



Province of Alberta

The 31st Legislature
First Session

Alberta Hansard

Monday afternoon, April 8, 2024

Day 34

The Honourable Nathan M. Cooper, Speaker

Legislative Assembly of Alberta The 31st Legislature

First Session

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United Conservative: 28

New Democrat: 38

Independent: 1

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 Al-Guneid
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 Eggen
 Hunter
 McDougall
 Sinclair
 Sweet

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

1:30 p.m.

Monday, April 8, 2024

[The Speaker in the chair]

Prayers

The Speaker: Lord, the God of righteousness and truth, grant to our King and to his government, to Members of the Legislative Assembly, and to all in positions of responsibility the guidance of Your spirit. May they never lead the province wrongly through love of power, desire to please, or unworthy ideas but, laying aside all private interest and prejudice, keep in mind their responsibility to seek to improve the condition of all. Amen.

Hon. members, it being the first sitting day of the week, we will now be led in the singing of our national anthem by Kendyll Stadnick. I'll invite all members to participate in the language of their choice.

Hon. Members:

O Canada, our home and native land!
True patriot love in all of us command.
With glowing hearts we see thee rise,
The True North strong and free!
From far and wide, O Canada,
We stand on guard for thee.
God keep our land glorious and free!
O Canada, we stand on guard for thee.
O Canada, we stand on guard for thee.

Indigenous Land Acknowledgement

The Speaker: The Legislative Assembly is grateful to be situated on Treaty 6 territory. This land has been the traditional region of the Métis people of Alberta, the Inuit, and the ancestral territory of the Cree, Dene, Blackfoot, Saulteaux, Iroquois, and Nakota Sioux people. The recognition of our history on this land is an act of reconciliation, and we honour those who walk with us. We further acknowledge that the province of Alberta also exists within treaties 4, 7, 8, and 10 territories and the Métis Nation of Alberta.

Please be seated.

Introduction of Guests

The Speaker: Hon. members, I have a number of guests joining us today. Today we were led in the singing of *O Canada* by Kendyll Stadnick. She's joined by her guest, Rene Grosso. Rene is a born-and-raised Edmontonian and a professional photographer. I invite them both to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

It's also a real honour of mine to introduce to all members of the Assembly a good friend of mine who also happens to be an amazing councillor serving the good people of Mountain View county. He's in Edmonton today for a number of meetings as well as to see the introduction of Bill 16, which he has advocated for. I invite Gord Krebs to rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

Last, it's my pleasure to introduce a number of public servants joining us in the gallery today. They are participating in a full-day public service orientation program which explores legislative, budgetary, and committee processes, enabling each participant to apply this knowledge to their role in the public service. I ask that you please rise and receive the warm welcome of the Assembly.

Hon. members, the hon. Member for Edmonton-Decore has a school group to introduce.

Mr. Haji: Mr. Speaker, I rise to introduce to you and through you to the members of the Assembly grade 6 students from Balwin school and their teacher, Rebecca Stushnoff. I ask the students and their teacher to rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Leduc-Beaumont has a school group.

Mr. Lundy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my privilege to introduce to you and through you students from East elementary school in Leduc. I hope they've enjoyed their time here at the Legislature. I'd ask that they would rise and please receive the warm welcome of the House.

Member Loyola: Mr. Speaker, to you and through you to all of the members here present I'm honoured to welcome 33 students from Jan Reimer school in the astounding constituency of Edmonton-Ellerslie. They're accompanied by Toni Hildebrandt. I ask that you give them the warm greetings of the Assembly, please.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Banff-Kananaskis has an introduction.

Dr. Elmeligi: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to introduce to you and through you the mayor of Jasper, Richard Ireland, and the mayor of Canmore, who is literally walking over right now, Sean Krausert. Please rise and receive the warm traditional welcome of the Assembly.

Member Boparai: Mr. Speaker, I rise to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly Harjit Singh Sandhu and his family: Akshi Sandhu, Manmit Singh, and Mehtab Singh, a wonderful family from my riding of Calgary-Falconridge who are active in the community and took time today to come visit the Legislative Assembly. I ask the Sandhu family to please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

Mr. Ellingson: Mr. Speaker, I rise to introduce to you and through you to all members of this Assembly Meenu Ahluwalia: a lawyer, community leader, currently working with federal Justice, Calgary. She cofounded the Punjabi Community Health Services of Calgary, the South Asian Inspiration Awards, the platform to congratulate changemakers in the South Asian community. I ask that Meenu please rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

Member LaGrange: Mr. Speaker, I rise to introduce to you and through you to all members of this Assembly the senior manager for advocacy at the Canadian Cancer Society, Angeline Webb. I want to thank you for joining us today in recognition of Daffodil Month and for your dedicated support to Canadians undergoing cancer treatment and to their families and their loved ones. Please rise and receive the warm welcome.

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Seniors, Community and Social Services.

Mr. Nixon: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly Ryan, Kate, Eli, and Everly Nixon. Ryan is my little brother though you're about to see that he ain't that little. I'd ask that they rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

Ms Lovely: I'm very pleased to rise today, Mr. Speaker, to introduce a very large group who are here today to support the Member for Leduc-Beaumont. Please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Chamber.

Members' Statements

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed has a statement to make.

Recovery Alberta

Mr. Bouchard: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Alberta's government is leading the way by supporting people in their pursuit of recovery from mental health or addiction challenges. Addiction and mental illness are a tragic reality for far too many Canadians. The Alberta recovery model is a system of care that the UCP is proud to be building, giving every person facing mental health challenges or suffering from the deadly disease of addiction an opportunity to pursue recovery. Last week I was pleased to hear the announcement of a new organization to lead the delivery of mental health and addiction services in Alberta. Services formerly delivered through AHS for mental health or addiction will move into recovery Alberta, highlighting the fact that recovery is possible no matter what challenges you face.

Recovery is more than sobriety; it is making a positive change, helping people live a happy, purposeful, and fulfilling life. Those facing mental illness or addiction deserve hope in moving towards this goal. As you know, Mr. Speaker, we do not run a sick care system but a health care system. Our goal is to help people get better. We saw the excitement of recovery as nearly 2,000 people, half of which were from Indigenous communities, came to Calgary last week for the eighth annual Recovery Capital Conference of Canada. This was an opportunity to showcase the Alberta recovery model and the work we are doing to build a more compassionate, dignified system that responds to the deadly disease of addiction and mental health challenges we face.

Mr. Speaker, this government is increasing capacity for treatment, removing cost barriers, and building 11 world-class recovery communities across the province. We are partnering with First Nations, helping people reconnect in a meaningful way with their culture and community. We are increasing mental health services through same-day counselling, in-school services, and residential treatment for young Albertans. I'm proud to join my colleagues as a supporter of the Alberta recovery model.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

1:40

Eid al-Fitr

Mr. Haji: As we wrap up the month of Ramadan, communities world-wide, including Alberta's Muslim community, prepare to celebrate Eid al-Fitr, an important day in the Islamic calendar. The exact date of Eid al-Fitr is calculated by sighting of the moon, and it is anticipated to either fall on April 9 or 10. Alberta's Muslim communities, including members from both sides of this Assembly, had a month of fasting, reflections, and gratitude: generosity during the day and prayers during the night. Eid is an important occasion. Not only does it signify the end of fasting but also embodies the essence of community spirit, a beacon of faith, and a sense of community. It's time when families and friends share meals, exchange gifts, and extend acts of kindness to the less fortunate, epitomizing the virtues of compassion, empathy, and solidarity, the exact values of this province.

Mr. Speaker, for our Muslim constituents in Alberta Eid al-Fitr holds a deep cultural and religious significance. Moreover, Eid al-Fitr serves as a vital link between generations, fostering a profound sense of belonging and identity. To my esteemed colleagues in this Assembly: I urge you to join me in extending heartfelt wishes to

Alberta's Muslim community on Eid al-Fitr. As the stewards of a diverse and inclusive province it is upon us to honour and respect the religious and cultural practices of all our constituents regardless of their backgrounds.

To Alberta's Muslim community [Remarks in Arabic].

Wishing you blessings throughout the year. [As submitted]

To fellow Somali Albertans [Remarks in Somali].

Happy Eid. It's the fortune and famous day. Enjoy a healthy holiday. [As submitted]

May this celebration inspire all of us to continue striving to a more inclusive, compassionate society where the rights and the dignity of all Albertans are upheld and cherished.

The Speaker: Hon. members, for the benefit of all members the hon. Member for Edmonton-Decore did provide the translation earlier today. It should be available on your desks.

The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Devon has a statement to make.

Daffodil Month

Mr. Boitchenko: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Across Alberta and around the world people continue to suffer and die from cancer, a horrible disease with impact transcending ages, socioeconomic status, and cultures. Each spring for over 65 years the daffodil has represented a symbol of hope for those facing cancer. During Daffodil Month people across Canada come together in support of everyone impacted by cancer. We often hear about cancer research, but what does it really mean? How does it work, and why is it so important? Cancer research provides us with the best means to fight cancer. Understanding how cancer spreads grows and expands our knowledge of life-saving treatment and prevention tactics. Clinical research carefully studies promising treatments through clinical trials and encompasses health services research, analyzing the accessibility, quality, and cost of health care.

Mr. Speaker, daffodils are one of the first flowers of spring. In 1956 volunteers for the Canadian Cancer Society started handing out daffodils to raise awareness, and since then daffodil days have become a widely known fundraiser to raise funds for cancer research. Today, the first session day of Daffodil Month, I would like to use my platform to urge all members, on both sides of the aisle, to join me in spreading awareness whenever possible.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Economic Indicators

Mr. Ip: Mr. Speaker, according to the Bank of Canada, Canada, including Alberta, is facing a productivity emergency. Productivity refers to how well an economy can turn its natural resources and talents into something useful. This matters because productivity correlates with the standard of living, and lower productivity means stagnant wages and less prosperity. On this front there are troubles ahead for Alberta. Low-wage jobs are growing, and by this government's own admission Alberta's GDP per capita is going to stagnate over five years. This means that we are becoming less prosperous, not more.

Provincial governments should lead the way in growing productivity through sound economic policy like diversification, investment in education and research, but the UCP is doing the exact opposite. Rather than funding research and innovation, the UCP has cut over half a billion dollars over the past four years to the postsecondary sector and cut \$55 million in R and D funding in its first years of government. Alberta is now one of the lowest funders of R and D in Canada. In K to 12 education, which lays the

foundations for a resilient and robust workforce, Alberta went from one of the best funded provinces to the worst.

This all hurts the upskilling of Albertans and will stagnate Alberta's economy for decades. We're already seeing the effects. Part-time jobs make up a larger portion of the job market now, at 18.2 per cent. Alberta also has the lowest wage growth in the country.

Mr. Speaker, we already know that this government is bad at managing health care and education, but the truth is that they're also bad at managing the economy. They lack any sort of cohesive economic vision for Alberta. Rather than embracing opportunities of the future, they are leveraging the future of Albertans for cheap talking points. We need to build a strategy for the future, not the past. Albertans deserve better.

Darcy Haugan

Mr. Sinclair: Mr. Speaker, I rise today to honour my friend, my coach, and one of my heroes, Darcy Haugan. I must admit that I was supposed to deliver a riveting statement today on Trudeau's federal emissions cap, but I'm not sure how many of these speeches I'm going to make in this House, and I want to make them count. I want to make all the days count.

Six years ago this past Saturday the world stopped turning, and 16 lives were lost in an instant in the Humboldt Broncos crash. After seeing pictures of the incident on TV that night, I knew deep down I'd never speak to my friend again. I've ridden the bus hundreds of times as a player, but I knew as a former coach myself that Darcy would have been sitting in the front seat, making small talk with the driver, trying to keep everyone safe, staring down at his lineup card, and wondering what he was going to say to the boys before they head out on the ice.

The first time I met Darcy, he asked me if it was true that a year earlier I'd finished the last half of my cross-country running race with only one shoe. He smiled and chuckled when I told him, "Yes," and he asked me why I didn't put it back on or why I didn't quit. I told him I didn't want to lose my pace, and I still thought I could win. That was the moment – I didn't know it – that Darcy was going to take a chance on me and recruit me to play in the SJHL and change my life.

Years later I won the SJHL championship in game 7 for the Yorkton Terriers. The euphoric happiness I experienced after we won quickly changed to a profound sadness and pain for me because I had no family there to share it with in person. I watched as my teammates took pictures on the ice with their parents, and mine, unfortunately, couldn't afford to make it. I was the first to leave the ice for my team. I snuck back to my stall. I turned my phone on, and the phone rang. The first person to congratulate me was my old coach Darcy Haugan. This is a moment I'll never forget. What a leader. What a life. What a man.

To Christina, Carson, and Jackson: I was honoured to know Darcy, and I'll continue to try and honour him by making all my days count, like he did. Mr. Speaker, Darcy wasn't a hero because of the way he died but because of the way he lived. The world could use more Darcy Haugans.

Thank you. [Standing ovation]

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Currie has a statement to make.

Mental Health and Addiction Strategy

Member Eremenko: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last week Albertans finally got a glimpse of the Mental Health and Addiction organization

that would be taking over from AHS beginning June 3. As usual the announcement was rich in rhetoric but weak in details as Albertans are expected to trust that the delivery of over 500 health contracts valued at over \$1.13 billion a year would improve simply as a result of changing ministries. I don't buy it, and in the absence of any sort of a plan I don't think Albertans should either.

What we now know is that the new organization, called recovery Alberta, will be overseeing the services and supports formerly under AHS, services that are reserved for some of the most vulnerable people in our communities. "Recovery" has become a repeated term for this government, Mr. Speaker. However, the problem is that if you ask 10 people what recovery means, you'll get 10 different answers. I wouldn't fault Albertans for believing that recovery equals in-patient residential treatment facilities. That's certainly where the majority of funding has gone. But what does it mean in relation to mental illness? What does recovery mean for youth? What does it mean for preventing substance use in the first place? What does it mean for those patients waiting months in a psychiatric unit for permanent supportive housing?

And all the while thousands of Albertans lose their lives to addiction. Five Albertans a day, Mr. Speaker, died of opioid use from January to November 2023. Every year sets new records for tragedy, with more and more families left grieving. Instead of being up front about addressing this, we see the minister and the Premier using cherry-picked data to justify their strategy, which has failed so many. This government needs to get on the same page and needs to be honest with Albertans about this crisis. Lives depend on it, lives that need harm reduction as a safety net when treatment doesn't work, which the minister knows is the case far too often. Without harm reduction, in addition to the UCP more focused on distraction than doing what is needed, many more lives will be lost under this government's watch. We all deserve better.

1:50

Oral Question Period

The Speaker: The Leader of His Majesty's Loyal Opposition has question 1.

Surgical Wait Times

Ms Notley: Well, Mr. Speaker, last year this Premier promised that by March of 2024 no Albertan needing surgery would be forced to wait longer than what is clinically reasonable. Well, it's now April of 2024, and at least 50 per cent of Albertans still are. To the Premier: is the difference between last year's wild claim and this year's reality something she knew at the time and said anyway, or is she asking Albertans to simply accept this historic level of incompetence?

The Speaker: The hon. the Premier has risen.

Ms Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We need to remain aspirational that every single person in Alberta should be able to get the care they need within a medically recommended period of time. When we began, there were 39,000 patients who were outside that medically recommended period of time guideline, and it was reduced to 27,160 as of last month. Of course, we can do better, but I have to say that we have to maintain that aspiration. There should be no Albertan who is waiting longer than medically recommended. We continue to see the numbers go down, and we'll continue to work on that.

Ms Notley: Mr. Speaker, aspirational is an interesting addition.

Last year the Premier claimed that zero per cent of Albertans would be waiting longer than the standard, and instead roughly 50 per cent

are. That's a very big difference. But it gets worse. According to the Canadian Institute for Health Information Albertans are also waiting longer than most other Canadians. To the Premier: why won't her government admit that they are failing when compared to the rest of Canada, change tack, and start focusing on the actual solutions that will deliver the health care that Albertans desperately deserve?

Ms Smith: Mr. Speaker, we are focused on the solutions that will work. We have seen that, for instance, hip replacement surgeries have improved so that 59 per cent are now within the clinically recommended wait times in 2023 compared to 38 per cent since 2022. On the issue of knee replacements, 49 per cent are within clinically recommended wait times compared to 27 per cent. On the issue of cataracts, 61 per cent are within clinically recommended wait times. So they're moving in the right direction, but we can't stop pushing. We know that what Albertans expect of this system is that every single person should be able to get treated within a medically recommended period of time.

Ms Notley: Well, Mr. Speaker, I know the folks over there love their scheme to privatize, but the fact is that that's what's causing Alberta to fall behind the rest of Canada. They lure critical health workers into chartered surgical facilities, leaving crucial operating rooms in our public hospitals empty and in crisis, that on top of the ongoing chaos. To the Premier: given the latest evidence of her government's failure will she agree to our caucus's emergency motion for a debate on surgery wait times this afternoon, and if not, why not?

The Speaker: The hon. the Premier.

Ms Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The member of the opposition is just simply incorrect. There are about 300,000 surgeries that are done each year; 60,000 are done in chartered surgical centres. If we stopped doing 60,000 surgeries in chartered surgical centres, guess what would happen? Waiting lists would go dramatically up. It's keeping the number of surgical wait times down, and it's allowing for us to be able to get the very best innovation and new approaches to delivering care. So, yes, we're going to continue having fully publicly funded surgeries being done in a variety of settings, including chartered surgical centres.

The Speaker: The hon. the Leader of the Opposition for her second set of questions.

Addiction Treatment and Recovery

Ms Notley: Mr. Speaker, in 2019 the UCP said that harm reduction has no place in fighting the opioid crisis. Instead, they wanted to focus solely on recovery. Now, we support recovery, but five years later both harm reduction and recovery are stagnating. Between January and November last year 1,841 Albertans died from drug poisonings. The crisis is getting worse. These are people with parents, siblings, children. To the Premier: how can she possibly defend a strategy that is so clearly failing and costing lives after five years?

Ms Smith: Mr. Speaker, again, the Leader of the Opposition is just simply incorrect. We do harm reduction. We do have safe consumption sites. We do have pain medication clinics to make sure that people who have opioid addictions are able to receive a safe supply of the drugs that they need as well as a transition to other types of drugs, the Sublocade and Suboxone. We have 8,000 people who are on the virtual opioid dependency program. It's an incredible success from when we began. We focus on both.

Ms Notley: Yet your minister calls it harm production.

The government is pathological in its presentation of manipulated stats. Nonpharmaceutical opioids like fentanyl cause roughly 90 per cent of substance-related deaths in Alberta. These deaths have risen by nearly 150 per cent since 2018. Again, this is the vast majority of people who are dying. To the Premier. We need emergency levels of funding in both recovery and harm reduction, which they are ignoring. Why will she not do what is needed?

Ms Smith: Well, Mr. Speaker, we agree. We need to have massive amounts of funding in both recovery and harm reduction. That is exactly what we're doing. We've had funding for services that reduce harm that has increased by more than 60 per cent since 2019. That was from \$22 million under them to \$36 million now. Naloxone kits are available for free at 2,000 locations province-wide. The digital overdose response system is a mobile app to send emergency response to somebody who becomes unresponsive when using drugs. We have the narcotic transition services, the virtual opioid dependency program. We have fully funded seven sites across the province, including recovery.

Ms Notley: Mr. Speaker, at her fundraisers this Premier demonizes harm reduction as a political tool. Meanwhile saying the word "recovery" over and over doesn't make it real, and we know that because the number of people dying is growing. This government has only opened two of the 11 recovery centres they promised. This is not a partisan issue. This is not a political issue. To the Premier: will she commit today to do whatever it takes, including dramatically increasing harm reduction as well as recovery efforts, to save lives? [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order.

The hon. the Premier.

Ms Smith: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I think that the difference is that we actually do support recovery and they don't. We know that they don't because when they were in power, they had a user fee for people to access addiction support of \$1,200 per month. We eliminated that NDP user fee so that more people would be able to access treatment. We're also developing 11 recovery communities, including five in partnership with First Nations – two are already up and running – and we have four correctional units that are also going to have on-site treatment. We're at two right now, and it's going to grow to four. We're investing in both. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order.

The hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity has a question.

Family Physician Compensation

Dr. Metz: On Friday this government announced that they were finally coming through with their commitment to provide funding to help family doctors with their administrative costs so they can devote more time to seeing patients. Sadly, it was yet another example of the incompetence of this government and another proof point for doctors that they cannot trust this government. Despite advice from the Alberta Medical Association the funding plan excludes family physicians with fewer than 500 patients. Why did the minister decide to impose this restriction?

Member LaGrange: Mr. Speaker, to the member: thank you for the question. In fact, we worked very closely with the Alberta Medical Association to develop the rollout of that funding. I'm very proud of the fact that even though we had negotiated a contract just 15 months ago with the Alberta Medical Association worth over

\$780 million in increases to physician compensation, we, in fact, added an additional \$57 million to stabilize family medicine and an additional \$200 million. Again, I'm very proud of the work that we're doing with the Alberta Medical Association.

2:00

Dr. Metz: Mr. Speaker, primary care physicians often have very diverse practices that include things such as hospital work, anaesthesia, caring for patients with complex needs, and providing care in settings such as long-term care and urgent care. These roles are critical but limit the number of patients to which these physicians can reliably provide longitudinal care. How does the minister plan to support these physicians who have smaller practices to provide other necessary medical services, or has she just given up on them?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Health.

Member LaGrange: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Of course, those additional services that physicians provide do, in fact, compensate those physicians for the work that they do. Whether they're going into the hospitals, whether they're going into continuing care, all of those services are compensated on a fee for service. Additionally, I can say that our fee schedule for family physicians and all physicians in the province remains one of the highest in all of Canada. We continue to work with the Alberta Medical Association to ensure that our physicians are fairly compensated.

Dr. Metz: Mr. Speaker, the support through this program is only going to physicians with high-volume practices, and we need all the help we can get. How will the minister support new physicians who are just starting to build a practice or support physicians who have the option of working part-time, perhaps as they slowly retire or return after an illness or from family leave, rather than not working at all? Why has the minister abandoned this critically needed part-time workforce during a health care crisis?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Health.

Member LaGrange: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again the member opposite is incorrect. In fact, our physicians are fairly compensated, and we have worked very closely with the Alberta Medical Association to make sure that we continue to fund physicians, particularly family physicians who are, in fact, feeling some pressure due to inflationary costs. That's why we've added an additional \$257 million up and above the negotiated contract; the highest physician compensation budget envelope ever at \$6.6 billion. It would be a different ministry, in fact, if it was a ministry on its own.

Electric Power System

Ms Al-Guneid: Mr. Speaker, it's another week, another two grid alerts, and Albertans were subjected to rolling blackouts in Calgary and Edmonton. Five years after the UCP scrapped plans for market reforms designed specifically to prevent shortages, Albertans saw record-high bills and brownouts. The Premier needs to stop playing politics and pitting renewables against natural gas and get to work, bringing costs down and reliability up. My question is simple. Why after five years has this Premier been unable to keep the lights on?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Affordability and Utilities.

Mr. Neudorf: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's great that the opposition is finally waking up to the fact that we have a problem in our electricity grid caused by the NDP. In fact, when they switched off coal and they ended up with costs ... [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order.

The hon. the Minister of Affordability and Utilities.

Mr. Neudorf: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Of course, under an independent review by Deloitte the NDP broke power purchase agreements and cost \$1.34 billion to Alberta taxpayers. We're actually working on the system. That's why we've done the inquiry. We're going to fix the mess that they left behind. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order.

Ms Al-Guneid: Six months ago the environment minister told us, quote, think of a mom awake with her baby in the middle of the night, and she can't turn on the lights. Absolutely, I and 45,000 other Albertans can. Then the AESO told us, quote, large areas of Alberta could be left without power, creating significant public health and safety risk. Why has this government been busy fearmongering and even politicizing the independent system operator instead of ensuring Albertans can keep their lights on? [interjections]

The Speaker: Order.

The hon. the Minister of Affordability and Utilities.

Mr. Neudorf: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again, because of policies that the NDP had, we had to buy wind and solar power first on Friday. What happened? There was none. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order.

The hon. the Minister of Affordability and Utilities.

Mr. Neudorf: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again, the system that was set up and furthered by the NDP. We were waiting for 800 megawatts from our wind and solar, which didn't show up. They were 900 megawatts under expected. We had to go back to natural gas because we need to price in reliability in our grid, something the NDP failed to do, something Albertans are still paying for at the tune of \$97 million a year because of their mistakes. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order.

Ms Al-Guneid: The Premier seems to be often bewildered that it's not always windy or sunny, but as we witnessed last week, when gas plants were down for maintenance and tripped offline unexpectedly, all forms of generation need backup. It took this government 22 months to proclaim the storage bill. The UCP has no one to blame except itself. They claimed the system would be reliable but left 45,000 Albertans without power. Can the minister commit that not a single other Albertan will experience another UCP power outage?

Mr. Neudorf: Well, Mr. Speaker, again, we continue to do the work that the NDP failed to do. We are making the grid more reliable. Why? We have more natural gas dispatchable generation coming on this year. We continue to provide reliability, we continue to fix the mistakes of the NDP, and we will provide the power that Albertans need where and when they need it.

Ms Notley: You have no idea what you're doing.

Mr. Schow: Point of order.

The Speaker: A point of order is noted at 2:06.

The hon. Member for Banff-Kananaskis has a question.

Affordable Housing in Canmore

Dr. Elmeligi: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. For thousands of Albertans the housing crisis is an everyday reality and stressor. For many in the Bow Valley this has been the case for more than a decade. The latest rental statistics in Canmore are in, and they're frightening. The increase in rent for two-bedroom units for the first two months of 2024 is up 65 per cent to just over \$3,400 a month. To be clear, wages in Canmore have not increased 65 per cent in the past year. Can the minister please explain to the good folks of Canmore how a temporary rent cap won't help them pay their rents?

Mr. Nixon: Mr. Speaker, every economist agrees that rent caps would make rent more expensive, would make fewer rental units available, and would slow down the building of supply that we need in our province. There are two jurisdictions with rent caps in our country. You may want to know where they are: Toronto or Vancouver. How's that working for their rent? That's what the NDP want to bring in. On one hand, they want them to live in tents. On the other hand, they want to continue to bring in rent control and make rent go higher and make fewer homes for people inside our province. We're not going to do that. We're going to make sure that we've doubled down and work with our industry. That's why we have record housing construction happening in our province. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order.

Dr. Elmeligi: Well, given that that's pretty good news – I love the idea of working with the industry to build more affordable housing – given that that same minister accused the town of Canmore of not working to approve development proposals fast enough, which is completely inaccurate, given that the town of Canmore has approved multiple housing projects, providing at least 1,250 nonmarket rental units, and that town councillors are also examining other creative options to address the housing crisis and given that it takes time to build housing, especially when the provincial government is not really offering any tangible help, can the minister admit that he misspoke and make plans to meet with the town of Canmore to discuss solutions?

Mr. Nixon: The Minister of Municipal Affairs just met more with Canmore today and will be meeting with Canmore in the next couple of weeks, Mr. Speaker. Again, unfortunately, we have seen projects in the Bow Valley be held up by both the municipal government at times and by the former provincial government. We are, though, investing in affordable housing in Canmore. We put millions of dollars into some recent projects. We're prepared to do more, but I want to be very clear. Not just Canmore; every municipality must do its part. If you're blocking any projects or projects are taking multiple years to be done, we'll look for other jurisdictions in our province that are willing to get to work with us on our ambition, because our job is to create homes. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order.

Dr. Elmeligi: Well, given that the town of Canmore is one of several communities that receive less funding with the new LGFF municipal funding model and given that they've calculated over \$4.9 million of increased costs due to provincial cuts to municipal funding and given that 5 million people visit this town annually, generating over \$2 billion for the provincial economy, and given that 25 per cent of Canmore's budget goes towards funding tourism-related expenditures, can the minister explain why a community that generates billions for this province cannot rely on provincial support to house their people or build critical infrastructure?

2:10

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Municipal Affairs.

Mr. McIver: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm happy to report to the House that I met with the mayor of Canmore this morning, and we did talk about this issue. Canmore has some what I think are legitimately good plans on creating some affordable housing. We will be following up with them on that and a number of other issues. We appreciate Canmore's enthusiasm for building affordable housing and other housing as well, and they can count on us to be there to co-operate in the ways that we can. In fact, we will still be looking for more ways to work together.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Livingstone-Macleod has a question.

Family Resource Networks

Mrs. Petrovic: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last week our government announced that we're extending the family resource network program to build stronger, more resilient families. We also announced providing an additional \$6.6 million over the next two years to help more Albertans access prevention and early intervention supports that will improve outcomes for families. Can the Minister of Children and Family Services explain how the family resource networks are helping prevent the need for more intensive child intervention services and reducing trauma and disruption time for families?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Children and Family Services.

Mr. Turton: Thank you so much, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to that member for that great question. You know, families deserve every opportunity to grow and reach their full potential together, and we know that's where they have the best chance for success. That's why we launched the family resource network program in the first place. We want to enhance families' connection to each other, their communities, and their culture by focusing on programs that improve the physical, mental, and emotional well-being of children, youth, and other caregivers. We know that we can help reduce the number of families and children that require government care and families that require child intervention services.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Livingstone-Macleod.

Mrs. Petrovic: Thank you, Mr. Speaker and to the minister for that clarity. Given that the family resource networks were first launched in 2020 to provide guidance and support to foster healthy families and given that we have 70 networks that cover every municipality in the entire province, which served more than 48,000 children and youth and 32,000 caregivers in 2022-2023 alone, can the same minister please explain how family resource networks have made an impactful difference on participants?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Children and Family Services.

Mr. Turton: Thank you so much, Mr. Speaker. Since December of 2021 the family resource network has been undergoing a phase evaluation in partnership with our network agencies right throughout the entire province, and we want to make sure that this program actually works for Albertan families. We're continuing to fund the family resource networks because that evaluation showed thousands of children, youth, parents, and caregivers have experienced improved

well-being. It is strengthening our communities right throughout Alberta, and by extending the grants for two years, we're providing the stability that FRNs have asked for. Our government is continuing to invest in families and communities. We know this program works.

The Speaker: The hon. the Member for Livingstone-MacLeod.

Mrs. Petrovic: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you again to the minister for that answer. Given the sad reality that many children in government care are Indigenous and that many in the community may find it hard to access the supports and services they need and given that 18 networks are dedicated to serving Indigenous communities both on- and off-reserve as well as the Métis settlements and multicultural families, can the minister please explain how our government is better supporting First Nations and multicultural communities through family resource networks?

The Speaker: The hon. the minister.

Mr. Turton: Well, thank you so much, Mr. Speaker, and again thank you to the member for the question. It's so important to our government to make sure that children and families who may have lost those cultural connections can rebuild those connections with their communities and culture. Agencies like the Bent Arrow Traditional Healing Society: they just do an amazing job in this regard, supporting families here in the heart of Edmonton. That's why I'm so proud that Alberta's government is providing \$1.8 million to help increase the access to training and capacity supports to ensure that each network can respond to the needs of Indigenous communities. We know this is making a difference for families throughout the province. Again, we are so proud of this program and the work that they do.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Beddington has a question.

Rural School Construction and Modernization

Ms Chapman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. School divisions are submitting their 2025-28 three-year capital plans, and we are seeing some familiar projects crop up. The top priority for the Wild Rose school division may ring some bells: the modernization and rightsizing of Breton high school. This school project received design funding in the 2023 budget but was absent from the Budget 2024 construction funding list. Oops. Can the minister tell us and the worried community when we can expect this much-needed project to actually be constructed?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Education has risen.

Mr. Nicolaidis: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm proud to report that we have 98 school projects in the pipeline, and we're eager to move all of those projects forward as quickly as we can. Of course, we also recognize that we have some significant enrolment pressures in our largest metropolitan communities, so we're working to make sure that we can build schools as fast as possible in our rapidly growing communities. It's encouraging to see so many people from across the country and around the world choosing Alberta once again. We know that when the NDP was in office, people were fleeing the province. The NDP was actually telling people to leave and go to B.C. We're happy that we've reversed that trend.

Ms Chapman: Given that Breton high school is underutilized at only 39 per cent and that reconfiguring the high school to a K to 12 would improve utilization significantly to 80 per cent and given that Breton elementary school was graded by a structural engineer as a

building in marginal condition with insufficient insulation and stress cracks in the roof and given that while this should not be acceptable, we are seeing more and more cases of impacted maintenance across the province, what will it take for the minister to at long last prioritize the needed modernization of rural Alberta's 70-year-old school facilities?

Mr. Nicolaidis: Mr. Speaker, modernizing and replacing schools in communities across the province is a top priority for this government. In fact, just on Friday I was in Brooks to announce alongside the Premier the replacement of the junior high school. We recognize that many of our schools in our smaller communities have undergone some significant life through them and are in need of updates, modernizations, and replacements. We're absolutely committed to doing that, which we have demonstrated in the upcoming budget. At the same time, we're also committed to building schools in our rapidly growing communities to serve the needs of all Albertans.

Ms Chapman: Given that Breton has a functional school facility, Breton high school, that is in good condition and is design ready for modernization, given that this government has the opportunity to save expensive maintenance on a 70-year-old building and properly utilize the other town school, why won't they fund construction for Wild Rose school division's top priority? Given that Breton elementary is a facility well past its best-before date, can any of these so-called fiscal hawk members opposite explain why this government hasn't thought to solve two problems with one solution?

Mr. Nicolaidis: Mr. Speaker, as the member noted at the beginning, every school division, of course, submits their three-year capital priorities, and all of those projects are evaluated and scored so that we can explore the best possible path to move forward. I just want to reiterate our government's commitment to modernizing and replacing schools in our smaller communities. More specifically, we were able to announce construction funding for a new school in Red Earth Creek. We were also able to announce design funding for a francophone school in Falher. We were also able to announce construction for a new K to 5 school in Blackfalds and other smaller communities as well. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order.

Indigenous Consultations on Energy Development

Member Arcand-Paul: Mr. Speaker, the AUC inquiry revealed that the Alberta government's position in regard to new rules on renewable energy projects will have, quote, an agriculture-first approach to protect prime agricultural land from redevelopment. End quote. I would like to ask the Minister of Indigenous Relations why he failed to articulate a reconciliation-first approach that would protect Indigenous constitutional rights such as those of the Piikani nation for provincial policy decisions. Did he try and fail, or did he fail to try?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Affordability and Utilities.

Mr. Neudorf: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We recognize that First Nations set their own land-use policies with the federal government for reserve lands, and our enhanced land-use rules are not designed to apply to those areas. We completely respect and want to work with our First Nations. We respect their land, and we respect their right to make sure that they can use it as fit. We will continue to work with them as they put their projects forward to connect within the provincial grid, and I look forward to working with my partner

the Minister of Indigenous Relations on making these projects successful.

Member Arcand-Paul: Given that if this was done and that this moratorium has cost nearly \$300 million in investment losses for the members of First Nations like Chiniki, Piikani, Ermineskin, and Paul and given that as a result of this policy and the direct actions of the Premier and minister, there are many First Nations jobs on hold and given that this government is failing these nations whose needs and constitutional rights have been ignored by the UCP, when will the minister step up and protect Indigenous economies, land, and futures?

2:20

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Affordability and Utilities.

Mr. Neudorf: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. None of these projects have been cancelled. None of these projects have been slowed. They continue to move forward through the process that we've had. We continue to work with their representatives to make sure that they are the most profitable and care for the land and peoples on which they reside. I look forward to working with all of my cabinet colleagues and our First Nations to make sure that they are successful and have energy security as well as economic realities.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Member Arcand-Paul: Mr. Speaker, given that throughout the AUC inquiry Indigenous respondents, despite not being asked, pleaded that the AUC give consideration to the cumulative impacts of development, given that this shows exactly why we need a government that listens to Indigenous peoples in Alberta, a government that leads with reconciliation, that moves with respect, given all this, how will the minister commit incorporating reconciliation into all development policy decisions in a meaningful way going forward?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Affordability and Utilities.

Mr. Neudorf: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm confused at which way they want to go. First they want development; now they don't want any development because of cumulative effects. Either way, we continue to work with our First Nations. We continue to respect their land and the consultation process. We continue to work through our Ministry of Indigenous Relations and make sure that our First Nations are successful, they have energy security as well as economic security. We look forward to continuing to work with them for the betterment of all Albertans. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order.

International Medical Graduates

Mr. Yao: I recently received a letter from a cohort of international medical graduates currently studying medicine in Ireland. The good news is that the College of Physicians & Surgeons of Alberta have recognized Ireland as a jurisdiction that has training comparable to that of Canadian universities. Unfortunately, the 85 signatories of the letter, who are all from Alberta and all would work here, still see major barriers deterring them from returning to this province. Despite being recognized as a proved jurisdiction, those trained in Ireland are treated no different than any other IMG. Is the government engaged with the CPSA to eliminate these barriers that prevent these grads from obtaining residency here in Alberta?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Health.

Member LaGrange: Thank you, Mr. Speaker and to the member. Our government recognizes the significant role international medical graduates have in delivering high-quality health care to Albertans. In fact, one-third of physicians in Alberta are IMGs, and our government strongly supports programs that help to integrate IMGs into the health workforce. Our province currently offers some of the most comprehensive programs in Canada for IMGs, and we will continue to work with our partners to streamline and improve the assessment process and training opportunities that are available for Alberta's applicants.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo.

Mr. Yao: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that one of the largest barriers that IMGs from Ireland face is an externship program which takes place from April to June but requires applicants to have their degrees conferred by December of the previous year, further given that most medical students don't graduate until May or June and therefore cannot apply for Alberta's externship program for a whole year but other provinces have adapted to allow for these future doctors to enter the workforce the same year that they graduate, to the same minister: is there anything that could be done to expedite these IMGs into Alberta's externship program?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health.

Member LaGrange: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Every Canadian jurisdiction has established policies and processes for assessing the qualifications of IMG resident applicants. In Alberta we have the Alberta international medical graduate program. Each year the AIMG program processes over 300 applications from Alberta IMG applicants that receive their medical degrees from over 50 countries, including Ireland, so to better support them, the AIMG program has reduced the number of documents that require notarization, waived the Casper test, and now offers multiple mini-interviews virtually instead of in person.

Mr. Yao: To the minister through the Speaker: thank you so much for that. It is given that each province deals with these health professionals in its own way, but only Alberta and Quebec have an additional stage in the physician approval. Despite the fact that IMGs have already satisfied the national standards of the Canadian Resident Matching Service, the residency hopefuls here in Alberta must go through an additional 10-week program. Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and B.C. filled all of their 2023 CaRMS positions; Alberta had 42 unfilled family medicine spots. To the same minister. The standards of the college here in Alberta seem excessive. What does this conversation with the CPSA look like?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Health.

Member LaGrange: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Our government will continue to engage with key stakeholders, including the CPSA, to help support IMGs and continue our work to remove barriers in IMG residency application processes. In fact, I had a conversation just last week on it. My department is also planning a comprehensive review of the AIMG program to improve the residency application process for IMGs seeking training and employment opportunities in our province. The review will consider concerns surrounding the program, including the residency application timelines, the externship requirement, and we will continue to consult with our stakeholders.

Youth Mental Health and Addiction Treatment

Member Batten: All we ever hear from this UCP on mental health is their narrow version of treatment and recovery and that it's the only

path forward. There should be many available solutions for struggling Albertans, but the UCP says nope. Their way is the only way. Well, this past week this government showed Albertans just how focused they were on recovery by permanently closing the vital youth treatment centre in High Prairie. This will force youth in the area to travel hundreds of kilometres for treatments, tearing them from their families and communities. To the minister: if this government cares so deeply about recovery, why close this important centre?

Mr. Nixon: The NDP don't want recovery, Mr. Speaker. As the Premier said earlier today, our government does both harm reduction and recovery. We watched the NDP in power. I sat in opposition beside you, Mr. Speaker, and saw that they did nothing for recovery. This government has already invested in 10,000 more recovery spaces, is opening more recovery locations each and every day. We're going to continue to stand with Albertans because we don't want what the NDP wants. What the NDP wants is palliative care for drug addicts. Shame on them for that. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order.

Member Batten: Given that the UCP already closed the Lac La Biche youth assessment centre in 2022 and has yet to reopen it, which completely removed services from the area, and given that many youths dealing with serious mental health issues in that area were already forced to go to places like High Prairie, hundreds of kilometres away, for the assistance they needed – well, that is, of course, until the UCP decided to close it with no explanation last week – to the minister: does the UCP care at all about providing any stability to the struggling youth in rural Alberta? Why is this government constantly uprooting and failing them in the critical time of need?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Children and Family Services.

Mr. Turton: Thank you so much, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member for the question. You know, just to set the record straight, the actual centre in High Prairie was closed because of a fire, so it's temporarily closed. I just want to assure all youth in that area that they will continue to receive the services that they require to keep them safe. We're going to be doing a large-scale evaluation of that area as well just to make sure that the programs are appropriate, and we're dealing with the actual workers and the staff there to ensure that they can continue to do the work that they need to do to keep our kids safe.

Member Batten: Given that forcing children to drive far from their families and support networks to receive treatment is incredibly reckless, even dangerous, and that youth of rural Alberta deserve to be helped and not harmed by their government and given that this Premier has gone on the record stating that we need a recovery-oriented model for the addictions crisis and her mental health mandate calls for more youth centres like the one the UCP just closed in High Prairie, to the minister: when did this government decide to leave young, rural Albertans out of the recovery model, and where is the UCP planning to force these suffering Albertans to go next?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Children and Family Services.

Mr. Turton: Well, thank you so much, Mr. Speaker. Clearly, the opposition never heard that the centre was closed because of a fire. They would rather have kids in a building that is actually trying to be rebuilt. Clearly, the members opposite have no idea in terms of

what actually is required to keep kids safe. They would rather have kids at a facility that is temporarily being closed so that we can ensure that they're looked after, that the staff can continue to do the amazing work that they would do. I would ask the members, clearly, to listen to the news and to have a little bit of empathy towards the staff that are working under some very hard conditions to keep our children safe. Shame on them. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order.

Energy Industry

Mr. Wiebe: Mr. Speaker, Alberta's oil and gas industry has a long, storied history. Our oil and gas reserves are the second-largest in the world. This industry is not just part of our economy; it's the backbone and driving job market in my constituency of Grande Prairie-Wapiti and provides jobs and energy security for our province. The oil and gas sector provides thousands of jobs for Albertans, from engineers to tradespeople. These jobs support families and communities. To the Minister of Energy and Minerals: what is our government doing to support this important sector right here in Alberta?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Energy and Minerals.

Mr. Jean: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's true. The Coalition of Chaos, the NDP-Liberal coalition from Ottawa, along with our friends across the way, are trying to put in place an emissions cap and a hard cap on production. We're not going to let that happen. We produce here over half the natural gas in Canada. We are world class and a world leader on natural gas and emissions. We're not going to make any excuses for what we do. We are going to lead the world on natural gas and hydrogen as well. The future is bright for Albertans. [interjections]

2:30

The Speaker: Order.

The hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Wapiti.

Mr. Wiebe: Thank you, Mr. Speaker and through you to the minister. I know that this industry is also vital in Fort McMurray. We know that this industry feeds into our communities, supporting local businesses and services. Given that the oil and gas industry also contributes to our province's revenue through royalties and investments and that this revenue is essential for funding crucial services like health care, education, and infrastructure, can the same minister also share how Albertans benefit from this industry?

Mr. Jean: Well, Mr. Speaker, it's not millions of dollars; it's not billions of dollars; it's trillions of dollars. That's what the oil and gas sector contributes to Albertans and their quality of life. In and around Fort McMurray you may have heard that there's a little bit of oil up there. It's the third-largest reserve in the world, and that adds so much value to schools, to hospitals, to roads, to bridges, for people's quality of life. We should be number one in the world for quality of life, and this government is going to get us there. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order.

The hon. Member for Grande Prairie-Wapiti.

Mr. Wiebe: Thank you, Mr. Speaker and through you to the minister. Given that energy security is another goal of our government and that by producing our own energy, we reduce our reliance on foreign imports, ensuring stable and reliable energy

supply for our province, and further given that this not only strengthens our economy but also enhances our sovereignty and security, can the same minister also share how the oil and gas industry supports Alberta's goals of energy security and reliability?

Mr. Jean: Mr. Speaker, you may have heard that Alberta is energy and energy is Alberta. The future is bright, indeed. We're going to see right across this province so many opportunities because we're going to get more of our product to tidewater. That's true. The Trans Mountain pipeline expansion: that's coming up. We're going to see some real revenue increase, which means more quality of life, more jobs, more security, more hospitals, more bridges, more schools. The future is bright, and it's because this government, this Premier are leading the way. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order.

Fuel Tax Increase

Mr. Dach: According to the School of Public Policy, "In total, between 2020 and 2022 the Alberta government accrued \$646.9 million in additional tax revenues as a result of de-indexation." This government took \$600 million out of the pockets of Albertans with their sneaky income tax hike. Now, just last week the minister hiked taxes again, by another \$430 million. Can the minister explain why, during an affordability crisis, he raised taxes by nearly half a billion dollars? [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order.

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, Alberta's debt-servicing costs: the projection for 2024 is about \$3.4 billion. I think it's pretty rich coming from that side when they want to talk about different taxes going up and down when they brought in a carbon tax they didn't campaign on and they left our government in a far more indebted position than Alberta has ever been in. Now, just like many Albertans out there, we're having to refinance that debt at a far higher rate while we're bringing forward a budget that's focused on health care and education and building infrastructure. It's responsible.

Mr. Dach: Given that in addition to a billion-dollar tax hike, this government took millions from seniors and disabled Albertans without warning and given that this government also promised a tax cut but never clearly intended to deliver it and given that Albertans are facing an affordability crisis, can the minister explain why he is choosing now to impose \$400 million in new taxes on Albertan families? Why doesn't he just halt the fuel tax hike?

Mr. Horner: Mr. Speaker, much different than the carbon tax is our provincial fuel tax, which is now back at the rate it's always been at, 13 and a half per cent. That goes towards building roads, maintaining roads, building bridges, things that the federal government and the NDP mother ship – I heard it called the Coalition of Chaos; that seems appropriate – have said publicly they will no longer do. Albertans expect us to build a province for the future and, more importantly, to maintain it. That's why it's there. If oil stays at the price it's at, Albertans can expect relief July 1.

Mr. Dach: The fuel tax goes into the UCP general slush fund.

Mr. Speaker, given that this government lifted caps on utility bills and insurance premiums, causing them to skyrocket, and given that this government deindexed income taxes and benefits for seniors and disabled Albertans, costing them millions of dollars, and given that this government wasted billions on its war rooms, pipelines to nowhere, fake Tylenol, and so much more and given that this

government just hiked taxes by over \$400 million last week, will this government stop trying to punish Albertans for the UCP's fiscal incompetence and have the Finance minister reverse this latest tax hike? [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order.

Mr. Horner: We're seeing commentary from across the country that the only place that's being fiscally responsible is Alberta. And some credit to New Brunswick. New Brunswick has done quite well, but if you look at the surplus they put forward, our meagre surplus is still larger than theirs per capita. We're doing this while bringing in changes that are responsible. We do need Albertans to pay for things once in a while. We have a very light touch, as you all know, when it comes to taxation in this province, and you know that everything costs more. So we're going to build the schools, we're going to maintain the roads, and Albertans are going to be with us, along for the ride, to help pay for it as we go. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order.

Health System Administration

Mr. Haji: This government's priorities when it comes to health care are rather interesting, Mr. Speaker. Are they recruiting more doctors? No. Building more desperately needed hospitals? No. Making sure health care workers are being fairly paid? Of course not. What they are doing, however, while entire cities and towns grapple with shortages of doctors and health care workers: they are doubling senior management in the ministry. How does the minister cope knowing her red tape expansion comes at the expense of the health and well-being of Albertans?

Member LaGrange: Mr. Speaker, I'm not sure what reality that member opposite is in, but it is not the real world that we're actually living in today in Alberta. In fact, we are increasing our number of surgeries. We are increasing the workforce. We've added over 330 physicians to the province, over 4,700 nurses. We're continuing to make improvements to the system. We've engaged. We've had over 65 in-person sessions by the end of this week, and we're going to continue to do more.

Mr. Haji: Here is the reality. Given the minister's decision to multiply assistant deputy ministers from six to 12 while Albertans suffer from the disadvantage of a shortage of health care workers because of this government and given that no previous minister has ever felt the need for such an excessive increase in senior management, is the surge in the management a testament to the government's incompetence or simply another addition to the long list of broken promises?

Member LaGrange: Mr. Speaker, again, the members opposite don't know what they're talking about. In fact, my department, if I compare it to any other province in Canada, any comparable size, is about half the size of any other health department in this country. I've added an assistant deputy minister of Indigenous health. Would the members opposite disagree with that? That's unacceptable, that we've never had an assistant deputy minister of Indigenous health to focus on Indigenous health. I won't apologize for that. [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order.

Mr. Haji: Given that it is painfully clear that the minister has no interest in resolving the health care crisis or actually answering questions in the House, decreasing surgery wait times, or even ensuring that Albertans have a family physician and given that she

apparently disagrees with the Premier's, quote, less management, less problems, unquote, can the minister at least tell us how many more senior management positions she intends to hire instead of investing in doctors, nurses, and other health care workers?

2:40

Member LaGrange: Mr. Speaker, again, the misinformation coming from the other side is monumental, as always. We are focused on putting together a department that will actually do the work that the members opposite couldn't do when they were in government. The fact that they left it in shambles is unacceptable. As I said earlier, if we compared my department to any other department in Canada, mine would be about half of the size of other departments across Canada in health care. We are focused on getting the job done. We need good people to help do it.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake-St. Paul.

Tax Policies

Mr. Cyr: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Axe the tax. I am proud to be advocating against the NDP-Liberal carbon tax. I'm also proud to see thousands of Canadians across the country protesting the 23 per cent increase last week. This is why I find it so hypocritical that we have the NDP leadership candidates right now claiming that they are no longer supporting the carbon tax when, in fact, it is their government that brought it in in the very first place. Can the Minister of Treasury Board and Finance please share how much . . .

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Finance.

Mr. Horner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I think I got the gist, and I like where he was going with that. I think we all know what happened during the NDP's time in government. We saw billions in investment flee this province. We saw jobs and families and opportunity be forced to look elsewhere. I know that was my family's experience. We said goodbye to many good friends who looked elsewhere. We saw 200,000 jobs lost, and we had such a compassionate government at the time that they said: well, maybe go get a job in B.C.; maybe that will work. That's not what's happening under this government. We're seeing people move here with their feet. It's a great problem to have.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake-St. Paul.

Mr. Cyr: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that the federal government's carbon tax is a punitive tax that punishes you to heat your home and to drive to work and further given that, unlike the Trudeau-Singh dud tax, the provincial fuel tax is designed to save Albertans money by bringing in much-needed government relief when oil prices are high, to the same minister: can you please share the key differences between the Trudeau-Singh boondoggle tax and the provincial fuel tax by describing what the tax revenue is used for? [interjections]

The Speaker: Order. Order. Order.

The hon. the Minister of Finance and President of Treasury Board.

Mr. Horner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, our Alberta fuel tax at its full rate over the course of a year brings in about \$1.4 billion. That is not nearly what this province spends on transportation, for new construction or maintenance, so you can see its importance. I think that, notionally, Albertans understand that that's how they help maintain this infrastructure. The federal carbon tax is a punitive tax, as the member said. It is trying to incentivize a change in behaviour. They want you to drive less. That is the difference.

It's also a wealth redistribution scheme, but I won't get into that here.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Cyr: Thank you, Mr. Speaker and through you to the minister for the answer. Given that I sat in this Chamber from 2015 to 2019, seeing first-hand the NDP government proudly pass their job- and investment-killing carbon tax, that they didn't campaign on and that Albertans never asked for, can the same minister please elaborate on some of the actions the UCP government has needed to take to restore investor confidence in our provincial economy?

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Finance.

Mr. Horner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We've done many things to bring investment back to Alberta. Our corporate tax cut reversed the NDP's tax increase and now brings in more revenue under our 8 per cent rate than the NDP ever did at 12 per cent. We've cut red tape, saving Alberta's economy hundreds of millions of dollars, and we've attracted major investments like Dow Chemical, De Havilland, Amazon Web Services, and new film productions from studios like Paramount and HBO. Oil production is at record heights, and we're leading the nation in economic growth.

The Speaker: Hon. members, that concludes the time allotted for Oral Question Period. In 30 seconds or less we will continue with the remainder of the daily Routine.

Notices of Motions

The Speaker: The hon. the Government House Leader.

Mr. Schow: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to provide oral notice of Bill 17, the Canadian Centre of Recovery Excellence Act, sponsored by the hon. Minister of Mental Health and Addiction.

Dr. Metz: Mr. Speaker, I rise to give notice that at the appropriate time I will move the following motion pursuant to Standing Order 42:

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly

- (a) acknowledge Alberta Health Services' commitment in 2023 that by March 2024 no patient in Alberta would face unacceptable delays in access to surgical care,
- (b) accept the Canadian Institute for Health Information's findings in its report dated April 2024 that surgical wait times for knee replacement, hip replacement, and hip fracture repair in Alberta continue to significantly fail to meet established benchmarks for the delivery of surgical care to Albertans,
- (c) call on the government to table, within seven days of the passage of this motion, evidence showing Alberta Health Services' commitment in 2023 has been upheld.

I have copies of this motion.

Introduction of Bills

The Speaker: The hon. the Minister of Service Alberta and Red Tape Reduction.

Bill 16

Red Tape Reduction Statutes Amendment Act, 2024

Mr. Nally: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I request leave to introduce Bill 16, the Red Tape Reduction Statutes Amendment Act, 2024.

This is our eighth red tape reduction bill, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the hard-working men and women of Service Alberta, who, thanks to them, reduced 230 unnecessary pieces of regulation.

With that, Mr. Speaker, I hereby move first reading of Bill 16, Red Tape Reduction Statutes Amendment Act, 2024.

[Motion carried; Bill 16 read a first time]

Tabling Returns and Reports

The Speaker: Are there tablings? The hon. the Member for Edmonton-McClung, followed by Edmonton-Highlands-Norwood.

Mr. Dach: Thank you. I rise to table five copies of the lyrics to a duet recently recorded by country artists Orville Peck and Willie Nelson entitled *Cowboys Are Frequently Secretly Fond of Each Other*. I encourage all members of the Legislature to listen to this anthem of solidarity.

Member Irwin: Love that.

I rise to table five copies of a recent *Calgary Herald* article entitled Apartment Rents Are So High in Calgary, They're Approaching Toronto Numbers. That's from the CMHC. I urge especially the minister responsible for housing to read this article.

The Speaker: Are there others? The hon. Member for Calgary-Acadia, followed by St. Albert.

Member Batten: I have the requisite five copies of a recent article entitled Closure of Youth-Treatment Centre a Double Whammy for High Prairie, where inside it says, "Instead of refurbishing the centre after a fire in November 2023, the government will keep it closed for the foreseeable future."

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

Ms Renaud: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have two tablings. The first is an update with a list about the number of seniors that are owed money from Christenson Group of Companies. That's gone up to 188, for a total of \$61.4 million.

The second tabling is a copy of an article called Our Lobbyist Premier. It comes from the *Alberta Views* May 2024 edition.

The Speaker: Are there others?

I have a tabling today. Pursuant to section 9.1(5) of the Child and Youth Advocate Act I'm tabling six copies of the Child and Youth Advocate report as required under section 9.1(4). The tabling covers the period of April 1, 2023, to March 31, 2024.

Tablings to the Clerk

The Clerk: I wish to advise the Assembly that the following document was deposited with the office of the Clerk: on behalf of the hon. Mr. Amery, Minister of Justice, pursuant to the Statutes Repeal Act a report entitled Statutes Repeal Act 2024 List.

The Speaker: Hon. members, that brings us to points of order, and at 2:06 the hon. the Government House Leader rose on a point of order.

Point of Order Insulting Language

Mr. Schow: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I do rise on a point of order at the time noted by yourself on 23(j), which reads "uses abusive or insulting language of a nature likely to create disorder." At the time noted, the hon. Minister of Affordability and Utilities was answering a question from the opposition. While answering that question, the Leader of the Opposition, the Member for Edmonton-

Strathcona, was heckling the member and said very distinctly, "You have no idea what you're doing." Now, it is debatable on that member's record whether or not that member knew what she was doing since she's been in office, but to say something like that in this House specifically directed at a specific member would likely be unparliamentary. That's why I haven't said such things, but the Leader of the Opposition felt it incumbent upon herself to throw that kind of a heckle at the hon. Minister of Affordability and Utilities.

2:50

Mr. Amery: An honourable man.

Mr. Schow: Very honourable, Mr. Speaker.

I do believe that this is a point of order. That member knows better. I don't know if it's going to be on the unofficial records, but that member does have an uncanny ability to find herself caught by the ambient mics in this glorious Chamber. Mr. Speaker, I submit to you that this is a point of order. Saying, "You have no idea what you're doing": I would disagree, but I would suggest it's a point of order.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: The hon. the Official Opposition House Leader.

Ms Gray: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I believe it is absolutely a matter of debate whether the UCP have any idea what they are doing given that this past weekend we had two grid alerts, rolling blackouts in Calgary and Edmonton. This is a government that has been in office for five years and mismanaged the grid, including scrapping plans for market reforms that are designed to prevent shortages. They delayed putting forward storage reforms, and this UCP government has no one to blame except themselves. They claimed the system would be reliable; they left 45,000 Albertans without power. So, certainly, I think it is a matter of debate that the UCP have no idea what they are doing.

That being said, for this particular heckle, Mr. Speaker, I am not certain without the benefit of the Blues exactly what the Leader of the Official Opposition said. Certainly, the use of the term "you" would be unparliamentary. In the heat of the moment she might have said that, so on her behalf I will apologize and withdraw.

The Speaker: I consider the matter dealt with and concluded.

Motions under Standing Order 42

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-City Centre to move Standing Order 42 on behalf of the hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity.

Surgical Wait Times

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise pursuant to SO 42 to request that the ordinary business of the Legislative Assembly be adjourned to debate a motion in regard to a matter that is urgent and pressing, that being the ongoing crisis in surgical wait times.

Why is this urgent and pressing, Mr. Speaker? Well, first, I'd like to acknowledge that pursuant to SO 42 I have provided the members of the Assembly with the appropriate number of copies. Further, while a motion under SO 42 requires no notice, our office did provide advance notice to the Speaker and the Government House Leader of the intention to introduce this motion under the appropriate standing order as per the Speaker's memo. The health care crisis is the most urgent and pressing matter facing Albertans today – it requires the immediate attention of all members of this

Chamber – so urgent that the Orders of the Day must be set aside for further debate on the issue.

Mr. Speaker, this is the first opportunity to have this debate in the Chamber as it is the first day of the House resuming since a number of recent announcements. Last week the Canadian Institute for Health Information released its most recent report that showed that wait times for procedures like hip and knee replacements as well as cataract surgeries are longer in Alberta than they were in 2019 before the pandemic. Only 59 per cent of Albertans are getting their hip replacement within 26 weeks, which is CIHI's definition of an acceptable wait time for critical surgery. Worse, less than half of patients waiting for knee replacements are getting them on time. Only 61 per cent are getting cataract surgeries on time.

I raise this point because, Mr. Speaker, things should be different. One year ago the Premier fired the entire board of AHS, replaced them with a single administrator who promised Albertans that the UCP would fulfill the promise they ran on in the last election, the promise that no one in Alberta would have to wait longer than the clinically acceptable wait times for their urgent surgeries. The Premier said that she was confident that through the expansion of private surgical clinics this would be possible. Their Minister of Health said that estimates that he believed it was possible and that that was their goal. Yet things have not improved, nor has that promise been met, making this matter urgent to be discussed in this Chamber today. The government's own data shows this to be the case.

Albertans need to hear from this government how they are going to adjust their plans to address this urgent and pressing matter, which goes beyond partisan politics. Albertans need to see from this government the results of their promise. Albertans need to hear from this government, if they miss this key benchmark, why. It's about our family members, our neighbours, our co-workers getting timely access to the care they need. Waiting for surgery is a painful experience for many. People receive knee and hip replacements because their bodies require it. These are not optional procedures; these have a deep effect on people's quality of life. That's why it's so jarring to learn the truth of these surgical wait times in our province.

The government needs to tell us today how they are going to consult with front-line health professionals and patients in the system to find out exactly what is not working and find a way to address the issues. Now, consultation does seem to be a problem for the UCP government, Mr. Speaker. They seem to often only talk to people who agree with their ideological approach, but front-line workers are calling out urgently to us and to this government, asking for help to get their attention.

That's why we need this debate. Not only is it impacting the lives of Albertans, which, of course, is the main reason this topic is urgent, but it is also impacting our economy. The number of dollars we are losing in lost time due to illness is staggering.

Mr. Speaker, our job description as members of His Majesty's Loyal Opposition is to oppose the government, but we also have many ideas we would like to propose. With crises as urgent as these Albertans should expect the government would consider implementing any and all ideas that would help to solve such a pressing matter. For Albertans who are waiting in agony after surgery is postponed and for their families, no subject could be more urgent. When the government ignores the data, would rather mislead Albertans into feeling secure about their health care, nothing could be more pressing. They need more than the Premier's aspirations.

Mr. Speaker, this Legislature must set aside all other business, focus on the urgent and pressing issues of our day. Today our failing health care system and the issue of surgical wait times is job number

one. I and every Albertan will be shocked, deeply disappointed if every member of this House does not welcome this discussion and debate and vote in favour of this motion.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Hon. members, pursuant to Standing Order 42 a member of Executive Council has up to five minutes to respond to the request for unanimous consent. The hon. the Minister of Health.

Member LaGrange: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise on a SO 42 motion today and address the current situation in surgical delivery in Alberta and why I will not be supporting the motion as presented. Our government is working to improve health care delivery to ensure Albertans are receiving the care that they need when and where they need it. Compared to other provinces, Alberta ranks third in Canada in three of the five priority procedures completed within benchmark time frames, and I won't rest until we are number one in every single one of those benchmarks.

The situation regarding surgical wait times continues to improve. We have made steady progress towards our goal of improving surgical wait times. In fact, the latest wait-list data shows that more Albertans are waiting within clinically recommended times than at any time since 2020. As of March 25, 2024, 71,852, or 62.2 per cent, of adults wait-listed for surgeries are waiting within clinically recommended times and receiving their surgeries within clinically recommended times. Approximately 27,160 are still outside of clinically recommended times, so of course we must do better, Mr. Speaker, and we will do better, and we are doing better.

Since 2022 hip replacement surgeries have improved from 38 per cent within clinically recommended times to 59 per cent within clinically recommended times in 2023. For knee replacement, surgeries have improved from 27 per cent within clinically recommended times to 49 per cent within clinically recommended times. Mr. Speaker, again, we're making improvements, but we're doing the catch-up on those backlogs since COVID as well. We know there's still more room for improvement. This is why Budget 2024 invested \$618 million in the Alberta surgical initiative plus an additional \$4.4 billion toward acute-care operating expenses.

It's important to remember that 2023 was the first year since 2019 without significant surgical restrictions due to COVID-19. Surgeries requiring overnight stays in hospital such as hip and knee replacements were significantly impacted by COVID restrictions, causing significant decreases in the number of surgeries performed in established benchmark time frames from 2020-2022. So comparing surgical data from 2023 to 2019 is difficult because the health system was significantly changed postpandemic with impacts from the pandemic still affecting areas such as the health workforce and creating large surgical backlogs, impacting the ability of surgeries to be performed in the established time frames.

3:00

Our government has invested \$80 million in increases in funding to add an additional 20,000 surgeries in '23-24. In fact, Mr. Speaker, we anticipate reaching 310,000 surgeries in '23-24 and additional surgeries in '24-25 with a \$316 million investment. In '25-26 we're investing \$324 million.

Mr. Speaker, we're committed to following through on the Alberta surgical initiative, which is really adding capacity within our hospital spaces. We're also seeing that we have the publicly funded chartered surgical facilities that have gone from about 40,000 surgeries to over 60,000 surgeries in just a very short time period. We are refocusing Alberta's health care system to ensure Albertans have access to more effective care and improved health outcomes.

We know Albertans are waiting longer than they should, but we are committed to making sure that we, in fact, do meet the benchmarks. As I said earlier, I will not rest until those benchmarks are reached in every one of those priority areas and, in fact, we are number one. Right now we're number three in Canada, but I want Albertans to be number one in Canada. We're going to continue to do that work, Mr. Speaker.

On the issue of consultation, which the member opposite brought up, we have done 65 in-person sessions across this province with over 3,000 people, most of whom are health care workers, attending. Over 18,000 online submissions have been made, and over 10,000 telephone town hall recipients have been part of the conversation, Mr. Speaker. The vast majority are health care workers, and they're telling us they want us to continue on this path of improvement particularly in the area of surgical wait times. We're committed to it, and we're going to get it done.

The Speaker: Hon. members, Standing Order 42 is a request for unanimous consent to put aside all of the other business of the Assembly and proceed immediately to the motion that's been proposed by the hon. the Member for Edmonton-City Centre on the behalf of the Member for Calgary-Varsity.

[Unanimous consent denied]

The Speaker: Ordres du jour.

Public Bills and Orders Other than Government Bills and Orders Committee of the Whole

[Ms Pitt in the chair]

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

Bill 204 Municipal Government (National Urban Parks) Amendment Act, 2023

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

Mr. Schmidt: Thank you, Madam Chair. I'm pleased to rise and stand in opposition to Bill 204. This is a bill that purports to limit federal overreach and protect greenscapes in Alberta, but let's be honest about what the true purpose of this legislation is. The purpose of this legislation is purely to poke a stick in the eye of the perceived enemies of the UCP government by preventing the democratically elected federal government and the democratically elected city of Edmonton government from negotiating on forming an urban park in the city of Edmonton. That is the cause of this piece of legislation here.

This isn't dealing with hypotheticals. We can well imagine a world where Leduc county wanted to designate the site of Leduc No. 1 as a national historic site, and if the federal government came to the table and said, "Here's millions of dollars for the Leduc county to preserve and protect Leduc No. 1 as a national historic site," the UCP government would be tripping over themselves to be a part of it and to make sure that that was successful. But because the UCP government perceives the federal government and the city of Edmonton as their political enemies, here they are presenting this piece of legislation to poke the stick in the eye and to shortchange the people of Edmonton yet again, Madam Chair.

You know, it's interesting to me, Madam Chair, that over the past five years that this government has been in power, we've heard nothing but complaints from members opposite about how the people of Alberta need to get their fair share from Ottawa. We're continually told that we should be grieving the shortchange that we get from the federal government on all kinds of areas of policy. But here we have a clear example of the federal government coming to the table with cash in hand, giving the people of Edmonton their fair share, and the UCP government wants nothing to do with it. Now, how much money is at stake? We're not sure because national urban parks are a new concept here in Canada. We can get the sense of the scale of money that's at stake by looking at the national urban park that was created in Toronto Rouge national park, which Stephen Harper's government committed \$143 million to in 2011 over 10 years and then a further \$7.3 million every year after that.

We have at least \$14 million a year up for grabs for the city of Edmonton, and the UCP government is bringing forward this legislation to say: "No. Thank you. We don't want it." This is a pattern of, I would say, abuse of the city of Edmonton. I think the city of Edmonton is being punished by the UCP government for not electing a single UCP member for three elections in a row, with the possible exception of Kaycee Madu. Of course, we know what the people of Edmonton thought of the job that he was doing, and he's no longer here in the House to debate this.

You know, we saw the government try to intervene in the finances of the city of Edmonton last week by offering to help the city of Edmonton manage its finances, to which the mayor of Edmonton responded with a letter outlining some very concrete actions that the UCP government could take to actually help with the city of Edmonton's finances. The government could actually pay its taxes. The government has eliminated the grants in lieu of payment for provincially owned buildings, and that shortchanged the city of Edmonton significantly. They've cut back on funding for the police in a number of areas. They no longer provide funding for DNA testing that the police conducts. They lowered the grant for operating the Edmonton Police Service, and they clawed back fines that the Edmonton police collected that normally goes to the city of Edmonton.

We also see that the city of Edmonton is not treated fairly when it comes to maintenance of provincial roadways. The city of Calgary gets the Deerfoot Trail maintained as a provincial highway, but the city of Edmonton doesn't get the same deal when it comes to Calgary Trail and Gateway Boulevard. Now, let me just be clear, Madam Chair, that I'm perfectly fine with Calgary Trail deteriorating because I think that it's in the best interests of Edmontonians to stay in our city and not have to go to Calgary. I think that by letting that road collapse, you know, we're doing the Lord's work by preventing the people from Edmonton from having to go to Calgary. I may be in a minority, though, when it comes to that opinion. The fact of the matter is that the UCP has continued to attack the city of Edmonton and their financial management by making these direct cutbacks to the city of Edmonton's budget.

Moreover, Madam Chair, they've also attacked infrastructure that the province owes the people of Edmonton when it comes to shortchanging us on the south Edmonton hospital. That's something that the 2019 UCP government promised to deliver for the people of Edmonton and failed. They admitted that they're no longer interested in doing that. We see it in the school budget, the capital plan. We have no new high schools being built in the city of Edmonton. Visit a high school here in Edmonton, and you will see that they are all packed to the

rafters. We cannot wait for the government to finally get around to funding high schools in this city.

3:10

At every turn this UCP government is shortchanging the city of Edmonton when it comes to getting us the finances that we need to run this city so that the people of Edmonton can live the quality of life that they have a right to live. This is just furthering the pattern of poking the people of Edmonton in the eye with a stick by bringing in this legislation that would prevent meaningful investment in the river valley, Madam Chair. I am proud to live in one of the three communities in Edmonton's river valley. I spend every day in Edmonton's river valley, and I see that it's one of the most attractive features of the city of Edmonton, because hundreds and hundreds of people come to the river valley every day to enjoy the facilities and the recreational opportunities that are presented here.

Let's just go over some of the things that are available to the people of Edmonton in our beautiful river valley. We've got the ACT centre in Rundle park. We've got the Edmonton Ski Club, which is across the river from where I live, Madam Chair. We've got the Kinsmen centre, the Queen Elizabeth pool. We've got the *Edmonton Riverboat*, which provides recreational opportunities for people in the summertime. We've got tremendous educational opportunities for people at the Muttart Conservatory. We've got the John Walter Museum adjacent to the Kinsmen centre. We've got Fort Edmonton Park.

We have tremendous conservation opportunities that are available to us in Edmonton's river valley as well. Big Island provincial park was one of the key campaign platforms for Edmonton that the UCP campaigned on in 2019. Unfortunately, that project seems to be not going forward. We don't know what's going on with that. We have other important conservation goals that we could achieve if the provincial government would just get out of the way and let the federal government negotiate with the city of Edmonton to enhance the ecological protections that are available.

You know, Madam Chair, in my past life I was a hydrogeologist, so I have a soft spot for groundwater features. There is a very important groundwater feature in Whitemud park. It's a tufa springs. The groundwater continues to flow out of the ground year-round, producing a beautiful rock formation there. It's a unique feature in the city of Edmonton, desperately needs to be protected. The city of Edmonton doesn't have the resources that it requires to offer the protection that it needs, and if the federal government were coming to the table to designate areas of Edmonton's river valley as a national urban park, we could very well see adequate protections in place for this significant and unusual groundwater feature.

In the 2015 election, when I ran for the first time, one of the significant issues of that election was the proposed daylighting of Mill Creek. Now, this is a project that has been a long-standing desire for many residents in both my community as well as neighbouring Edmonton-Strathcona. When the city of Edmonton wanted to design a freeway up Mill Creek in the 1970s – well, let's just say that Mill Creek has been the result of many, many years of abuse, and it's now buried underneath the ground in a number of culverts in the name of water management, Madam Chair. The people of my constituency and the people of Edmonton-Strathcona have been working very long to daylight that creek.

The Chair: Are there others wishing to join the debate? The hon. Member for Camrose.

Ms Lovely: Well, thank you, Madam Chair. I'm proud to rise today in support of Bill 204, the Municipal Government (National Urban Parks) Amendment Act, 2023, which has been put forth by the Member for Leduc-Beaumont. As Albertans we have an easy time taking pride in our parks. The first national park ever created in 1885 was Banff national park. Wood Buffalo national park, the largest park in Canada, is the pride of the Member for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo. Since being formed, these sites have preserved pristine landscapes and viewscapes for generations of Albertans to enjoy. It isn't just the national parks that we as Albertans can be proud of. We have 470 wonderful provincial parks as protected areas spread all over Alberta such as Miquelon Lake provincial park in the Camrose constituency. The creators of these parks knew that it would be a disservice to the landscapes, the Indigenous peoples who have safeguarded them, and the future generations who will inherit them if they were not preserved.

This is a sentiment that I share. The Edmonton river valley is a beautiful location, not only as a site for recreation and relaxation but also a historical gathering place. This is why it's vitally important that when any changes are made to how this area is preserved, every relevant group has a seat at the table. Creating a new national park is no small decision, so we want Indigenous groups, community groups, and all levels of government to be able to make their voices heard on the matter. What the city of Edmonton and the federal government have done by labelling the provincial government as an interested observer is to exclude Alberta's voice in this conversation.

Madam Chair, this is a brazen attempt by the federal government to sideline the views of Albertans in the discussion. Moreover, it is an unacceptable breach of the constitutional division of powers in Canada. Municipal relations are the sole and exclusive jurisdiction of the province. This is why Bill 204 and the amendments it makes are so important. Albertans chose to elect our government at least in part because they trust that we will stand up and resist the federal government when it intrudes on provincial affairs.

Now, members on the opposite side may be convinced that our government only does this to score political points, fighting for the sake of fighting. However, this could not be further from the truth. I'm not exaggerating when I say that every day I hear from my constituents how the federal government is making their lives harder. To me, this is no surprise when the government in Ottawa seems indifferent to their concerns on so many issues. Whether it be the carbon tax, the unconstitutional no-more-pipelines bill, or so many other policies, the voices of Albertans seem to fall on deaf ears. See, Bill 204 isn't just fighting for fighting's sake or creating bureaucracy for bureaucracy's sake but, instead, would be a reasonable response to a federal government which has a proven track record of trampling on our province's interests.

How would Bill 204, if passed, protect the role of the province when it comes to the formation of national urban parks? Simply put, it would give the power to cabinet to create specific requirements before a municipality and the federal government could create a national urban park in Alberta. This amendment to section 70 of the Municipal Government Act would also be comprehensive. Wherever a municipal government and the federal government are developing a plan or planning a national urban park, the province would have a mechanism to make sure its input is not ignored. Bill 204, if passed, would also reinforce the mandate of the Municipal Affairs minister to protect the province's constitutional right to oversee the governance of Alberta's municipalities without federal interference.

While I support municipalities developing and protecting their lands, the passing of Bill 204 would close a loophole that allows the federal government to bypass the province in doing something as

significant as creating a national urban park. Opponents of Bill 204 may claim it is attempting to implement unilateral provincial control over the green spaces in urban areas. They may claim that the government is attempting to exclude stakeholders or being overbearing towards municipalities, but that is not the case. If Bill 204 is passed, all the same consultations and engagement which were already happening before would still be free to take place but with Alberta's government also having a seat at the table.

Madam Chair, since the carbon tax hike on April 1 and the clear favouritism shown to eastern Canada by exempting home heating from this hike, my constituents have made one thing clear: we want Ottawa to listen up and give us a break. This government was elected to represent Albertans, and we will ensure that Albertans' voices are heard loud and clear. If Bill 204 is passed, it will be a clear statement that we will not allow for decisions to be made about the future of Albertans' green spaces and parks without the input and participation of Alberta's government.

That is why I am proud to support the passing of Bill 204 in this Chamber, Madam Chair.

3:20

The Chair: Are there others to join the debate? The hon. Member for Calgary-Beddington.

Ms Chapman: Thank you so much, Madam Chair. I'm pleased to rise today to speak in opposition to Bill 204, Municipal Government (National Urban Parks) Amendment Act, 2023. Bill 204 is adding an unnecessary layer of red tape, plain and simple. This is another example of this government being oppositional just to be oppositional. I have three kids, so – oh, boy – I remember the toddler years, and this is behaviour that I recognize.

What is our government opposing today? A plan to create more parks in our big cities. Okay. The national urban parks plan is part of Parks Canada's goal to preserve 30 per cent of land, inland waters, marine and coastal areas by 2030. By opposing the national urban parks program, the UCP is showing us once again that they simply don't value our natural spaces. In fact, this government is acting like a petulant toddler. If they can't have a specific seat at the table, they're going to stamp their feet and throw a little tantrum. A specific seat, mind you, because the provincial government has absolutely been welcome at the table when it comes to the development of a specific national urban park located right here in Edmonton.

Now, when I was preparing to speak on this bill, I did read the bill debate from a few of the members opposite, and if that's all you had to go by, you would think that the national urban parks program was some kind of declaration of war. I saw mentions of Emperor Trudeau and Jagmeet Vader, completely childish language. More to the point, it's not an honest reflection of what the national urban parks program is. It is a complete misrepresentation of the National Parks Act and the process of creating national parks to suggest that the province is not already a part of the process. In fact, the National Parks Act requires provincial approval for any national park to be approved.

So national urban parks: what's the deal? There are three pillars of the national urban park policy. It is to conserve nature, connect people with nature, and advance reconciliation with Indigenous peoples. National urban parks are unique in their approach to acknowledging the role park space plays in the cultural history of an urban centre and also the importance protecting parks has for environmental stewardship for years to come.

The 2021 federal budget funded the creation of a network of up to six national urban parks by 2025, and Parks Canada is working very closely with partners at six candidate sites across Canada to

advance that commitment. Local partners include provincial and local governments, Indigenous governments and organizations, and other interested parties. And there is no federal overreach. It's the communities themselves who approached Parks Canada to be able to participate in this program, and as I mentioned, that National Parks Act already requires provincial approval for a national park to be created.

Personally, I think we should be thrilled that one of the six new urban parks to be created was selected to be right here in Edmonton. One thing I've learned about Edmonton and Edmontonians, aside from their disdain for the ostensibly more awesome city of Calgary is how much they love their river valley. We do have a couple of rivers in Calgary, too, so you could come and visit those.

But Edmontonians love their river valley, and on this side of the House we support the city of Edmonton's work to designate this land and their efforts to work with Indigenous partners about the best governance models and practices for a national urban park.

This Edmonton river valley: it's a piece of land that's been home to the Cree, Blackfoot, Métis, Nakota Sioux, Dene, Anishinabe, Inuit, and many others. The history of this place is the history of colonialization, the fur trade, industrialization, environmental protection, and land reclamation, and in fact archaeological evidence of Indigenous peoples along the river goes back thousands of years. The importance of this piece of land and its protection now cannot be understated. There is absolutely no good reason for the UCP to stand in the way of this.

I wanted to share a couple of words from a constituent in my riding. I have received a number of e-mails from constituents who are supportive of the national urban parks program. Ian writes to say that this bill actually

limits the ability for Albertans to express their opinions on a National Urban Park proposal.

The process of a National Urban Park designation, which is still in its early stages in Edmonton, would require multiple rounds of public engagement.

We know we don't have to worry. The public engagement is baked into the process.

A National Urban Park could be an excellent opportunity within the Edmonton region to protect nature and to foster connections to nature among Albertans. Future proposals could be beneficial to other municipal regions.

Ian supports

a National Urban Park in the Edmonton region and [wants] to see a process that meaningfully engages the public on this opportunity.

He feels that Bill 204 is a barrier for people in Alberta like him to voice their perspectives on a national urban park.

As I was learning about national urban parks, I found that there's one that already exists. Rouge national urban park was created in 2011, and by all reports this is a highly successful park. This is a park in Toronto, and the partner groups that were involved in the creation of it were the regional municipalities of York and Durham; three cities: Toronto, Markham, and Pickering; Toronto and Region Conservation Authority; the governments of Ontario and Canada. These groups did not have a problem working together to create this park. It's not at all clear to me why here in Alberta we are having these kinds of issues when we have this model that is already working in other places in the country.

I've never actually wanted to go to Toronto before I read about this park, but I kind of want to go see this. It's an 80-square-kilometre park. It includes Bead Hill national historic site. It's a greenscape. You know, people use it for health, recreation, conservation, tourism, agriculture. It is open to users without charge. Imagine that: a park space that you don't have to pay to access. I think we could use a few more of those in Alberta. It's accessible by transit. You've got trails,

rec facilities, visitor amenities. It can host festivals, events. You can camp. It's got programs. It's everything you want to have in a city. Why would we throw up any barriers to including something like this here in Edmonton?

And it's not stopping there. They are actually building on the success of this park with an expansion. It's an urban linear park. It's going to be called Meadoway. This is going to be a 16-kilometre-long park, and mixed trail use will now make it one of Canada's largest urban parks. I want to go see it. I don't know why on earth we would be preventing such a thing from happening here in Alberta.

Okay. I've just got a little bit of time, so I want to end with this anecdote. This past weekend I had the great pleasure of attending the Alberta Debate and Speech Association provincials with my lovely daughter, and I had so many great conversations with the youth in attendance. These are people who want to sit here in these seats, like we do, one day, and they want to debate bills just like this one. When we were talking about debate strategies, a common refrain that came up this weekend was reasonable limits. One of the motions up for debate was to set age limits for politicians. If you ever want a hearty dose of humility, I highly recommend judging a debate discussing the mental capacity of elected officials by a group of teenagers.

But one of the most common opposition points to age limits for politicians is, of course, Charter protections against ageism. So how does the proposition argue around that? Well, it turns out that the best defence is reasonable limits, and reasonable limits are what apply here as well. It is simply not reasonable for the provincial government to stand in the way of a duly elected municipal government that wants to do nothing more than protect an important piece of land and create a new park.

3:30

The Chair: Are there others? The hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed.

Mr. Bouchard: Thank you, Madam Chair. I rise today to speak to Bill 204, the Municipal Government (National Urban Parks) Amendment Act, 2023. Implementing this private member's bill addresses the concerns of many Albertans regarding the federal government's overreach in provincial affairs. The Prime Minister and the mayor of Edmonton bypassed our provincial government to establish the river valley into a national urban park, making this green space property of the federal government. This green space, which is cherished and beloved by surrounding communities and Edmontonians across the city, could come under the control of the federal government.

Madam Chair, there is currently no formal procedure for our provincial government to intervene or assert influence over areas that are of provincial jurisdiction. This undermines the sovereignty of our provincial government, inhibiting our ability to ensure that our green spaces are protected. However, if passed, Bill 204 would ensure that safeguards are in place to limit federal government overreach... [interjections]

The Chair: Order. Order. [interjection] Order.

Mr. Bouchard: ... and ensure that Alberta's elected government is actively involved when these decisions are being made. Although this bill will directly address the current discussion concerning Edmonton's river valley, if implemented, this will apply to all municipalities within Alberta. Bill 204, if passed, would amend the Municipal Government Act under division 8, limits on municipal powers, section 70, disposal of land. It will give the cabinet the ability to create new regulations that will detail specific

requirements before municipalities and the federal government could create a national urban park within our province.

Provincial governments need safeguards to protect their sovereignty and limit the federal government from interfering in provincial matters. This aligns with the Ministry of Municipal Affairs' mandate to protect the province's constitutional right to oversee the governance of Alberta's municipalities without federal influence. Beyond that, this bill aims to ensure that our provincial government can protect families and communities from this federal overreach and intrusion.

Madam Chair, we support our municipalities in the process of developing and protecting their river valleys and lands. However, current circumstances allow the federal government to bypass the province and work directly with municipalities on national urban parks. This loophole to bypass the provincial government is unacceptable, and throughout this bill it would be addressed. Our government is standing up to this federal overreach because infringement in areas of provincial jurisdiction should not be tolerated. This bill does not seek to assert overt control but, rather, would ensure that Alberta is included in the discussions when decisions are being made that will affect the communities within our province, our green spaces, and all of Alberta.

We are also aware of the concerns from some of the Edmonton city councillors who voted against the action of planning for a national urban park in the city's river valley. They did so because they didn't see any real benefit to pursuing this project and raised concerns over a lack of clarity concerning ownership and the administration of the park, essentially expressing fear of losing control of this area to the federal government.

Our government also has a concern about the lack of transparency and clarity surrounding this potential implementation. We want to ensure that Albertans will always be in control of their green spaces, urban areas, and river valleys. It is integral that Albertan voices are heard concerning our parks, our public lands, our outdoor spaces, and our communities. Bill 204, if passed, would address the need for provincial involvement during these discussions and ensure that Albertan voices are being heard and protected. I urge all members of the House to do the right thing and vote in favour of Bill 204, the Municipal Government (National Urban Parks) Amendment Act, 2023, to maintain the integrity of our provincial government systems ...

Mr. Schmidt: We'll stand up for the people of Edmonton. We don't need your help in maintaining our river valley.

The Chair: Order. Order. Hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar, if you would like a turn to speak, you can wait for the appropriate time and stand on your feet. Right now I'm trying to hear the hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed. I'm having a hard time hearing the hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed.

Hon. member, please proceed.

Mr. Bouchard: Thank you, Madam Chair.

... and to allow our government to continue to advocate for all Albertans.

Thank you.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-McClung.

Mr. Dach: Thank you, Madam Chair. Last time I checked, I was living in a country called Canada. It had a national government, and I was expecting it would stay that way for the duration of my lifetime, although members opposite seem to think that sovereignty should belong solely to the province. Perhaps separation is a real and underlying goal. Certainly, baby steps are being taken towards

that end with measures like Bill 204. It's a sign of weakness – a real sign of weakness – by having this government come forward to bring forward and support Bill 204 in opposition to a measure by the federal government in consultation with the city of Edmonton, at the invitation of the city of Edmonton, with the invitation to the province as well during this process, to design and develop this urban park in our Edmonton river valley.

It's a sign of weakness, Madam Chair, that the UCP government's response is to rather churlishly, I think – and you can look it up, members opposite – try to provide a precedent to prevent the federal government, our national government, from directly engaging with and partnering with municipal governments throughout the province and the national government of Canada from making a move to protect a vibrant riparian national treasure, our Edmonton river valley, a ribbon of green, and protect our waterway. This measure is going to be used as a precedent, as has been alluded to by members opposite already in debate, suggesting that they were using this as a vanguard to protect against future moves that the federal government might make to, in their words: intrude upon provincial jurisdiction.

Well, Madam Chair, if we do truly belong to this Canadian nation as citizens of Canada and residents of Alberta, I think it's incumbent upon us to recognize that there are main directions that the federal government can take in entering into negotiations directly with municipalities without being accused of entering into the sovereign territory of the province. Historically we have for decades had federal governments involve themselves in matters directly with municipalities without suffering these accusations that we now face by the United Conservative Party government on a regular basis. No matter what the federal government does, they're accused of interfering in provincial jurisdiction. This is a refrain that, frankly, Albertans are tiring of very, very quickly.

In this particular instance, Madam Chair, when we are looking at a municipality protecting its lifeblood, its river system, its river valley, the backbone of the city of Edmonton, which is something that we're extremely proud of in Edmonton, and taking advantage of an opportunity to partner with the federal government, which invites the province to be a part of the development of this national urban park as part of the process and the design of the whole program, to oppose it simply because they feel threatened by it as a means of intrusion into provincial jurisdiction is a weak argument. It's a sign of a weak government who's threatened by something that's been taking place on a regular basis, a direct federal government investment with municipalities on a variety of different projects, whether it be infrastructure or other means of improving the local areas. We are baffled on this side of the House as to why the United Conservative Party government is involved in such a limited scope of understanding of what, indeed, the relationship should and has been with the federal government and municipalities.

3:40

Now, to their credit, yes, of course, we have different jurisdictions in the country, whether it be federal, provincial, or municipal. Yes, the municipal governments are creatures of the province, but there is also a historical precedent, Madam Chair, that this UCP government is attempting to sweep aside by declaring that this federal proposal to partner with the city of Edmonton directly to create a national urban park is somehow an intrusion upon provincial authority. It's not. In fact, if you look at the program more directly, you'll see very clearly that one of the partners that is invited to the table as part of the process is other governments, provincial governments specifically named in the federal program, along with Indigenous participation as well, certainly a high priority in the whole program.

In the time period that we're living in, Madam Chair, where we are facing a drought situation once again this year, where our river levels, no matter where you happen to look in the province, are low and they're at risk of not being able to provide the water that we need for human consumption, for industry, for agriculture, this is a timely piece of park development for the city of Edmonton to engage in.

Now, we recently have had a sandbar develop on the city of Edmonton North Saskatchewan River, and of course it appeared because the river level was low. Now, granted, the North Saskatchewan is not a free-flowing wild river any longer. It has for many, many years been subject to controlled flow because of the headwaters being dammed, and that indeed is something that Albertans have come to realize more and more, that unless we do in fact watch and monitor our river levels, we will end up having the North Saskatchewan River and others perhaps be nothing more than sandbars to have as a playground.

The concern that Albertans and Canadians right across the country have is that with climate change affecting our water flows, the riparian areas such as a ribbon of green that goes right through the city of Edmonton along the North Saskatchewan River banks need to be protected. It's an absolutely critical lifeblood for the city. Our drinking water used to be something we'd take for granted, Madam Chair, that there would be adequate flow in the North Saskatchewan River. The *Edmonton Riverboat*, a paddlewheeler – it used to be called the *Edmonton Queen* – used to have little difficulty going up and down on a regular basis in the North Saskatchewan River, but the current owner, Mr. Esterer, has now got it up for sale. It will be interesting to see who takes the risk on buying it to float it in rivers that have various low-level periods of flow that might not make that boat operational. I certainly hope that's not the case because it's been a wonderful addition to the river valley and a beloved piece of our Edmonton scene to see the *Edmonton Riverboat* floating up and down the North Saskatchewan.

Madam Chair, that's one of the things that the city of Edmonton and the federal government are looking to protect, the viability of the recreational capacity of the river valley that we liken to our own backyard in Edmonton. The threat that is felt by the UCP is not one that is shared by the city of Edmonton, the Edmontonians, and by the wider public in the province. We recognize that we live in a country called Canada. Most Albertans declare themselves to be Canadians first. They're citizens of Canada; they are residents of Alberta. Dare I say that I certainly am one of those as well who look across this fantastic country and realize that the federal government must never be prohibited from having the ability to engage in this type of a direct arrangement with a municipality, another level of government.

To have us prohibit the federal government from engaging right across the board with individual municipalities to engage in deals like creating a national urban park is a precedent the UCP may like to set in motion, but it's not one that would benefit the country over the long haul. What it does is that it chops off the knees of the federal government from actually identifying ways that they can bring federal dollars into the picture to do things that otherwise might not get accomplished, particularly with respect to our urban national . . .

The Chair: Are there others to join the debate? The hon. Member for Grande Prairie.

Mr. Dyck: Well, thank you, Madam Chair. I really appreciate the opportunity to speak to my friend and colleague's Bill 204, the Municipal Government (National Urban Parks) Amendment Act, 2023. I just want to thank him for bringing this forward. This is a crucial piece of legislation put forward by the Member for Leduc-

Beaumont. To be frank, this is much needed. It is very important, and we want to welcome this change for Albertans. This is about having Albertans' voices heard, being able to have their voices respected concerning the creation of national urban parks within our province. This is a key piece of legislation that allows every Albertan to have their voice heard, cuts the overreach of the federal government into Alberta, and allows Albertans to make the choice for Albertans.

What is the problem, Madam Chair? Currently the federal government possesses the ability to bypass all the wishes of the province. Right now they're able to directly collaborate with municipalities in order to establish national urban parks. While the creation of such parks may indeed hold many benefits – I've been to a few; I love the parks – the lack of provincial involvement does raise some very significant and serious concerns about federal overreach and the intrusion into Alberta's affairs by not allowing the provincial government to be part of the conversation. Without our province's input the voices of Albertans are at risk of being silenced. They're at risk of having their concerns dismissed and their desires overlooked. There is a glaring problem, and this loophole must be closed.

To be frank, shouldn't Albertans make the choices for where Albertans' parks and federal parks are going to be? Shouldn't Albertans, the people who call this province home, have a say in the decisions that directly impact their communities? The creation of national urban parks may seem like a noble endeavour – and we've heard many things across the aisle about this – but it must be executed with proper consultation and consideration within the provincial jurisdiction, Madam Chair. This is vital, that we have a seat at the table, and this is what the Member for Leduc-Beaumont is bringing this bill forward for.

To be frank, Madam Chair, decisions about your community, your city, your very way of life should not be made thousands of miles away by the federal government, who may or may not have ever even stepped into Alberta. Their conversation of what the way of life here for Albertans – they may have no idea about that. This piece of legislation puts the driving seat, the decision-making as part of the conversation right here in Alberta. This is so important. This is not a scenario that any Albertan should be willing to accept, and I fully agree that this is an important piece of legislation.

Bill 204, this legislation, seeks to rectify this imbalance of power by ensuring that the province of Alberta is granted a rightful seat at the table when decisions regarding the creation of national urban parks are being made. Madam Chair, no longer will the federal government be able to steamroll our provincial interests, disregarding the voices of those who are most directly affected by the federal government's actions.

Why should Albertans even care about this? What is so important about this? First and foremost, this bill reaffirms the principle of provincial autonomy, a cornerstone of our democratic system. By granting the province a say in the creation of national urban parks, this ensures that decisions are made with full consideration for local needs, concerns, and local priorities. This means that Albertans will have a direct say in how their communities are developed and preserved for future generations. Madam Chair, Albertans want and insist upon having a seat at the table, making sure that our conversations and decisions are being made by Albertans.

Bill 204 serves as a defence against federal overreach and intrusion into Alberta's lands. To be frank, Alberta lands are a provincial jurisdiction. We should be in that conversation and have a seat at the table. By asserting the province's constitutional rights to oversee the governance of its municipalities, this sends a clear message that Alberta will not stand idly by while its autonomy is infringed upon.

3:50

This is not about rejecting national parks and their creation. It's about ensuring that any decisions about their creation or development take place in a way that respects the rights and interests of all Albertans. This is about empowering the people of Alberta. It's about giving Albertans a voice, a seat at the table, and the ability to shape the future for our own communities. It's about ensuring provincial involvement so that decisions are made by those who are directly impacted by them, not the federal government in Ottawa, who do not have Alberta's best interests at heart.

Now, the members opposite have argued that Bill 204 is unnecessary and will only lead to increased bureaucracy. To be frank, I cannot disagree more. It is crucial to recognize that Bill 204's primary aim is to safeguard provincial sovereignty and ensure meaningful provincial involvement in decisions regarding national urban parks. Dismissing the importance of this bill completely overlooks the fundamental principle that we must protect Alberta's interests from federal overreach. Decisions regarding our lands and our communities should be made by those who understand the unique needs and concerns of Albertans, as we do on this side of the aisle.

This does tie into our mandate. As I mentioned, this bill is about ensuring collaboration, not unilateral control. Our government has demonstrated time and time again our commitment to working with municipalities and other stakeholders for the benefit of Albertans. As mentioned, the establishment of Big Island provincial park, for example, a collaboration with the Enoch Cree Nation and the city of Edmonton, stands as a testament to our commitment to meaningful engagement and partnership.

Our government is also committed to supporting Alberta parks while prioritizing the interests and preferences of Albertans. However, it's critical to emphasize that Alberta's parks must be developed in alignment with Albertans' interests in mind, not the interests of the federal government. This is clearly the jurisdiction of the province. I bring this up as some members opposite believe this bill seeks to oppose all urban parks, but this is just simply not the case. We want Alberta to have a seat at the table in these discussions, and that should be our end and, frankly, is our legal right.

Now, I do want to spend a minute talking about the Constitution, maybe a quick education moment for the members opposite, and really just dive into the heart of what this matter is. The opposition opposite: I just feel like they don't really have a true and deep grasp of the Constitution Act. The document that outlines the very division of powers between the federal and provincial government here in Canada is the Constitution Act. What are we finding there? [interjections] You're welcome. I would encourage them to actually take a look.

Section 92, which seems to escape the attention of all our NDP opposition, outlines that the management and sale of public lands belongs to the province, falls under provincial jurisdiction. Not only is the federal government currently having far overreach into what is clearly a provincial jurisdiction; we see the NDP not understanding the provincial jurisdiction. My friends, it's not just an old dusty footnote. This is active today. It's literally the rule of law in Canada at this moment, and it clearly states that the management of public lands falls within the wheelhouse of provincial governments. This is not Justin Trudeau's distant bureaucratic nightmare in Ottawa for Albertans.

Now, the federal government in its infinite wisdom has decided it's fully within its rights to ignore our provincial autonomy and encroach upon Albertans and our right as a province. They want to just scoop in and establish national urban parks without any say from our provincial

government. As I just established, we have legal precedent to be part of the conversation, Madam Chair. Well, enough is enough. This bill, Bill 204, is not about adding bureaucracy or assuming unilateral control. It is about asserting our given rights as a province, standing up to federal overreach, and ensuring that decisions regarding our green spaces are made right here in this province by the representatives duly elected to represent the voices of Albertans, not the voices from Ottawa.

I can already hear the NDP clamouring about co-operation, collaboration. They'll tell you that we're standing in the way of progress. To be frank, nothing could be further from the truth, Madam Chair. This bill seeks to enhance and improve collaboration with federal, provincial, and our municipalities by giving Alberta a seat at the table and ensuring Albertans' voices are heard. If the federal government wants to establish national urban parks, they can come to the table, negotiate in good faith, and respect the constitutional division of powers that has served the country for many years.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Are there others? The hon. Member for Sherwood Park.

Mr. Kasawski: Thank you, Madam Chair. I'm rising to speak to Bill 204 – I think I've got that right – the Municipal Government (National Urban Parks) Amendment Act, 2023, a private member's bill brought forward by the Member for Leduc-Beaumont, who I'm sure is taking a lot of notes here for his wrap-up speech at the end of this debate. You know, Canada's national parks are really the gold standard in parks for conservation of nature, for connecting people with nature, for advancing reconciliation with Indigenous peoples, and so many stories come from our national parks when we spend time in these special places; songs, mostly written by Blue Rodeo, are about our national parks.

When I think of the idea of a national park in Edmonton, it is something that brings a great fondness. And when I think of the future for the generations of people that will hold a park like our river valley in the esteem of a place like Banff national park or Jasper national park, places where, you know, riding up past Pyramid Lake in the backcountry, you run into black bears on your singletrack and create these amazing memories, memories where proposals and engagements are made – in Banff and these beautiful places weddings are held – and places where we celebrate with other people, the idea of Edmonton's river valley becoming a national park held to this standard, as the national parks we're familiar with in our province, is something that really warms my heart. I want to make sure that we don't in this Legislature use any of our power to provide interference in a way that will limit the opportunity for Edmonton to form a national park.

I'm really worried that that's what this bill is going to be doing. When I've talked to councillors in the city of Edmonton about this bill, they are certain that it will just kill the opportunity of the development they've been doing over the last few years for bringing forward an opportunity to manage and maintain and preserve the Edmonton river valley for generations. One of the great things that they can really, you know, be proud of is that it has become a place to connect spiritually with nature. Culturally, we have the Indigenous Knowledge and Wisdom Centre, so sacred land that provides a natural setting for Indigenous people in an urban setting, in groups and communities, to host ceremony, sweat lodges, and facilitate intergenerational learning. That model is now being created or trying to be re-created in other parts of the world because they've come and seen what Edmonton has done in its river valley and want to provide that opportunity in urban parks in other places in the world.

You know, in general there is a worry in this province that the UCP are trying to starve municipalities into disillusion, and when you watch the manoeuvres of the UCP, it is understandable why: over a 56 per cent cut in municipal funding from the province that gets transferred to municipalities. We've been told we're going to be having political parties coming forward, legislation that will introduce political parties into municipal elections and school board elections, something that's opposed by Albertans and was never discussed in election campaigning; proposing changes on how municipalities fund new developments and how they can pay for new development. There has been suggestion by the UCP that they're going to eliminate the ability of municipalities to set higher building standards than the minimum building code.

This Bill 204, a private member's bill, is really just UCP interference into municipal governance in Alberta. If we step back a little bit, I feel it's a total waste of a private member's bill. There are currently no circumstances under the laws of the lands of our country where we could form a national park without provincial approval. We already have all of the legislation in place that allows the province to control whether or not there will be a national park in Edmonton's river valley, and bringing forward this private member's bill does nothing to change that. We already have the legislation in place that we need and the Constitution so that we can decide as a provincial government whether a national park can be formed here.

4:00

One of the things about the river valley, besides my own personal experience, is that since, like, the 1960s Edmonton has consciously protected its North Saskatchewan River valley from development. It has become a cultural tradition of Edmonton, protecting it from development so that it stays in a park setting, and now the river valley is considered the heart of this city. The opportunity to codify protection and management of the Edmonton river valley as a national park will create total certainty that this ecological and recreational gem will be preserved for future generations.

This private member's bill provides no benefit for the people of Leduc-Beaumont, which is sad. If I had an opportunity to have a private member's bill, which is won by lottery, I would want to make sure it was going to be benefiting the people of Sherwood Park.

This national urban park concept is relatively new in Canada. The possibility for the Edmonton river valley becoming a national urban park is exciting, for the local municipalities to fund the management and protection of an environmental and recreational gem in a river valley that is cherished by both local residents and visitors alike. It's a wildlife corridor. You have your own experiences in there with moose, with deer, with bobcats, sometimes black bears. From a recreational perspective, single-track mountain bike riding in the river valley is not as good as you get in Banff, not as good as you get in Jasper, but considering it's a river valley, it's spectacular.

It is not an overreach by Parks Canada to be working with the municipality and Indigenous groups to form a national urban park. Edmonton's river valley is the largest urban parkland in Canada, with over 160 kilometres of pathways and 20 recreational parks. If we were to create a national urban park, we would protect this parkland and provide access to federal funding for upkeep, protection, and management at no cost to Albertans. In a time when the city of Edmonton has had so much of its funding pulled back, to get long-term funding to preserve the potential national urban park in Edmonton's river valley is a great opportunity that should not be wasted and fettered away by this legislation.

We support the city of Edmonton's work to designate their land and their efforts to work with Indigenous partners to find the best

governance models and practice for a national urban park. It is something that they get to work on. Again, when we come back at the end, once they've done their work, the province is going to have to approve anyway. Coming in now, after the work that's been done, after years of work that's been done, it feels like a wedge issue is trying to be created for posturing by the UCP so that they have a way to again, as some of my colleagues have said, just really poke a finger at the federal government. It's not helpful for Albertans.

I'm also very disappointed by the paternalistic response of this province with municipal governments. You know, when we formed as a province, we had maybe 160,000 people. Now we're at 4.8 million people, and this UCP seems to be wanting to go back to a time and an age when they were governing municipalities, when we had fewer people than they have in the city of Red Deer.

When I heard from the city of Edmonton about the process that they have followed with Treaty 6 and Métis people, always including the government, it is the UCP that have limited themselves by their own lack of participation in this process of developing a national park. This private member's bill is going to undermine the participation and input from our Indigenous partners.

Back in 2020, when Parks Canada announced that it would be developing policy and programs to support the creation of national urban parks in Canada, they were focused on three pillars: supporting conservation in urban areas, including biodiversity protection, and climate change mitigation and adaptation, which is so important considering that, as we've just come through the budget process, we see no effort from this provincial government to provide any climate change mitigation and with nothing being done for adaptation. When we futurescape and we think about our river valley and what it would be like in years ahead, what is going to be done to make sure we can preserve and afford to preserve it?

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Are there others to join the debate? The hon. Member for Vermilion-Lloydminster-Wainwright.

Mr. Rowswell: Thank you, Madam Chair. I'm here today to talk about something that's really close to home for all of Alberta and especially those in Edmonton. We're looking at Bill 204, a necessary bill that responds to unnecessary overreach from the federal government in provincial matters, particularly regarding the creation of a huge national urban park right here in Edmonton's river valley.

The city of Edmonton is currently in discussions with Ottawa about the creation of a national urban park right in our own backyard, but here's where it gets tricky. We need to make sure that Alberta, our province, gets the opportunity to weigh in properly. We can't have the bigwigs in Ottawa making all the calls for us. That's exactly where Bill 204 steps in. The proposed bill seeks to amend the Municipal Government Act under division 8, limits on municipal powers, section 70. What it boils down to is giving us as Albertans a bigger voice in provincial matters, especially as it relates to our cherished green spaces in the river valley. It's about local control over local land, something we all value.

So why is all this talk about a park important? It's about our rights as a province. It's about making sure big decisions that affect our land and our people are made by those who know it best, us. Without Bill 204, there's a risk that the federal government could swoop in and make decisions without our input. That's like someone else deciding what's best for your house without asking you.

Albertans value and care deeply about our parks and green spaces. These are the places where individuals can go to connect with nature,

exercise, and create memories with friends and loved ones, whether it's a leisurely stroll, a bike ride, or winding down the trails. By passing the bill, we will ensure that before the national urban park gets the green light in our province, our province plays a role and has a seat at the table. This isn't about putting up roadblocks; it's about ensuring that the proper checks and balances are in place. We're taking this route because it's a smart thing to do to keep everyone accountable and make sure that these decisions being made are in the best interests of Albertans. It's about having a say in our future and protecting our right to shape our communities.

On August 22, 2023, the city council made a significant move by voting to plan this national urban park – that's a big step – but some council members had concerns. They worried about losing local control and about how the park would be managed. These concerns are exactly why the provincial involvement as outlined in Bill 204 is so critical.

Albertans might be wondering: what does this mean for me? Well, it's about your voice being heard loud and clear. It's about ensuring that the places you love and the environment you cherish are managed by the people who understand your needs and values. This park and any project like it should reflect what you as a resident of this province want to see.

Albertans cherish our local landscapes, our way of life, and our community values. We see first-hand how decisions made without adequate local input have unintended consequences. Whether it's about land use, resource management, or community development, the people closest to the issue often have the best insights. This belief in local expertise and stewardship is at the heart of my support for Bill 204.

So here's the bottom line: Bill 204 is about us taking control of our destiny. It's about ensuring that our province, our cities, and our communities are shaped by our hands. This bill is a statement that we are capable of making our own decisions and protecting what's important to us.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-City Centre.

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Madam Chair. I appreciate the opportunity to rise and speak to Bill 204, the Municipal Government (National Urban Parks) Amendment Act, 2023. I'm speaking against this act. You know, it seems the UCP and this member, I suppose – it is a private member's bill, but it seems that most of his colleagues are in support. I have yet to hear one against. It seems they must be nostalgic for their time in opposition, because that is seen to be what this is all about. They want to express their opposition against Ottawa in absolutely every way they can even if that means interfering with local decisions that are being made here by the city of Edmonton and the people of Edmonton.

4:10

You know, the Member for Grande Prairie spoke about: "Well, let Albertans make the choice for Albertans." He said: "Shouldn't Albertans make choices about where national parks should be? Shouldn't Albertans have a voice?" Madam Chair, Albertans do. The last I checked, all of us here in the city of Edmonton, who elected Edmonton's city council, who have been undertaking this process, who reached out to the federal government to begin this conversation, are Albertans. We have a voice in this. We have a voice at the table, a democratically elected voice. And what we have here is a member from outside of our city introducing a bill because he wants his government to interfere with that voice and that conversation. I strongly disagree with that.

They talk about Alberta having a seat at the table. Alberta has a seat at the table, Madam Chair. There is nothing excluding the provincial government from being part of this discussion. The challenge here is that this is a provincial government that wants to control every aspect of every conversation, which has been continually coming forward with incredible condescension towards our municipalities, who is looking for every possible opportunity to interfere as municipalities attempt to get things done.

I think of, you know, under the first iteration of this government, Madam Chair, how their Minister of Municipal Affairs interfered, stuck a stick in the wheel on the green line in Calgary. They interfered in the process for that construction. They dragged that construction out and prevented that construction from going forward for a full extra year. That construction was slated to begin in early 2021, delayed to April 2022 because the provincial government decided that they didn't want to let the city of Calgary go ahead. They said that the city of Calgary hadn't done enough work yet, that they didn't have a credible plan despite the fact that the city of Calgary had spent four decades of research and planning on the green line. That is how this government likes to come to municipalities to help.

Having the opportunity for the city of Edmonton to work with the federal government to get good things done allows us to get some good things done despite this government. I think of the fact that in the past year we have seen 210 new units of supportive housing come online in our city. Let me tell you, Madam Chair, that here in my constituency, representing downtown and our central communities, we have seen the need for that supportive housing for years. With the realities we see, with the doubling of the number of people that are living unhoused, the city of Edmonton took the initiative to step up and donate land, to invest money to build that housing. The federal government stepped up and provided funding to allow us to help build that housing as well. They put the funding in. This provincial government dragged its feet for four years.

If we had had to sit and wait for this government to stop sitting on its hands and take action, there would be 210 more people who would still be living on the streets of Edmonton, but because we had that opportunity to work directly with the federal government and get that funding, we were able to do the right thing despite the intransigence of this government.

Now, the provincial government wasn't prevented from being at the table, Madam Chair. They just weren't interested in coming to it, and indeed federal funding was lost. Further applications from the city of Edmonton for further funding for supportive housing were denied because this provincial government refused to come to the table and put in its fair share.

So I'm against this bill. It is a bit rich that we have a government that will interfere with projects like the green line in Calgary or will pass bills like the sovereignty act, which ignored, utterly ignored, the duty of consultation with First Nations, Indigenous communities here in the province of Alberta, and run roughshod – the members stand and talk about the Constitution.

My goodness, Madam Chair, the level of ignorance of the Constitution we heard from these members in the debate on the sovereignty act: astounding. These are not members to be lecturing anybody about jurisdiction.

You know, the Member for Camrose talked about the federal government being indifferent to her constituents' concerns, that being a reason for this government to feel it has to interfere in a process initiated by the city of Edmonton, said that this government was elected to represent Albertans and will ensure their voices are heard.

Madam Chair, how many issues do we have going on right now where this government is not listening to Albertans, is utterly indifferent to that member's and all of these members' constituents'

concerns? Albertans have been very, very clear. They do not want this government taking control of their Canada pension plan, but this government is charging ahead. Albertans have been very, very clear. The vast number of municipalities, a majority of Albertans, do not want a provincial police force. This government is putting in the legislation to set it up now. This government, who insists that they are now the guardians of parks in this province: let's not forget that one of their earliest acts was to try to sell off a number of those parks. Albertans had to speak out at great volume to stop that process. This government, that claims it wants to protect our provincial parks, is the one that is, over the objections, again, of a majority of Albertans, going for round two and trying to force through coal mining in the Rocky Mountains in the eastern slopes.

Contrary to the Member for Camrose, this provincial government is the one that is indifferent to Albertans' concerns. They are not representing Albertans or ensuring their voices are heard. They're upset because somebody is getting something done where they feel they want to have another chance to grandstand against Ottawa. This is not about what's best for Albertans, Madam Chair. This is about what's good for this government or what they feel is good for them and their political objectives. We're seeing far too much of that across the system right now.

I can tell you, Madam Chair, I have a very deep connection with the river valley here in the city of Edmonton. That was one of the places that my family would go together when we would spend time. As many in this Chamber will know, I am a lifelong cyclist, and one of my favourite places to be is to be out and about on two wheels. I don't get nearly as much time doing it these days as I used to, but I'll tell you: I can't count the number of hours that I've spent riding in our river valley. We would go for rides with my family as a kid. We would go down to Rundle park. We would ride all the way down through Gold Bar, all the way up and down to the Muttart Conservatory and back. When I lived out in the west end – I was going to MacEwan community college at that time studying music – I would ride the length of the river valley from the west end all the way to Rundle park and up to visit my parents in Clareview. It's an amazing asset that we have. It's an incredible gift that is under the stewardship of the city of Edmonton, and this opportunity to protect and preserve that is a golden opportunity.

This is not something that is being forced on anyone by the federal government. This is not the federal government stepping in and taking away anybody's rights. This is the city of Edmonton taking advantage of an opportunity that's been presented to it, and now we have a provincial government which has been going out of its way to pick fights, not only with the federal government but, frankly, with the city of Edmonton.

You know, we talk about consultation, we talk about respect, we talk about seats at the table. When this government was putting together its public safety task force about issues that are primarily taking place here in the communities that I represent, they didn't actually go and talk to city council. They didn't actually go and talk to the mayor. They didn't go and talk to any of the local city counsellors. They hand-picked two particular city councillors . . .

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

Mr. Lundy: Thank you, Madam Chair. As I rise to speak to Bill 204 today, I would like to once again thank all members of this House who have spoken to this legislation and added their input, perspectives, and passion. Although I must confess that as member of a provincial Legislature I'm a little surprised at the members opposite getting so worked up over ensuring a provincial role in something so important. It's a little mystifying to me.

4:20

Madam Chair, I would also be remiss not to acknowledge the continued support of a strong group of concerned citizens who continue to speak up, make their voices heard, and support Bill 204. If you would have told me that the same group of people would integrate themselves so closely with this issue, even coming to the gallery week after week, and those people weren't my parents, I would not have believed you, but this process has shown me how truly as legislators it's an honour to represent our constituents and indeed all Albertans.

I would like to take a little bit of time at the end here to address some of the concerns that have been chatted about. There is reference to some e-mails from citizens who are claiming that Bill 204 might be a barrier to having their voices heard. In fact, it's the exact opposite that's true. Bill 204 would be a guarantee that Albertans' voices are heard in this process.

I'd also like to talk about some of the main concerns that have been raised: conservation, funding, environmental protectionism, recreation. It's important to understand that this bill will make sure that the Alberta voice is heard on those conversations. We're not limiting those discussions. We're not freezing out partners. We're ensuring that the provincial voice and, most importantly, Albertans will be heard on these key issues.

We've heard a couple of times that there's already some federal legislation. Well, on this side of the House we're just not going to take the federal government at their word. We know they've broken that way too many times. In fact, the federal government should be appreciative if Bill 204 is passed. If they're sincere about involving the province, this bill will help them be assured that the provincial perspective has been considered. Now, of course, if they're not sincere, then they might be upset, so I think we'll let the history speak for that on the sincerity of this federal government.

I'd also like to thank the Member for Sherwood Park for his concern over the residents of Leduc-Beaumont, and let me assure him that the residents of Leduc-Beaumont will be very well served by this legislation. They will keep the federal government out of their parks and recreation areas. In fact, if the member is so lucky to win the draw for a private member's bill next time, perhaps he can craft something that maybe would sign his entire riding over to the federal government; it might keep him a little happier on that one.

I would like to close, Madam Chair. As I often get the chance to do, I spent some time this past Sunday walking around Lake Telford in Leduc. Obviously, the weather was nice. I got to say hi to everyone. I was really appreciative to spend some time outdoors, but I kept thinking: how ridiculous would it be if Justin Trudeau and Steven Guilbeault were standing there telling me and my constituents how to enjoy our park. It's an absolutely absurd notion, and just because they're physically distant doesn't mean that they should be able to do that through the national urban parks initiative. So I think that's a really good way to end debate here. Why would we allow Justin Trudeau and Steven Guilbeault to tell us how to use our parks and our river valleys in Alberta?

Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Are there others to join the debate? You have 45 seconds.
The hon. Member for Banff-Kananaskis.

Dr. Elmeligi: Forty-five seconds. Okay. Really fast, here is the deal with Bill 204. It is not needed. The National Parks Act already requires approval of the province to create national parks. The province was involved in discussions around the idea of the Edmonton river valley as an urban national park and chose to step

away. It's not very cool that you were there and then you changed your mind and now you're like: "Oh, no. Wait. I want to change my mind again." That's not how this works. This legislation is not needed. It's redundant with the National Parks Act. The province was there. The province could also go back any time. There's no prohibition to the province already being engaged. We do not need to put it into legislation to ensure that happens.

The Chair: That was perfect timing.

[The voice vote indicated that the clauses of Bill 204 were agreed to]

[Several members rose calling for a division. The division bell was rung at 4:25 p.m.]

[Fifteen minutes having elapsed, the committee divided]

[Ms Pitt in the chair]

For:

Amery	Jean	Rowswell
Armstrong-Homeniuk	Johnson	Sawhney
Boitchenko	Jones	Schow
Bouchard	LaGrange	Schulz
Cyr	Loewen	Sigurdson, R.J.
de Jonge	Long	Sinclair
Dreeshen	Lovely	Singh
Dyck	Lunty	Stephan
Ellis	McDougall	Turton
Fir	McIver	Wiebe
Getson	Nally	Wilson
Glubish	Neudorf	Wright, J.
Guthrie	Nicolaides	Yao
Horner	Nixon	Yaseen
Hunter	Petrovic	

4:40

Against:

Chapman	Hoffman	Metz
Dach	Ip	Pancholi
Eggen	Irwin	Renaud
Elmeligi	Kasawski	Shepherd
Haji	Loyola	Sweet
Totals:	For – 44	Against – 15

[The clauses of Bill 204 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. Deputy Government House Leader.

Mr. Amery: Thank you, Madam Chair, and congratulations to the Member for Leduc-Beaumont.

Madam Chair, I move that the committee rise and report.

[Motion carried]

[The Deputy Speaker in the chair]

Mr. Cyr: Madam Speaker, the Committee of the Whole has had under consideration certain bills. The committee reports the following bill: Bill 204.

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. That is carried.

**Public Bills and Orders Other than
Government Bills and Orders
Second Reading**

Bill 205

Housing Statutes (Housing Security) Amendment Act, 2023

[Debate adjourned March 11: Mr. Lundy speaking]

The Deputy Speaker: There are seven minutes remaining in the debate for this particular member. The hon. Member for Leduc-Beaumont.

Mr. Lundy: Thank you, Madam Speaker. As the debate on this bill continues, I would like to preface my remaining remarks in opposition to Bill 205 by reiterating the substantial pressure that inflation has placed on the housing market. Of course, the major driver of this inflation has been the NDP-supported fiscal policy under Justin Trudeau's Liberal government. The reckless-spending, deficit-fuelled fiscal hole that the federal government has put us in can only be tamed by the rising interest rates that have impacted us all.

Now, Madam Speaker, no one should be surprised that a Prime Minister who once said that he didn't think about fiscal policy was at the helm during an incendiary inflation crisis. But you know what might have been expected? That maybe politicians from both sides of the aisle would have had the backs of Albertans. Sadly, that has not been the case. Where were the members opposite to tell their boss, Jagmeet Singh: "We cannot support this federal government. It is making life too hard on Albertans"? Why weren't they lining up to say, "We cannot continue to prop up a government that has created such a costly housing affordability crisis"? Instead of standing up for Albertans, the NDP stood up for ideology and for the politics of convenience, refusing to rock the boat by calling out their boss and their party for facilitating this crisis.

At the very least Albertans may have expected the NDP to publicly oppose the carbon tax, particularly as the full brunt of rising inflation and interest rates were bearing down on Albertans' bank accounts, but I don't have to remind everyone here the crickets we heard from the opposition on this critical issue. I guess maybe they were under orders to not talk about it until their leadership race.

Madam Speaker, it's clear now that the NDP played a major role in getting us into this affordability crisis, so let's take a critical look at how they think they can get us out of it through Bill 205. Bill 205 has two primary components, one redundant and unnecessary and the other being rent control that would make the problem worse.

Firstly, Bill 205 would call for setting and reporting on housing targets that for the most part are already tracked in ministry business plans, current agreements, or through Alberta's affordable housing plan, stronger foundations. If passed, the provisions related to setting targets in Bill 205 would prove disruptive, repetitive, and confusing in light of the current ongoing work on affordable housing targets by our government.

But, Madam Speaker, by far the most concerning aspects of Bill 205 are those related to rent control. Rent control would be a disaster and limit the supply of housing in our province. When rent control was previously implemented in Alberta in the mid-1970s, construction of new properties dropped, vacancy rates decreased,

and fewer units were available for rent. This is why rent control was phased out in the early 1980s.

This experience is not uniquely Albertan. Jurisdictions all over the world who have dabbled in rent control have all witnessed a weakening of their overall housing market and have almost universally reversed or regretted implementing rent control in their jurisdiction. If we look at cities like Vancouver or Toronto, we see the consequence of rent control on housing that the NDP wish to bring here. We can also look globally and see the effects of failed rent control policies in New York, Stockholm, Berlin, and many more.

Rent control consistently fails. It distorts the housing market, results in an inefficient amount of housing available, and creates divisions between people. Madam Speaker, it's pretty clear that rent control would be a huge risk for Alberta, and it's very likely to limit supply, harm renters long term, and make it even harder for Albertans to find a place to rent.

So what, then, is needed to get us out of the housing affordability crisis? The answer starts with sensible and responsible fiscal policy to help tame inflation . . . [interjections]

The Deputy Speaker: Order. Hon. members, if you would like to continue to have conversations in this Chamber, I ask that you exit so that we can hear the member who has the floor right now. That is Leduc-Beaumont.

Mr. Lundy: Good news, Madam Speaker. We've already seen housing supply starting to increase in our province. In December 2023 housing starts were up by more than 64 per cent year to year with more housing coming on the market. We will make sure there will be more housing options to meet Albertans' needs. Also, under the stronger foundations affordable housing strategy our government is committed to maintaining a baseline number of households supported and an expansion target.

Alberta's government will continue to promote a healthy environment and vibrant investment climate that will allow our industry partners to continue to build additional housing supply in our province. We will also work with municipalities to address and reduce red tape that often stifles the quick and efficient increase in housing supply.

Madam Speaker, I would like to close by summarizing the three-step policy process that the NDP are reflecting through this bill. Step 1, create a problem; in this case, by contributing to and facilitating the housing affordability crisis by going along and refusing to stand up to the inflationary Trudeau-Singh alliance. Step 2, propose a solution that would make the situation worse; in this case, rent control. Of course, step 3, fearmonger and lob baseless attacks at our government, who are actually taking tangible actions to fix the problem. There you have it. NDP policy development 101: create a problem, make it worse, then fearmonger and attack. That is reason enough to not support Bill 205.

Thank you.

4:50

Mr. McIver: How much time is left, Madam Speaker?

The Deputy Speaker: You have 10 minutes.

Mr. McIver: Ten minutes. Okay. Well, there's a little bit to unpack here, so I'll just get started. [interjections]

The Deputy Speaker: Order. Order. Order.

Mr. Eggen: Point of order.

The Deputy Speaker: Point of order?

Mr. Eggen: Don't we go back and forth?

The Deputy Speaker: If you would like to stand and speak, you must stand and speak. If the Speaker does not see you, the Speaker doesn't see you.

Ms Pancholi: I don't think the Speaker looked this way.

The Deputy Speaker: The Speaker recognized the hon. minister. That is who the Speaker saw. The hon. minister will have 10 minutes to speak, and I hope to recognize the hon. member next time.

The hon. minister.

Mr. McIver: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I appreciate that. It's my pleasure to rise in the House today and speak about Bill 205, the housing statutes amendment act. It's been said many times in the House and elsewhere that introducing rent control would be a disaster for Alberta, but despite all this the folks across the aisle didn't seem to have gotten that memo. What we do know is that people and families are flocking to Alberta. Our population is booming, and part of that reason is that our province is affordable, especially compared to our neighbours next door in British Columbia.

Alberta is an excellent place to work, raise a family, and retire. People come here for the Alberta advantage, and we knew that the need to increase the supply of all sorts of housing options – affordable, purpose-built rentals, single-family homes, and market housing – needs to happen in every category. In a time when our population is hitting record numbers, we can't afford for rent control policies to discourage the housing supply and blunt progress that has already occurred.

This year, of course, partially because our government has worked very hard at it, is having the busiest start in a new year for housing in Alberta's history. To put that in perspective, we saw the most housing starts in January 2015 and 48 per cent more housing starts in January 2023, and that's not just housing starts but purpose-built rental units. In the past three years construction has started on more rental units than were built in the preceding 15 years combined. [interjections]

I'm getting complaints from the other side, who would rather have people living in a tent than in a home safely and rather, while they're living in a tent, be tortured by gang members and treated terribly and all of that, yet they complain when the facts are being pointed out about a terrible piece of legislation that the folks across the way have put on the table.

In the past three years construction has started on more rental units than were built in the preceding 15 years combined. There are currently over 16,000 rental units under construction today. That's one-third of all new housing starts province-wide, and that number has historically been below 10 per cent. Alberta is building, Madam Speaker, and it's helped by the policies of this government that we are seeing these results.

We've legislated development approval timelines so builders can get to work faster. We're requiring municipalities to report on subdivision development permit approvals, including how many were received and average approval time so we can measure and track progress. We've strengthened transparency of off-site levy calculations for all municipalities as well as bolstered municipal reporting and stakeholder consultation requirements for off-site levies, and we've implemented changes to city charters to remove barriers to attainable and affordable housing initiatives that will help limit the potential for cost increases to new housing, Madam Speaker, and the list goes on and on and on.

Our policies that are incentivizing the development of housing and reducing red tape in the residential construction sector will help

add 50,000 to 60,000 units above the expected level of housing starts in the next 10 years. That is massive, and that doesn't just mean more homes; it means more affordable homes, more families able to buy a home that weren't able to do so under the NDP government. That's good news for all Albertans, for those that have lived here their entire life and those that have recently moved here from Canada and around the world because they wanted a more affordable place to live, that this government cannot and will not allow the dream of home ownership to die for the average Albertan, especially young Albertans.

There are people that are trying to tell young Albertans they can never have their own home. Well, it's not this government saying that, Madam Speaker. We're doing something about it. We are working hard to make sure that is not the fact. We will not allow Alberta to fall into the housing crisis, like places like Toronto and Vancouver, who have rent control. We will certainly not allow Albertans to become homeless because they cannot find a place to live due to the disastrous policies that the members opposite want to make law.

[The Speaker in the chair]

Not only do Albertans want to simply find a place to live, pay the rent, or afford a home; they want to live in a vibrant, beautiful community. In 2014, Mr. Speaker – I guess you're in the chair now – a study out of the U.K. found that rent control has been known to reduce the entire desirability of a neighbourhood. It doesn't incentivize landlords to look after their units and upgrade them, leading to older buildings being in worse repair. Under rent control, in other words, even when there is affordable rent, it's likely to be in a poor condition and less favourable for a quality of life than without rent control. The study out of the U.K. goes on to say that rent control properties in Cambridge had "substantial negative [effects] on the nearby housing market, lowering the amenity value of these neighbourhoods and making them less desirable places to live."

Now, imagine bringing in rent control across this entire province like the members opposite want to do. Literally – literally – they would rather have Albertans living in tents like they advocated when we were trying to help with that situation in Edmonton. Not under our government, Mr. Speaker. That is why the Premier has tasked the Minister of Seniors, Community and Social Services with developing an affordable and attainable home ownership and rental strategy that focuses on incentivizing the construction of new rental units and homes.

Mr. Speaker, the folks across the way: I know they're embarrassed about this bill. I know they're embarrassed about the terrible record that they had during the dark years when they were in government. But our government is not going to go down the negative dark roads that they did. That's why our government is injecting even more funding into rent supplements to help Albertans who need help paying their rent, currently serving over 12,000 households across our province. [interjections]

I can hear the embarrassment from their voices across there, Mr. Speaker, and it's why our government is laser focused on increasing the supply of housing across Alberta. We know that rent control was previously implemented in Alberta in the mid-70s. It didn't work. The construction of new properties dropped, vacancy rates decreased, fewer units were available to rent.

Mr. Speaker, being in a home, having a home is not a short-term proposition. We want it to be for the rest of our lives. Albertans want it to be for the rest of their lives. The folks across the way can see what looks like a very, very short-term promise of more affordable housing with rent control, but we know from history that short-term

promise leads to long-term disappointment. A short period later there will be even fewer homes, less ability for affordable homes, higher prices, less choice, less construction, making more and more and more people unable to afford homes. Whatever slightly short-term bit of advantage that might be promised by rent controls actually manifests itself in less housing, more expensive housing, poor housing. In other words, this is a policy that doesn't work, hasn't worked. It actually runs exactly counter to providing enough housing and enough affordable housing for Albertans, which is why this government will soundly reject it, because it's a bad idea. It's a tested bad idea.

Now, Alberta is building a record amount of homes and purpose-built rental units, but we're not ignoring those people that need an affordable place to live in below market value housing. I find it fairly rich that the folks across the aisle want to bring in rent control as a way to fix the mess that they helped to create in the affordable housing file during their time in government. Under their government, Mr. Speaker, the affordable housing wait-list increased by 76 per cent.

The Speaker: I hesitate to interrupt the hon. member; however, time for consideration of this piece of legislation has concluded for this afternoon.

5:00 Motions Other than Government Motions

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Banff-Kananaskis.

Tourism in the Rocky Mountains

508. Dr. Elmeligi moved:

Be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly

- (a) recognize the importance of tourism on Alberta's economy and the need to balance visitor experiences and resident affordability; and
- (b) urge the government to work with municipalities in Alberta's Rocky Mountains with tourism-based economies to establish funding and support programs that ensure municipal taxpayers do not bear the financial responsibility for the additional infrastructure requirements and operational demands on those municipalities due to tourism.

Dr. Elmeligi: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Thanks, everyone. It is truly my pleasure to rise today to speak private member's Motion 508, tourism-based economies. I want to provide a brief overview of why we're here, why we're debating this motion, and how it came to be. Tourism is an amazing opportunity for mid-sized cities, small towns, and rural landscapes to truly boost their economy. The provincial tourism strategy talks about increasing tourism spending to \$25 billion by 2035, which is a very lofty goal. It will take strategic moves to get us there.

The tourism strategy labels Banff, Canmore, and Jasper as legacy destinations. Well, what does this mean? These places are legacy destinations because this is, really, where tourism in Alberta or even Canada began. Banff national park, as the first national park in the country, is really the birthplace of tourism in western Canada. It is even arguably the first really profitable industry in Alberta. Alberta's oldest industry began with the designation of these national parks, so the history of tourism is incredibly strong in both Banff and Jasper, and Canmore in its proximity also really receives a lot of benefits from a growing tourism economy.

These three communities continue to be significant economic drivers not only for the tourism sector in Alberta but for the province as a whole. These three communities contribute over \$200 million in provincial taxes each year and generate over \$2.2 billion

for the provincial GDP annually. This is no small economic contribution to Alberta. These three communities also host the highest visitation in Alberta: Canmore received over 5 million visitors in 2021; Banff, 4.13 million visitors in 2022-23; and Jasper, 2.42 million in 2022-23. These three communities have .68 per cent of the Alberta population yet host 13 per cent of all visitors to Alberta.

It is due to this disproportionate number of visitors to residents and the cost of tourism-based infrastructure that we're here discussing this motion today. It is difficult for a rural tax base to provide infrastructure to host millions of people without seeing recognition or support from the province. These three communities and other tourism destinations arguably need financial support from the province in recognition of the billions of dollars provided to the provincial GDP.

I'd like to take a moment to share some of the honour and cost of tourism. Before I became an MLA, I was honoured to be part of the mayor's Tourism Task Force for the town of Canmore, which is a multistakeholder group that came together to discuss how Canmore could move forward with a significant tourism economy, basically, in town. These are not easy conversations to have, but they are very important ones. There is an incredible honour that comes with being in a community that is in or very close to Canada's Rocky Mountain national parks. Also, Canmore, of course, is right next to Kananaskis, our premier provincial parks. It is an honour to live in these places. It is an honour to be in one of Canada's most photographed and loved landscapes. If you google "Canada tourism," you will find pictures of my hometown and of Jasper and of Banff.

There are many benefits to these three communities by living and being in these places. We have great, thriving local economies, incredible creative local businesses, incredible innovation in a small town where people literally carve out their own niche and find ways to do the things that they love. There are lots of things to do, places to eat, and events to enjoy, and all of that comes with being one of Canada's most premier tourism destinations.

However, that tourism comes at a cost to the local community. Municipalities invest money into tourism infrastructure like parking lots, public toilets, multi-use trail networks, and that takes away from other municipal budgetary infrastructure needs like water treatment, affordable housing provision, local community affordability programs. These municipalities have also experienced reduced budgets with the new LGFF funding model, but tourism continues to increase. This decreased funding to municipalities literally translates to increased property taxes as residents are asked to pay more to welcome the world while the provincial bank account continues to grow. All of these communities have increased municipal taxes to address the needs of tourism.

I also want to share some of the legislative options. Obviously, Alberta is not the first province to try to figure out how to create balance and equity in this. In 2023 the former MLA for Banff-Kananaskis, Miranda Rosin, introduced Bill 208, Municipal Government (Tourism Community Designation) Amendment Act, 2023, and this current motion builds on this effort from our previous MLA from the UCP government. Unfortunately, this bill didn't have a chance to reach debate because the session ended, but I think it's worth resuming that discussion now.

This bill had two parts: first, to define designated tourism communities with a set of criteria that communities could measure themselves against and then a destination development committee that would evaluate requests from communities. This is the important part: this bill linked that designation for these designated communities to apply for financial support with respect to building, maintaining, improving infrastructure to increase tourism capacity and/or develop and enhance the character of the tourism community

or facilitate destination marketing. So there is clearly an interest on both sides of the aisle in legislation and policy to help support these legacy destinations in doing the great things that they do.

Oftentimes in Alberta tourism we compare ourselves to B.C. They're our neighbour. We offer similar but, I would argue, actually very different products. But we talk about leakage to British Columbia, which is basically people passing through Alberta to get to B.C. Well, one of the key differences is that B.C. has very intentionally created legislation and policy to support tourism in ways that Alberta has not. The government of B.C. will distribute \$1 billion to be split among 188 municipalities and regional districts to support tourism infrastructure and increasing tourism capacity in regional and rural communities.

The resort municipality of Whistler is accompanied by legislation that recognizes the role Whistler plays in the provincial economy and supports that to grow. In 2023 the regional municipality of Whistler expects to receive \$5.7 million in provincial funding under legislation. This is huge. I can guarantee you that Canmore and Banff and Jasper are not receiving \$6 million from the province to help address the dire need for tourism-based infrastructure.

This motion is the first step in supporting these communities meaningfully to continue to offer the incredible high-quality visitor experiences that they do offer and for them to continue to contribute to the provincial economy in the way that they do. This motion also gets us one step closer to our overall goals of increasing our tourism spend by 2035. One of the things that I really have come to appreciate from working in and around tourism is that adage of: you have to spend money to make money. We need to invest in these legacy destinations so they can continue to draw people in, and that investment needs to create high-quality visitor experiences so that people will go and tell all of their friends and family to come to Alberta.

This motion supports our legacy destinations, which are the foundation of our tourism sector in Alberta. It is a motion that I believe all members in this House should support, because it helps our Alberta economy grow, it supports people living in some of the most expensive communities in Alberta by contributing to, hopefully, reduced property taxes, and it's just a really great way to celebrate and acknowledge the incredible hard work that all of the people in Banff, Canmore, and Jasper continue to do every day to make sure that Alberta is that international tourism destination of high repute.

Thank you.

5:10

The Speaker: Hon. members, are there others? The hon. Minister of Municipal Affairs, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-South.

Mr. McIver: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to rise on the private member's motion before us, which reads:

- (a) recognize the importance of tourism on Alberta's economy and the need to balance visitor experiences and resident affordability; and
- (b) urge the government to work with municipalities in Alberta's Rocky Mountains with tourism-based economies to establish funding and support programs that ensure municipal taxpayers do not bear the financial responsibility for the additional infrastructure requirements and operational demands on those municipalities due to tourism.

Well, I've got to say that it sounds nice, and it is, but what it fails to recognize is that we're way ahead of that here in Alberta. The hon. member that moves the motion wasn't here then, so I guess that hon. member doesn't bear the responsibility . . . [interjection] I thought it was my turn, Mr. Speaker. I'm sorry.

Listen, the fact is that the hon. member that made the motion doesn't bear responsibility for the fact that when the NDP was in government, they actually took the hotel tax away from the tourism industry. Yeah, that's what they did. That's what they did. So it's a little kind of rich now to talk about how important that particular political party thinks that tourism is when they seemed to do everything in their power to damage it when they had a chance to help it for four years.

Of course, we have returned some of that money to the tourism industry since the NDP were fired after one term, which is, incidentally, the only time that's happened in the 100-plus year history of Alberta, where a government got fired after one term. Perhaps that was part of the reason, Mr. Speaker.

Listen, we do support tourism on this side of the House. Some of the things that the hon. member said in her opening were legitimate things that tourism towns have to concern themselves with: the cost of parking, toilets, the trail network, garbage pickup. I'm proud to say that 100 years ago, when I was transportation minister, I approved the last million dollars which connected the pathway between Banff and Canmore. I certainly wouldn't take all the credit for that, but the pathway was there except for a section that was undone, and of course until that section was done, it wasn't nearly as usable as it is today. Any time now, if you're going on highway 1 between Banff and Canmore and you look, you can see most days a parade of people walking, hiking, on bicycles, rollerblades, whatever their means of choice transportation is on that important pathway. That is certainly another example of our government supporting those things in tourism communities.

Mr. Speaker, we are fortunate in Alberta to have some of the most iconic and popular tourism destinations in the country and the world. The hon. member across is right in saying that. It has led to a vibrant tourism sector that helps drive our economy and create good local jobs for Albertans. In fact, in 2019 alone travellers contributed about \$10.1 billion to Alberta's economy, and it is our government's goal to increase that number to \$25 billion by 2035.

Of course, all Albertan communities are part of it, but it must be said that the tourism communities like Canmore, Banff, Jasper, and Drumheller are major drivers today and will continue to be major drivers as we try to find success in finding that bigger number of tourism visitors and spending here.

They are responsible for those important infrastructure projects, and they're a reason why people not only revisit our beautiful province but why so many people move to Alberta. As much as our government policy helps that, I'll tell you what else helps: when people come to visit Alberta and they like it here. Then a lot of people will say: "You know, what if I could get a job there? What if I could move my business here? What if I could start a business there?"

Tourism is one of those seeds that gets planted that can blossom into a lot of economic development and a lot of opportunity for families and jobs and other opportunities for Albertans that have been here a long time and for Albertans that have just arrived. It can help all of that. It's something that our government is ambitious about, and we think that under the leadership of our Minister of Tourism and Sport we'll have a good chance of making that laudable goal. We are committed to supporting entrepreneurs, community leaders, organizations, and businesses that help our community grow.

We have been talking and we regularly talk to tourism municipalities. I spent some time this morning with the mayor of Canmore, and we talked about housing for employees of the many businesses in Canmore. The municipality, I'm happy to say, has a plan. We have agreed to talk more about the municipality's plan and about our government's plans, which will be introduced in legislation during this session of the Legislature, to see how we can bring those two things together to help, amongst other municipalities, certainly our

tourism municipalities, because they matter. Tourism is, to me at least, a little bit like agriculture. It was one of the first industries that was successful in Alberta, and if we do it right, it could be one of the industries that should be successful in Alberta forever if we all manage it well.

Part of the motion that's talked about is funding. I was a little disappointed in the opening comments complaining about the LGFF formula for municipal funding, because that's really something that the municipalities asked for and an example of Alberta's government saying yes. Now, it may be true that some municipalities and even some of the tourism municipalities may have been one of the ones under the formula that took some reduction in the first year of the program, but some of the other comments that I heard from across the way were, "Well, the government makes a bunch of money; the municipalities don't" when in fact, Mr. Speaker, I thought everybody knew here that that's exactly the opposite of what happens.

Under the LGFF municipal funding goes up or down – or down: let's be clear – by the same percentage that the provincial government funding goes up and down, with a three-year delay so that municipalities can plan. Because of that, municipalities across Alberta will see their revenue go up by an average of 13 per cent next fiscal year based on that formula. That's an increase.

The other thing about the LGFF is that some of the things that the formula is based on are infrastructure and population, so as tourism municipalities build more infrastructure and have more population, there is a good chance that they will get a bigger portion of the LGFF.

The other thing that I would remind members of the House is that included in this budget is \$60 million over three years. That's \$20 million a year, the local sustainability and growth grant to help growth in municipalities and municipalities to be sustainable.

I guess what I'm saying, Mr. Speaker, is that our government is very actively working towards building on the success of all municipalities, but that also includes our tourism municipalities, because they have a special place in all of our hearts. All municipalities are important, but these are really, in many ways, the front door to our province. When people look to visit Alberta, to come here, very, very many of them have words like "Drumheller" or "Canmore" or "Jasper" or "Banff" on their mind when they come here and when they look at tourism brochures and when they plan a car trip across the country or to fly here.

We have committed to being supportive of municipalities. We will continue to be supportive. We don't have all the answers yet, but we are committed, as I said, to working with those municipalities. As the Municipal Affairs minister I'm certainly committed to staying in regular touch with them to talk about how we can work together. Again, I guess the most recent thing I would talk about is what the mayor of Canmore and I did talk about today: how we can work together to make sure they can be successful at developing housing for the people that work there, that in many cases can't afford to live in the community now or can't afford to live the way they'd like to in the municipality now. Mr. Speaker, I can assure members of the House that we are committed to this.

5:20

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-South West.

Mr. Ip: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to rise to speak in favour of Motion 508. I find it interesting that the hon. member opposite spoke of how they're ahead of this motion and that they're supportive of the tourism industry, because as recently as just a few weeks ago the headline in a local newspaper in Jasper read, "Mayor Ireland Concerned about Lack of Capital Funding in Alberta Budget." Clearly, this government is not ahead of this motion, and

clearly they're not supportive enough if you talk to mid-size and other municipalities impacted, certainly, by the budget and who bear the brunt of the tourism industry.

I want to thank my colleague MLA Elmeligi . . .

Some Hon. Members: Names.

Mr. Ip: Oh, sorry. My apologies.

. . . the hon. Member for Banff-Kananaskis for bringing this motion forward and for her passion and tireless advocacy for the tourism industry and for the natural treasure that is our mountains and national parks.

Now, let me speak to why this motion is important and why I believe it will help address some of the gaps we currently see in the tourism industry that are particularly impacting our mid-size and rural communities. Alberta's Rocky Mountain communities – for example, Jasper, Banff, and Canmore – provide an outsized economic contribution to Alberta. As has been mentioned in this House, these economies generate \$2.2 billion to Alberta's overall economy while contributing \$112 million in provincial taxes. These three communities alone host 13 per cent of Alberta's visitors yet have less than 1 per cent of the province's population. The fortunes of these communities are directly tied with the fortunes of Alberta's visitor economy.

Let me just say that the visitor economy is an important foundation of the economy of the province. In fact, in Alberta nearly 10 per cent of the province's jobs are attributable to tourism-related business activities. We've seen that Alberta tourism has made great strides and has exceeded pre-COVID revenues by 6 per cent despite international visitor spending still being down by 33 per cent from pre-COVID levels. So I think this speaks to the determination and the heart of the people who work in our visitor economy. When the Alberta visitor economies succeed, the local economies of Alberta's Rocky Mountain communities succeed.

At the same time, though, this does create a significant strain on the municipal infrastructure that these communities provide. In Alberta's visitor-based economies, as local infrastructure gets strained, as there's more demand, local residents, visitors, and businesses all feel the strain. This has created unprecedented stress on these communities' municipal budgets, putting their councils truly between a rock and a hard place, between raising property taxes further or letting existing infrastructure crumble. Frankly, any visitor-based economy would have challenges under these circumstances.

It is unacceptable that we would allow municipalities to bear the brunt of tourism support and infrastructure investment. Indeed, this government must do better. Presently there is a mismatch between what Alberta's Rocky Mountain communities give to the rest of Alberta in economic benefit and how much the provincial government actually invests in their municipal infrastructure.

Every year millions of visitors benefit from the municipal infrastructure these communities provide. Despite local taxpayers footing the bill, the entire province gets the economic benefits the Rocky Mountain communities provide, without the provincial government sufficiently paying for necessary investments. For example, Banff and Jasper residents will see property tax increases of over 9 per cent this year. If you talk to anybody who lives there, this is not sustainable. Municipal property taxes aren't keeping up with the needs of residents in these communities, especially given the population increases, inflation, and a higher cost of living.

Hosting the world comes with its own challenges. Although I'm sure that residents of Jasper, Banff, and Canmore are happy to share their amazing surroundings with so many visitors, it shouldn't fall exclusively to them and to the municipal jurisdictions in those communities to provide the upkeep of municipal infrastructure that,

frankly, serves more than just residents. It serves in many ways the world and all Albertans.

We want to make sure that the Rocky Mountain communities remain great places to live and visit. It is an integral part of Alberta's visitor economy. As Motion 508 states, the government should work with these municipalities to establish funding and support programs to lessen the burden on local property tax payers. I'm sure the government and members opposite would agree that this is needed. I would invite them to collaborate with this side of the House and really send a message of support, particularly to those joining our House today from those communities, to say to them that their communities are important, that the work that they're doing to support the visitor economy and the tourism sector is important, and that as a Legislature and as the government we won't let them be on their own.

Let's make sure that we approach this problem not as a municipal problem per se but look at it as an investment that will benefit the entire provincial economy, that will ensure the resilience of the provincial economy. As I mentioned earlier, about 10 per cent of jobs in Alberta are attributable to tourism-related business activities, so this is in fact investing in the economy of Alberta. It shouldn't be seen solely through the lens of Municipal Affairs. Given that the provincial economy as a whole benefits from these tourist areas, the government should treat this as an investment in economic diversification for the whole province. I would encourage members opposite to consider perhaps working with other ministries such as Jobs, Economy and Trade and others to look at whether or not there would be other possibilities to invest other funds, other monies in these communities.

Provincial help to support designing and building high-quality infrastructure and services will ultimately create a high-quality visitor experience and help the province's reputation. I know this government loves to tout how important it is to promote Alberta, and on that front I agree with them. Alberta has an incredible story to tell. But we also want to make sure that when visitors come to Banff, Jasper, and Canmore, they will have quality roads, sidewalks, paths to get around, and other tourism-related infrastructure and other quality amenities that will support the reputation of Alberta. Leaving visitors with a positive impression of its towns will support the local visitor economy, and creating such a program will contribute to tourism growth in Alberta.

The fact is that municipal property taxes will never be able to keep up with the needs of these quite unique municipalities as long as they remain an international destination of choice for visitors. Residents in the Rocky Mountains can also pay more, I should add, for groceries, activities, and everyday purchases compared to other Albertans.

5:30

Mr. Speaker, asking these residents to pay more, to bear more of the brunt of, frankly, the tourism-related sector by way of property taxes and potentially other taxes is simply unreasonable. Special investments are needed from the provincial government, sustainable investments, long-term investments, looking at investments through a different lens, not only to help local residents but, frankly, to invest and to help grow the provincial economy.

Mr. Speaker, there's so much more to say, but let me just say that it's so important, and I invite members . . .

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Cardston-Siksika and the Minister of Tourism and Sport.

Mr. Schow: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the opportunity to rise and speak on this bill. Sorry. I'm just looking for a copy of the NDP's campaign platform on tourism. I don't think it exists. [interjection] It certainly is.

What I can tell you, Mr. Speaker, is that I'm very proud. I'm very proud of the tourism economy and how quickly it has been

rebounding since COVID. As a result, we are two years ahead of schedule, and to hear the members opposite heckling as if it's a bad thing that we're doing so well as a province – I mean, I'm not the one here typing up op-eds for the *Calgary Herald* and then tabling them in the Chamber because no one else read them. I mean, I find that actually about as pathetic as the campaign from the Member for Edmonton-Whitemud.

What I will say, Mr. Speaker, is that when it comes to tourism, the province is booming. It's absolutely booming, and it's a result of the investments that we as a province are making in the visitor economy. We have been investing in Tourism Jasper, been investing in Banff and Lake Louise Tourism, Canmore Business and Tourism Association, and Tourism Canmore Kananaskis. As a result, we are absolutely reaping the benefits of that as we see thousands and thousands of visitors coming to Alberta because it is the best place to live, to play, and to visit.

Now, the motion has some lacking in the words, including the fact that it only recognized the Rockies as a tourism destination. If the Member for Banff-Kananaskis had read the tourism strategy that we recently released, she would know that the five pillars help us to build tourism around the entire province. Now, I have referenced in the past Banff, Jasper, Lake Louise as the crowning jewels of tourism in Alberta, and I stand behind that – beautiful destinations; visited them many times – but to have crowning jewels, you have to have a crown, Mr. Speaker. We're building that with this tourism strategy by expanding air access into the province. Travellers from overseas, which is the one piece of the puzzle we are still missing in our recovery from COVID, need direct access to the province via air. We're expanding that. We have new routes to places like Tokyo, Korea, Spain, France, Germany, and the list goes on. I'm grateful for that air access from our partners like WestJet.

The member opposite was also correct. Investment in tourism supports the entire economy but not just the investment in the Rockies, Mr. Speaker; investment across the entire province. Alberta has a tremendous story to tell, and as the Minister of Tourism and Sport it's my job to help tell that story. I have been doing that tirelessly since I was appointed to this role. It's a role that I take very seriously and am grateful for the opportunity to represent the province in this capacity.

But, Mr. Speaker, when the NDP was in government, Travel Alberta investment was \$38 million, okay? Now, we would all in this Chamber, at least on this side of the House, love to forget that four years that the NDP were in government – sadly, we're still paying the price for that – and think for a moment that it's really far off in the distant memory, but it's not. We're talking 2015 to 2019. Thirty-eight million dollars. Today the investment in Travel Alberta from the government is \$80 million. That's money that's going to product development. That's money going to support marketing. That's money that's going to building the visitor economy and making Alberta that attractive place to live, to play, and to visit.

Now, I know there are other members who want to speak to this motion. I will be voting against it because I don't feel it's in the best interests of the province. However, I will say this. I will continue to fight, I will continue to work, I will continue to sell this province because it is a province that I believe in. I believe in the people here, and I believe that it is and will continue to be the best place to live, to play, and to visit.

The goal that we have set of \$25 billion by 2035 is, yes, ambitious but more than achievable with the proper investment and the targeted approach, the approach we're taking with the tourism strategy, something that was grossly lacking under the previous government, Mr. Speaker. While I appreciate the Member for Banff-Kananaskis for her diligent work in the tourism sector and being interested in supporting that, I believe this motion falls short. [interjections] And while the

Member for St. Albert heckles, as she usually does, complete and utter nonsense, I will continue to stand here as an advocate for Alberta while the members opposite want to tear this province down.

Mr. Speaker, I appreciate that. I appreciate the opportunity to speak, but I will be voting against this motion.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-City Centre is next.

Mr. Shepherd: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the opportunity to rise and speak to Motion 508 and indeed recognize the municipal leaders who have joined us here today for this debate and apologize to them for some of the childish and petty behaviour we've seen from some of the government ministers here today in this debate, because this is important. We don't have to sink to that kind of behaviour when we're talking about something that's so important for so many municipalities across our province.

You know, I've spent many summers, had many opportunities to spend time in Banff, Canmore, Jasper. Those were places that were our go-to for family vacations and instilled a deep love of the mountains in me. Still one of the favourite places to go. Canmore: one of the favourite places that my partner, Anna, likes to visit. We're headed there again in May. Looking forward to checking out the Nordic Spa in Kananaskis.

But we are here today, and we are having this debate, and I just wanted to note, for the government members that are complaining about this motion, that this builds on work that was started by their own former colleague Miranda Rosin, the former MLA for Banff-Kananaskis with the UCP government. She put forward a private member's bill that was essentially putting forward the same principles that the current MLA is putting forward today, because it is incredibly important that we recognize the value that these tourism destinations – and, yes, they are broader than just the Rocky Mountains. I would like to think that downtown Edmonton here is a tourist destination in some respects here in our city, certainly this beautiful Legislature and many other things that people do come here to visit.

They do make outsized contributions to our provincial economy, but they also need support. One of the disappointing things, Mr. Speaker, alongside the petty behaviour we've seen here today, is that this is a government that likes to brag about people coming to Alberta, likes to brag about the good things but doesn't like to talk about the fact that they are rarely interested in actually funding the infrastructure needed to support that. It is wonderful that we have more and more people coming to live in Alberta. It is wonderful that we have more and more people coming to live, coming to visit and recreate in Alberta, but that requires actually investing in the infrastructure to support them, and what we have had is a failure, under this government, to do that. Indeed, this is a government, instead, that has piled up additional costs on municipalities.

In the *Rocky Mountain Outlook* the mayor of Banff on March 8 talked about this frustration. She talked about the fact that this government increased Banff's school tax requisition by 18 per cent from \$8.8 million in 2023 to \$10.3 million this year, but she said that there's no evidence any of that \$10.3 million that they take out of Banff gets put back into Banff. That's the mayor of Banff. Alberta Municipalities just put out a report on April 3 talking about the costs for municipalities and investments under this government, and they noted that if they

exclude the federal funding and ... amounts [that are spent on] provincial [infrastructure] highways and bridges, ... the total provincial capital funding for municipalities in 2024 will be \$1.73 billion. [That] is actually \$1 billion less than what the provincial government [takes] from municipalities through education property taxes this year.

This year, Mr. Speaker. So what this provincial government is extracting from, even as they brag about what these municipalities do to attract people to Alberta, what they add to this province: they are not putting back the same.

5:40

It is clear, Mr. Speaker, that we need to be true partners. We need true collaboration across orders of government. For what these communities contribute to our province, they deserve a real partner at the provincial level. That's what this motion is about. It's simply saying: how can we move forward in ensuring that these areas of our province, that add so much to our economy, to our experience here – that we support them in that work so that it does not simply lie on the backs of their residents who already face much higher costs than in many other quarters of this province.

I want to say thank you to the Member for Banff-Kananaskis for, in a nonpartisan way, Mr. Speaker, unlike many of the remarks from the government here today, building on the work of a UCP MLA to represent her jurisdiction and the people she represents to put forward, I think, a constructive approach to building a better province.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: Are there others? The hon. Member for West Yellowhead has risen.

Mr. Long: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm proud to rise today to speak to Motion 508. As an MLA who represents communities in Alberta's Rocky Mountains I know very well how much the visitor economy impacts communities, providing opportunities and even challenges that communities otherwise might not have if they were in a different location. When I first read Motion 508, I was somewhat appreciative of the intent of the motion. However, given the time I've spent travelling the province representing all aspects of the tourism sector, I can confidently say that this motion misses the mark on a few levels. For example, in the first part of the motion, it says that the government should "recognize the importance of tourism on Alberta's economy," but then it follows up by talking about "the need to balance visitor experiences and resident affordability." This portion alone appears to provide conflicting statements. Are we to recognize the importance of tourism on our economy, or should we gatekeep and limit visitor experiences?

Our government and everyone on this side of the Assembly is laser focused on growing Alberta's visitor economy. We know that tourism is a major economic driver. We know it diversifies the economy, promotes growth, and creates jobs, all of this while supporting thousands of businesses across the province, including in my own riding. Dare I say, Mr. Speaker, that this approach is working. The commitment to growing the visitor economy is paying off. The tourism industry reached new heights with \$10.7 billion in tourism spending in 2022. That's up \$600 million from 2019 levels, which is a return to prepandemic levels years ahead of schedule. On that note, we are so far ahead of other provinces right now on the recovery aspect that we're leaving them in the dust. This is a sign that Alberta's visitor economy is on track to reach new heights year over year over year. It's why the government recently launched our long-term provincial tourism strategy, charting a path towards a goal of growing the province's visitor economy from \$10 billion to \$25 billion annually by 2035.

Another aspect of the motion. In the second part it discusses working with municipalities in Alberta's Rocky Mountains with tourism-based economies to establish funding and support programs [to] ensure [that] municipal taxpayers do not bear the financial responsibility for the additional infrastructure requirements and operational demands on those municipalities due to tourism.

In theory, Mr. Speaker, I do appreciate the intent of this. However, I'm uncertain why there has been no distinction included in the motion based on the different aspects of Rocky Mountain communities. For context, did you know that some communities in the Rocky Mountains do not control land-management decisions because the federal government is in charge of land management for their community while other communities that do have control of land management are purposely blocking further development, including taking developers to court? Understanding that increasing development, expanding communities and thus increasing the tax base could help alleviate the pressure on existing municipal taxpayers, I'm uncertain why this motion is lumping all Rocky Mountain communities into one category when I think it is very evident that they are not.

Mr. Speaker, the Travel Alberta tourism investment program is part of the government's plan to invest in communities. It helps visitors access unique attractions while spurring economic growth. It does this by supporting rural development, cultural events, and festivals while also accelerating the launch of shovel-ready tourism developments. We know that Alberta is the best place in the world. We want to ensure that more and more people from across Canada and around the world will continue to experience Alberta. With all this growth Alberta's government also wants to ensure that current tourism hot spots remain affordable for residents and that municipalities have the supports they need to be a welcoming place for visitors.

I know the Minister of Municipal Affairs is helping to build Alberta's communities by providing predictable funding so that local governments can plan more effectively for the future. The government is continuing to provide funding to support priority infrastructure projects. Alberta's government provides infrastructure funding to municipalities through the LGFF framework, and they determine the best use of those funds to reflect local priorities.

Mr. Speaker, our communities are getting supports, our visitor economy is growing, and Alberta's economy is diversifying. More and more people will get to experience what Alberta has to offer. I'd love to get into more of the reasons why I'm not quite sure this motion hits the mark today, but I would like to also allow other members to speak as well.

I would encourage members to not vote for this motion today.

The Speaker: Are there others?

Seeing none, I am prepared to call on the hon. Member for Banff-Kananaskis to close debate.

Dr. Elmeligi: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you, everyone in the House, for listening to and being involved in discussion around this motion. I want to make some things clear about this. The reason why this motion focuses on the communities of Canmore, Banff, and Jasper is because those communities face a disproportional cost and a humongous – humongous – amount and volume of tourism that is not funded by a rural tax base. The town of Canmore is 14,000 people. It is designed with roads for 14,000 people. On a weekend in Canmore there are hundreds of thousands of people. That puts a tremendous tax on infrastructure. So while this motion focuses on these three mountain communities, I recognize that tourism across Alberta is really important.

Since the drafting of this motion, Sylvan Lake and Drumheller, who are also rural communities experiencing some of this disproportional visitation to rural tax base challenge, have also started working with Banff, Jasper, and Canmore on how they can work together to get more provincial government funding for infrastructure.

The minister has commented on how great the provincial tourism strategy is and all of the funding for Travel Alberta. I do not deny

that those things exist; however, funding for destination marketing organizations like Tourism Canmore Kananaskis or Tourism Jasper is not funding for infrastructure. It is funding for marketing to bring more people to these communities that are already struggling to provide high-quality infrastructure for those visitors. That is a significant challenge that I feel is missed in the comments from the members opposite.

I also have had the pleasure of discussing tourism in other rural communities across Alberta, and I will say that one of the concerns that I hear from other rural communities is the cost of tourism on local infrastructure when they have a small, rural tax base. So even though there are five communities in the province that are currently struggling with a disproportionate amount of tourism to infrastructure funding through a rural tax base, other rural communities are also concerned that if they welcome tourism into their communities, they will be burdened with this increased cost as well. One of the goals of the tourism strategy for the province is to grow rural tourism. This will be a barrier. The lack of provincial support for infrastructure will be a barrier to growing tourism in other rural communities.

The other thing I'd like to emphasize is that this is not my idea. I moved to Canmore 17 years ago. I feel lucky and blessed to be one of the people who's actually managed to be able to stay there for 17 years. This was a topic of conversation when I moved to Canmore. I'm pretty sure that 17 years ago there was a Conservative government in power, who also did nothing to create resort municipality status, tourism-based economies, whatever you want to call it. This is not a new issue. It's not my idea. It wasn't even MLA Rosin's idea. This is a conversation that has been happening in these communities for almost two decades, maybe even more. So the fact that this government refuses to take responsibility and finally close the loop on this multidecadal conversation is disappointing, to say the least.

We talk about a tourism strategy, we talk about provincial tourism, we talk about legacy destinations, but when push comes to shove and we're having a conversation about what that actually means for communities, there's hesitancy to put our money where our mouth is. That is unfortunate. The communities of Canmore, Banff, and Jasper pay a high price to host the world, and I would say that we do an astounding job at it. People come, they have an amazing experience, but that cost cannot be ignored by the members in this House. You're welcome. You're welcome. Several billion dollars every single year on the shoulders of rural tax bases of men and women and people like myself who work really hard just to try to be able to afford to live where we live: you're welcome.

5:50

A little bit of provincial support to help build that infrastructure to offer that high-quality visitor experience, to make sure that when people do come to experience our crazy awesome legacy destinations in Alberta, they have an incredible time, would be very much appreciated.

Please vote in support of this motion.

[The voice vote indicated that Motion Other than Government Motion 508 lost]

[Several members rose calling for a division. The division bell was rung at 5:51 p.m.]

[Fifteen minutes having elapsed, the Assembly divided]

[The Speaker in the chair]

For the motion:

Chapman	Irwin	Pancholi
Dach	Kasawski	Renaud

Eggen	Loyola	Shepherd
Elmeligi	Metz	Sweet
Ip		
Against the motion:		
Amery	Jean	Rowswell
Armstrong-Homeniuk	Johnson	Sawhney
Boitchenko	Jones	Schow
Bouchard	LaGrange	Schulz
Cyr	Loewen	Sigurdson, R.J.
Dreeshen	Long	Sinclair
Dyck	Lunty	Singh
Ellis	McDougall	Stephan
Fir	McIver	Turton
Getson	Nally	Wiebe
Glubish	Neudorf	Wilson
Guthrie	Nicolaides	Wright, J.
Horner	Petrovic	Yao
Hunter	Pitt	Yaseen
Totals:	For – 13	Against – 42

[Motion Other than Government Motion 508 lost]

The Speaker: I see the hon. the Government House Leader has risen.

Mr. Schow: Yes, Mr. Speaker. During my comments on the previous private member's motion I made some remarks regarding the Member for Edmonton-Whitemud. They were certainly unparliamentary. I do apologize and withdraw.

I would also like to say that I was recently made aware of an incident that took place in the lounge between a member of the opposition caucus and the government caucus, for which I intend to bring a point of privilege tomorrow.

The Speaker: Hon. Government House Leader, I appreciate you providing notice for such an issue; however, in light of the time and circumstances, I would expect that official notice will also be given to my office by 11:30 as per the standing orders.

Mr. Schow: Most certainly.

The Speaker: Hon. members, pursuant to Standing Order 4(3) the House stands adjourned until tomorrow at 1:30 p.m.

[The Assembly adjourned at 6:08 p.m.]

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