

PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY



Speaker: Hon. Darlene Compton

Hansard, Published by Order of the Legislature

First Session of the Sixty-seventh General Assembly

Thursday, 14 March 2024

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[The Legislature sat at 1:02 p.m.]

[Hon. D. Compton in the chair]

Matters of Privilege and Recognition of
Guests

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Hon. D. King: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

Good afternoon to my colleagues and welcome back to another day of debate in our provincial Legislature to our staff, Pages, and everyone who is tuned in at home.

I want to begin by informing the House that I participated this morning in the official opening of the 73rd Easter Beef Show, which is taking place today and tomorrow at the Eastlink Centre in Charlottetown. It was a great turnout this morning; lots of positivity in the air about the sale tomorrow. There's a banquet tonight. Of course, a prominent fixture at the Easter Beef Show year in and year out is our Deputy Premier. I'm sure he'll be prominent again there at some point tomorrow.

There are a number of steers, of course, going through the sale. Sixteen of them are being shown and introduced by 4-H members across PEI. To all those who are involved in the organization and all those who are participating, we wish you the best of luck.

I had a chance, also, this morning to meet for the first time with the new CEO of Health PEI, Melanie Fraser. Had a great chat about the status of health care and her vision for the future. It was a nice chat. I wish her well as she has taken on the duties, a very important job, as the CEO. Welcome to PEI to Melanie and her family.

Also, I wanted to recognize someone who's been recognized many times in this Legislature in recent years and for good reason. That is Mark Arendz from Hartsville, who was named for the third time as the World Para Biathlon World Cup champion. Had a tremendous season; his best ever, I would think he would say. He was undefeated in his four biathlon races.

[1:05 p.m.]

I had a chance to spend some time with Mark about just this time last year, maybe a little bit before, when he came home to participate in the opening ceremonies of the Canada Games, which was a great event but a great privilege for Mark. I reminded him at that time that I know he still has lots of tenure left in his career and lots of potential, but when we sit around with friends over a glass of wine and talk about the great athletes of PEI, it's pretty easy right now to make the case for Mark Arendz being the best athlete, pound for pound, in the history of PEI, and I know he's got lots left. So, all the best to him.

Just in the same vein, finally, the PEI Sports Hall of Fame will be inducting some new members: Katie Baker from field hockey from out in Argyle Shore; Dave Cameron from Kinkora on hockey, a tremendous hockey career that's still going; Ray Moore, who, if anyone knows him, is sort of the founder and face of rugby and its rejuvenation in PEI; Ricky Burns of Charlottetown who's just an incredible advocate for the Special Olympics, but is also a renowned bowler and bowling coach; and the 1969-1970 Charlottetown Islanders Junior A team who, when hockey was much different, made what was a very improbable run to the Memorial Cup semi-finals from right here in Charlottetown, losing in the semi-finals to the Quebec Remparts who had, at that time, the greatest young hockey player in the world playing for them by the name of Guy Lafleur, but our Island team took them to six games and almost made it to the finals. Players like Bobby MacMillan, Hilliard Graves, Angus Beck, and so many more.

I'm reminded often that the *Evening Patriot*, which no longer exists, which used to be a wonderful newspaper in this province, had a legendary columnist by the name of Bill Ledwell who was read religiously by Islanders from tip to tip for many, many years. He would often refer to the 1969-1970 Charlottetown Islanders junior team as the greatest hockey story in the history of PEI. So, I'm glad they're inducted.

To all those who are inducted, congratulations. This is a great place for

sports, and we do it very well here in PEI. Keep up the good work.

I wish all of my colleagues a good and productive day.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Hon. H. Perry: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

It's a pleasure to rise today and welcome those who are watching online to today's proceedings.

I, too, want to send best wishes out to all the exhibitors at the 73rd annual Easter Beef Show and Sale held at the Eastlink Centre here in Charlottetown. Today, it began with the 4-H show, followed by the open show. Of course, the sale will be tomorrow. Again, all the organizers and participants – the Easter Beef Show and Sale is actually a proud supporter of the Easter Seals Society of Prince Edward Island. We thank them for that.

The Premier mentioned that the Minister of Agriculture should be over there. He's been there for years. I was first introduced to him at the Easter Beef many years ago. I was expecting a different person in here because when you see him at the auction, he's not the same person you see in here. He certainly gets into it a lot. Anyway, I wish them all the best.

I also want to say that this Monday, there's a fundraiser in Tignish. It's at MJ's Bakery. She will be making lobster burgers on homemade kaiser buns. You can call in beforehand, pick up between 11 a.m. and 1 p.m. on March 18th, this coming Monday, and all proceeds will go to the Tignish Fire Department new truck fund. Thank you to Judy and thank you to everyone who will go there and get a burger. If you're in the Tignish area, you know where to go.

Also as mentioned yesterday, from my colleague from Summerside-Wilmot, the U15 female provincials will be held in Tignish, so I'd like to welcome all participating teams to the town of Tignish

tomorrow and I look forward to watching some of the games there.

Thank you very much.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Third Party.

K. Bernard: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

I guess I would like to start out today by doing much the same: wishing everyone the best of luck, everyone who's involved with the Easter Beef Show this year.

I, too, would like to congratulate Mark Arendz on a perfect season, capturing the men's overall World Cup title, and as the Premier said, one of the best athletes in PEI's history, and just a fascinating story. So, I would like to congratulate Mark and thank him for representing PEI so well everywhere he goes.

This weekend is the Charlottetown Tourism Job Fair. It's happening Saturday, March 16th, at the Delta Prince Edward. The job fair is a one-stop shop for summer jobs. There are 40 employers there ready to hire over 700 people, so bring your resume this Saturday from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. to the Delta.

[1:10 p.m.]

It reminded me of my first summer job at Twin Shores Camping Area. We camped there for the summers, and I started working there when I was 15 and stopped when I was 30. It was a great place to work. If you can get in there and get a tourism job, it's such a great start. It teaches you so many lessons and so many things about people, and it's really fun. If that's something you're considering, I encourage you to get down there.

Also, I'm sure most of you who have children especially, in the public school system, would have received an email from Tracy Beaulieu, the director of the Public Schools Branch, sharing that they're going to be sending solar eclipse glasses home with students.

It's funny because I panic-ordered some yesterday because I heard they were all out of stock. So, I panicked and ordered some glasses, and then realized – as I was kind of

thinking about it, I thought of two things. I don't think I got enough, (1), and (2), what about the kids who can't afford these glasses, and how do you not look up? So, Michelle Patterson, in her office today, was telling us that she was told to look at her toes the last time that this happened. So, I'd rather not tell children that. [Laughter]

So, they're going to be distributing these internationally certified glasses to all students, and they'll also be sharing some more information with parents as the time gets closer. I think this is such a unique opportunity; such a unique educational opportunity for teaching about astronomy and just all the really cool things that happen in the sky that we don't even think about.

Hon. H. Perry: And where is the best place to view it?

K. Bernard: And where the best place to view – and...

Hon. H. Perry: Tignish?

K. Bernard: We will be heading – I plan on loading up my van and heading to Tignish that afternoon, so I may see you there.

I also would like to wish everyone taking – there are provincials happening all over the Island this weekend. We're in Rustico for the weekend. I just want to wish everyone the best in provincials this weekend. I hope you have lots of fun and make great memories.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Statements by Members

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Foundation of Health Care

Hon. H. Perry: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

We all know that the health care system on Prince Edward Island is falling apart around us. In February, the PEI Nurses' Union wrote to the government. In part, the union said: "Our members are carrying the burdens of a broken system." In fact, the nurses say that as of November of last year, there were

349 vacant nursing positions within Health PEI.

This is a terrible reality, and these failures are causing a lack of confidence among thousands of Islanders. Of course, these problems are widespread: severe doctor shortage, long wait times for basic surgeries, and an absolute inability to cope with the growing demands in addictions and mental health.

But where does this government place its emphasis? On a medical school; on a multi-million-dollar vanity project that may further impair access to health care here on Prince Edward Island.

Someday, a medical school may be a great idea. But under the watch of a government that can't get the basics right, I'm absolutely certain that this is not a great idea because I don't think this government is even up to the job of addressing the basics.

Again, I would urge this government to slow down the medical school, get the basics right, and then move forward after the foundation of health care has been repaired.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Rustico-Emerald.

Sterling Women's Institute of Stanley Bridge

B. Trivers: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

I wanted to stand today and recognize a longtime, bedrock community organization in District 18 Rustico-Emerald, the Sterling Women's Institute of Stanley Bridge.

The Women's Institute was founded in 1913 and has been focused on supporting local education and the wellbeing of children in the community. In fact, many, many decades ago, they ran the original school food program for local one-room schoolhouses.

The Women's Institute operates out of the Stanley Bridge Community Hall and continues to organize and host many events geared towards social enterprise in the surrounding area, making great use of the Live Well program from the Chief Public

Health Office. Events like free weekly hot lunch, meditation classes, active living initiatives; they provide free vegetable boxes for community members in need, fun community-building evenings, along with much more.

A month or so ago, the Women's Institute announced they've received the funding necessary to partner with the Growers Station and help Islanders who are struggling with the rising cost of food. The institute is purchasing vegetables from local producers and reselling them at affordable prices.

Groups like this are vital to our communities. The work they do and the services they provide, based in the kindness of their hearts, are invaluable to Island life.

Make sure to visit the Sterling Women's Institute Facebook page to find more about what they do. I applaud them – and want to especially recognize their VP Jennifer Stenhouse – for all they do for Islanders, and to commend them for their accomplishments to date. I know they have many more great ideas to help improve the wellbeing of Islanders.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

[1:15 p.m.]

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Winsloe.

Josh MacFadyen – *Time Flies*

Z. Bell: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

I rise today to recognize the accomplishments of a constituent and a neighbour of mine, Joshua MacFadyen. His wife Colleen and his four children currently live in District 10, and I may be a little bit biased, but they are some of the best next-door neighbours that anyone could have.

Josh MacFadyen currently works as an associate professor at the University of Prince Edward Island. He holds the position of Canada Research Chair in Geospatial Humanities. Josh is an academic researcher best known for his work studying the geographical and land use history of the

Atlantic region, and most importantly, for his recent book release.

His book, titled *Time Flies*, is a historical timeline of Prince Edward Island from an aerial view, showcasing the ecological and environmental change on the Island from 1935 to 2023. Josh brings years of expertise and experience to everything he's a part of, and he's an integral part of every project that he takes on.

His book, *Time Flies*, has gained massive attention from scholars and Islanders alike. The book is available at basically every bookstore in Atlantic Canada, or you can order it online from the publisher, Island Studies Press. This isn't Joshua's first book, but I know it likely won't be his last either. Josh is an asset to Prince Edward Island and to UPEI.

I also want to take this time to recognize the work done by the Island Studies Press, a publishing group and an arm of the Institute of Island Studies at UPEI, for all their published work about basically everything "islands", but especially Prince Edward Island. Check out their website, islandstudiespress.com, to browse their releases by Joshua MacFadyen and others.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Responses to Questions Taken as Notice

Questions by Members

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Hon. H. Perry: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Question for the Minister of Housing.

One of the problems with this government is secrecy and lack of accountability. In part, I believe this habit is due to a government that's just really not up to the job, and in part due to well thought out decisions to hide some information from Islanders.

Purchase of housing units

For example, last fall I asked the minister for information about the 140 housing units

the government has bought. In reply, the minister said, "...I believe that that number includes properties that are purchased and commitments to purchase.... I certainly expect that that's data that we can bring back to this House."

It's been four months. Where is that information?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Housing, Land and Communities.

Hon. R. Lantz: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

That's something we discussed; we touched on it in budget estimates yesterday. I'm actually just sitting here looking at a takeback on this issue that we discussed yesterday. Yesterday, I indicated that the Housing Corporation had purchased about 100 units since 2019, and there are about another 40 that we had committed to. This morning, in speaking with my staff, we expect to purchase probably close to or in excess of another 100 units within the next two to three weeks.

So, this is something we're constantly working on: increasing the inventory of our public housing in this province to put low-income Islanders into affordable housing.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Hon. H. Perry: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

So, 140 units is a very expensive proposition. Based on a very low-cost number, let's say \$300,000 per unit, we're talking about \$42 million. So, I want to see the complete list of transactions, the prices, the vendors, the locations, and the listing agents, and I want to see all the commissions paid to buy these properties.

Will the minister bring this information back to the House tomorrow if it's not going to be tabled today?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Housing, Land and Communities.

Hon. R. Lantz: Thank you, Madam Speaker, and thank you to the member for

highlighting the extraordinary amount of money that we're investing in housing in Prince Edward Island.

[Interjections]

Hon. R. Lantz: It pales in comparison to the zero investment in 2016 and '17 that the previous government put in. We've been ramping up our expenditures in housing investments since 2019, and we'll continue to do that.

We're happy to provide information that we can. We spoke about this yesterday. We'll provide whatever information we can while respecting privacy of our clients who live in public housing.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Hon. H. Perry: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

That's \$42 million to buy homes. Not to build homes; they had to buy homes because they did nothing for five years.

So, I'm going to ask again because I want to know: Will you bring a complete list of the transactions, the prices, the vendors, the locations, and the listing agents tomorrow? I didn't ask for who is living in those units. Will you do that? Will you commit to that, minister?

[1:20 p.m.]

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Housing, Land and Communities.

Hon. R. Lantz: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

It's worth pointing out that that \$40 million that he estimates we've spent on purchasing homes is only that; it's only the units we've purchased. On top of that, we're spending tens of millions of dollars to build brand new public housing in this province. We're investing and incentivizing market builds in this province. We're investing in all kinds of ways to improve the housing situation in this province.

With respect to the information that the hon. member is seeking, there certainly are some

privacy considerations there. I'll bring his request back to my department and see what we're able to provide to him in a timely manner.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Hon. H. Perry: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

Well, last fall, I asked, so that was several months ago, and I still didn't receive that information. So, I'm not sure what his definition of "timely" is.

I'm assuming it's \$42 million, just going by what the \$300,000 per unit might be. We don't even know that. The fact is that the real estate sector has been doing extremely well here on Prince Edward Island for the last few years. Housing prices have risen, commissions and costs have also gone up as well, and all of those costs add to the price of a home.

Regulating real estate industry

Has the minister ever considered regulating the real estate industry to lower commissions on home sales and purchases?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Housing, Land and Communities.

Hon. R. Lantz: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

It's actually not legislation that we control through my department. I believe the *Real Property Act* and regulatory around that industry lies with the Department of Justice. I certainly know that the federal government – the previous Minister of Housing, Ahmed Hussen – had talked about some initiatives in that regard, but it's not in my mandate in my department to deal with such issues.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Hon. H. Perry: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

So, obviously, he doesn't have an interest in that.

Question for the Premier.

One of this government's typical routines is to offer bluster instead of substance, and the Premier seems to think he's the master of exaggeration. So, I suppose when substance fails, noise will sometimes work, and a comedy routine is a handy substitute for leadership.

Yesterday, the Premier said, "What we have to deal with are the realities: as I say, the most housing starts ever in our history over the last five years; building at a speed that's almost unsustainable...."

To put it bluntly, this is an amazing, out-of-touch statement.

Addressing the housing crisis (further)

Given this terrible housing crisis in this province, does the Premier really stand behind the idea that we are building at a speed that's almost unsustainable?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Hon. D. King: I do stand behind my comments because it's true. If you talk to anybody in the industry, they'd tell you they're pretty much at a max and that's why we're working with the Construction Association of PEI, for example, to lead some trade missions out-of-province to try to get some skilled labour to come in here to add to those who do a wonderful job each and every day of constructing in this province.

I continue to stand behind the numbers, which are facts and true, that there's never been a five-year period in the history of PEI that's seen the explosion of new housing than we have here in Prince Edward Island.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Hon. H. Perry: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

The Premier went on also with the loud noise of knuckles banging on an empty jar: "We have a comprehensive housing strategy – one of the best in the country...."

I would be very interested to hear the Premier justify this statement. In what specific ways does he believe the housing strategy on Prince Edward Island is better than most jurisdictions?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Hon. D. King: I just know the work that has gone into it. I know the leadership in the department under the Minister of Housing, Land and Communities and the drive he has and the work that they put in, that incredible staff that they have, the vision that they are undertaking with it, the way they are addressing all areas of the housing continuum. It's a very, very aggressive plan and one we're very, very proud of and I think it stands up with any in the rest of the country.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Hon. H. Perry: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

I want to go back to the Premier's statement that somehow, we are setting house records here on Prince Edward Island. In fact, the record for housing starts was set way back in 1973, which is just another reason that I find it hard to take the Premier seriously sometimes.

In 1973, there were more than 2,100 housing starts. Last year, there were about 1,100 housing starts in this province. But the housing need on Prince Edward Island is about 2,900 per year.

My question: When will the Premier stop making excuses for his do-nothing government and begin the process of actively building the public housing that we so obviously need?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

[1:25 p.m.]

Hon. D. King: Well, I believe – I know they're not great at listening and they don't want to hear the good news – the Minister of Housing, Land and Communities just talked about the incredible efforts that we're undertaking not just to build but purchase public housing, and it's an incredible record.

It's one that we're very, very proud of. We'll continue down that path, doing everything we can, working with everybody in the system to try to make sure we can deliver as fast as we can under very challenging circumstances.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Hon. H. Perry: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

The unprecedented surge in spending on travel nurses is reaching an outstanding \$8.8 million for the current fiscal year. That paints a stark picture of mismanagement with our health care system.

Given the substantial cost of travel nursing, averaging about \$120 per hour, which includes administrative fees paid to the agencies, it's imperative that taxpayers understand what specific expenses are being covered.

Private nursing agencies (further)

Question to the Minister of Health: How many of this \$120 hourly expenditure is actually reaching the nurses compared to the private agencies? What expenses are covered for the travel nurses? Will the minister table a detailed breakdown?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Hon. M. McLane: Thank you, Madam Speaker, and thanks to the member for the question.

With regards to our expenditures in travel nurses, it's important to note that we spend over \$134 million a year on our existing nursing workforce. So, \$6.8 million, that is a small percentage. It's a necessary percentage in order for us to staff some hard-to-staff facilities and to keep services going. We want to maintain those services.

But back to his question. I want to be very clear: we do not pay for meals; we do not pay for accommodations with any of our agencies that we work with. They charge us a rate, and if they do anything for their nurses, that would be part of their prerogative.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Hon. H. Perry: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

He didn't say that he would table a detailed breakdown and I hope that he will.

The government's do-nothing approach to nurse recruitment has resulted in our province desperately needing travel nurses. As a result, the price tag for these travel nurses has soared to almost \$9 million when it was less than \$1.5 million last year and merely \$30,000 just three years ago. This increase on spending on travel nurses raises serious concerns about this government's ability to manage health care resource, and frankly, is undeniably alarming.

To the Minister of Health: Can you explain why such drastic escalation has occurred under your watch with expenditures skyrocketing from less than \$30,000 just three year ago?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Hon. M. McLane: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

I don't want to oversimplify my answer, but the hon. member asked me what the population of PEI was yesterday, and it was 175,000. I want to remind him that our population was about 155,000 in 2019, so more people, more growth, more services that we need to provide to Islanders.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Hon. H. Perry: That's a pretty poor answer. We were talking millions and millions of dollars for a few thousand, tens of thousands, of people. That's a lame excuse.

While the minister asserts that spending on travel nurses is necessary, the Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions has raised significant concerns regarding the use and cost of private nursing agencies. In fact, the

Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions' calls for an investigation into the use and cost of private nursing agencies underscores growing concerns within the health care community about this government's lack of accountability and transparency.

To the same minister: Can you outline the specific measures your government has taken to address these concerns and ensure transparency and accountability in the expenditure of public funds?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Hon. M. McLane: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

I think we've been quite clear that this is something that we do not want to do. It's something we have to do in certain situations to maintain services. Colville Manor, for example; we absolutely depend upon travel nurses to take care of their residents there. Throughout the tour, we've had people that have asked us. Again, we have to use this to support the PCH. I don't think the city of Summerside or western PEI would want us to send those six travel nurses home and restrict services.

It's not something that we want to do. We're working on our nursing recruitment strategies. We've talked about our trips; our international educated nurses pathway that now has more than 100 nurses in our pipeline. We've had some arrive in the last month or two, and they continue to arrive each and every day. We have nearly 100 graduates coming out of our UPEI nursing program with increased seats.

We are trying to address this issue. We do not want to use travel nurses.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-West Royalty.

G. McNeilly: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

[1:30 p.m.]

Speaking of recruitment and retention challenges, yesterday's dismissal of a motion to extend bonuses and issue an

apology to health care workers that were excluded from a previous incentive was profoundly disappointing. Our neighbouring province of Nova Scotia took decisive action last year, offering bonuses across the board and introduced retention payments, showcasing a proactive approach to incentivizing health care workers. Is this government that content to lag behind?

Incentives for health care workers

Question to the Minister of Health: How can the minister justify allowing Prince Edward Island to fall so far behind our neighbours in recognizing and rewarding the dedication of our health care professionals?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Hon. M. McLane: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

We certainly do recognize our health care professionals. I think you'll see in the budget debate today and in the days to come about some of the collective bargaining improvements that we've made to pay those health care workers within that collective bargaining framework. We do appreciate them. It's important that they have work/life balance and strong wages. So, we'll continue to support all of our health care workers in what they do for us.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-West Royalty.

G. McNeilly: That's what they're complaining about: strong wages and work/life balances that this government is not providing. Based on that lack of answer from this minister, it seems clear that this government is content to lag behind at the expense of hardworking health care professionals and the expense of Islanders who desperately need access to primary care.

Question to the Minister of Health: Given the glaring disparities in treatment between health care workers in Prince Edward Island and those in neighbouring provinces, will you reconsider your decision and ensure that all health care workers receive the bonuses

they deserve, the retention bonuses, and whatever else you did not provide them?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Hon. M. McLane: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

I appreciate the advocacy that the member is doing for our health care workers. We do recognize how important they are within our system. I think I was very clear in the statements yesterday about they were really, actually, stabilization payments. We had some significant pressures from DVA to try to maintain our workforce. We talked about the index pensioning that was going to happen on January 1st of that year. We had a very deep concern that we were going to lose even more nurses to our system.

Again, it was a stabilization in return for service, and it was a one-time thing. I think the best path forward is to respect the collective bargaining agreement and try to improve everyone all the time.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-West Royalty.

G. McNeilly: You're talking about the excuses. You could have seen those coming, we all saw those coming, and you did nothing, minister. It's a big problem right now.

We recognize that financial incentives are not the sole motivator for health care workers, but amidst an affordability crisis, severe staffing shortages, and extreme retention challenges, they undoubtedly play a significant role.

Question to the minister: Will you commit to exploring improved and competitive retention incentives for health care workers on Prince Edward Island to address this pressing retention issue?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Hon. M. McLane: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

I think I was quite clear from the amount of meetings that I tabled the other day that we try to do as best we can to communicate with our unions and to listen as best we can, within the framework that we have, with equity, to maintain as best we can within our means to support these important workers. We'll continue to do that. We do appreciate these workers. They're so valuable to our system. We appreciate our union leaders who are strong advocates for their members, and we appreciate their voice.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-West Royalty.

G. McNeilly: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

The recent Auditor General's report highlighted significant discrepancies in surgical wait times for cataracts, knee, and hip replacements, well beyond our national standard. The Auditor General was quoted as saying, in a January 16th standing committee, "It's a bit concerning that we're not at that level of accountability or transparency in delivering the services."

AG recommendations for surgical wait times

Question to the Minister of Health: What concrete measures will Health PEI implement to ensure the standards are met?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Hon. M. McLane: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

I did watch that standing committee. I think it's important to note that we were actually calculating wait times incorrectly, according to the national standard, which made it look worse than it actually was. Again, the way we calculate those wait times are going to be changed and we accepted all the AG's recommendations in order to do so.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-West Royalty.

G. McNeilly: Madam Speaker, the Auditor General also noted inconsistencies in tracking and monitoring surgical wait times, including the lack of tracking for the times taken to access a specialist for booking surgeries.

Minister, what steps will Health PEI take to address the inconsistencies, which he might have just made reference to, and improve tracking and reporting practices?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Hon. M. McLane: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

[1:35 p.m.]

Actually, I don't have it at my fingertips, but I did get an update on our Virtual Hallway platform that we instituted last year. It's been extremely effective in getting referrals to specialists in time. Off the top of my head, I think about 80 or 85 percent of those referrals were not required once the Virtual Hallway consultation was taking place. For those other ones, treatment can start earlier. That's a great innovation that we've made in order for specialist referrals.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-West Royalty.

G. McNeilly: Furthermore, the Auditor General highlighted the absence of monitoring wait times to access specific surgeons/specialists.

Minister, will your government commit to monitoring and reporting each surgeon's caseload to facilitate referrals to surgeons with shorter wait times for Islanders?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Hon. M. McLane: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

We have a new CEO in place, and I guess this will be one of her challenges in order to balance workloads for our specialists and put in processes so that we can achieve some equilibrium in that process. The Virtual

Hallway that I spoke of before has helped in that process. I'm all for technology to manage access to our system, so we'll continue to work on that.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Third Party.

K. Bernard: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Over the past few weeks, I have received emails from Islanders who are waiting for cataract surgery. Their eyesight is deteriorating, and with it, their quality of life. In their email, they told me: "At this time of year, I have few pleasures: reading, watching my hockey channel, going out in the evening. But with my deteriorating eyesight, those pleasures are gone." This individual was diagnosed in June of 2022 and is told his surgery won't take place for another year from now.

AG's recommendations for surgical wait times (further)

Minister of Health and Wellness: What is your department doing to improve wait times and finally meet national standards, which for cataract surgery – I'll remind the minister – is 112 days, not the 1,000 days that this Island senior is heading towards?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Hon. M. McLane: Thank you, Madam Speaker, and thank you to the member for the question.

Cataract wait times is certainly an issue that we need to address. We have met with an ophthalmologist on Prince Edward Island to talk about this. We've made some improvements in processes and OR time that are increasing the output again, but it's not enough. So, we'll continue to meet with those ophthalmologists to see where we can improve cataract wait times.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Third Party.

K. Bernard: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

In the Auditor General's report on surgical wait times, the central recommendation was for Health PEI to monitor surgical wait times, identify the factors causing wait times to be higher than targets, and take corrective actions.

Government's response to this recommendation was that they have created a provincial director of surgical services. Unfortunately, we did hire someone into this position who then left to work for the PEI medical school, where wages are 30 percent higher.

To the same minister: What progress has your government made to address our growing surgery wait times since the Auditor General's report?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Hon. M. McLane: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

You did reference some of the processes that we've made into provincial services. We've created directors in certain specialties who monitor that specialty across PEI instead of a facility approach. That's a good direction, to look at the system as a whole so that in certain specialties and requirements, we can manage it from one point. People will move within and without our system as they see fit; there are lots of opportunities, obviously, these days in health care. So, that will continue to happen.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Third Party.

K. Bernard: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

What good are directors if there's no one in the position? I'm not getting much hope from you, minister, that this is going to change anytime soon.

I've heard a number of times over the past few years that surgeons could do more cataract surgeries if provided additional OR time, which you mentioned. Wait times for cataract surgeries continue to grow year after year on PEI.

To the same minister: Why have you not done more to increase OR space within our hospitals, and allowed these wait times to get completely out of control?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Hon. M. McLane: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Again, we are working with a group of ophthalmologists. I think it would be premature to talk about those meetings and discussions, but we continue to look at what they're doing. They have purchased a large building in Charlottetown – I think that's no secret; the former Bed, Bath and Beyond building – so we're looking at how we can cooperate with that team for improved eye care all across PEI.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Borden-Kinkora.

M. MacFarlane: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Last week, one of my colleagues asked questions about the lack of transparency in government procurement. It appears that this year, government is once again hiding the amount of funding going to each private long-term care facility.

All we know is that over \$43 million of Islanders' money is being given to private companies. We don't know if that money is spread equally among facilities or beds. We don't know if the funding is tied to any special conditions. We don't even see how much is going towards direct patient care.

[1:40 p.m.]

Funding and standards in long-term care

To the Minister of Health: If the minister thinks Islanders are getting a good deal on this spending, why is he not being transparent in how much of our tax dollars each facility is receiving and how they're actually spending our money?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Hon. M. McLane: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

We do have a positive relationship with the PEI Nursing Homes Association. We do have an agreement that we negotiate with that association for rates that go to our facilities. They can be variable based on occupancy and length of stay, that we pay those facilities.

As we embark on the wage parity program, we will need to put accountability factors in there so we can ensure that, most specifically, that that wage parity top-up is going to those employees.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Borden-Kinkora, your first supplementary.

M. MacFarlane: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Despite the government's responsibility as stewards of public funds, this government's new investment in private long-term homes is 51 percent greater than our investment in public facilities. We don't even know if this contribution includes funding for the new beds that the Premier has announced over the last couple of weeks. Perhaps that will appear in the special warrants.

Question to the same minister: If government is putting this much public money into private long-term care homes – and yesterday, the minister committed to legislating the national standards, which is wonderful – why are we not, for the time being, aligning the standards of care in private homes to match those in the public homes (Indistinct)?

[Interjections]

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Hon. M. McLane: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

The long-term care review was tabled this summer. It's our working plan for our department. It's a recipe for success, as I call it. So, we are going to continue to work on that.

Obviously, it takes time to align standards and licensing and legislation that works, but I think we're on a great path in order to support both private and public, and we want to get the best care to seniors, no matter where they are on Prince Edward Island.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Borden-Kinkora, your second supplementary.

M. MacFarlane: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

We hear from the minister yesterday that we need the private sector to step in, because according to the minister, they can respond faster. We see government turning to private nursing travel agencies to backfill nursing positions. We see government directing Islanders to their tablets to get a family doctor on the Maple app. We see a complete failure to build sufficient public housing to attempt to meet the housing crisis.

Government spending on private companies

Question to the same minister: Is there anything this government can do anymore to meet the needs of Islanders, or are we simply going to continue to spend public tax dollars on private companies and agencies to do the job of government?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Hon. M. McLane: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

I guess I would ask the 53 families that are going to have the opportunity to move their loved one out of one of our hospital situations if they think this is a good idea.

Again, it's about providing care. We have a private and public system. We've always had a hybrid system. There are many other provinces that do so. So, again, we will support to give Islanders the care that they need, where they need it, why they need it.

It's a little contradictory. I don't know where the Leader of the Third Party was going with her cataracts questions, but

we've seen cataract clinics across Canada. We're the only one that doesn't have one, so I don't know if you can speak out of both sides here when you're asking questions, but it certainly appears so.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Rustico-Emerald.

B. Trivers: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Our senior citizens' access to health care is a key area we need to focus on and improve.

For example, our senior citizens line up for hours in the freezing cold, trying to get a spot in walk-in clinics. Skip the Waiting Room is not an option for most, and even arranging transportation is challenge. Some end up taking ambulances to the emergency department, which they're charged \$150 for, and then they wait for hours and hours to get help.

I firmly believe we can do better for our seniors, and I know the minister responsible for seniors is a great advocate for accomplishing change. Maybe it's dedicated hours for seniors at walk-in clinics, like Access PEI has. Maybe it's house calls for seniors at home. Maybe it's remote examinations at local pharmacies or other innovative solutions. But I know we can do better.

Improving seniors' access to health care

Question to the Minister of Social Development and Seniors: Will you engage senior stakeholder groups specifically on this topic and lobby your Cabinet colleagues to implement solutions to improve seniors' access to health care?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Social Development and Seniors.

Hon. B. Ramsay: Thank you very much, member, for that question, and thank you, Madam Speaker.

Seniors are very, very important to me and I'm very proud to represent them as the Minister of Social Development and Seniors.

[1:45 p.m.]

We do have a seniors action plan in place right now. That would be something that I would be interested in taking to the Seniors' Secretariat and the interdepartmental colleagues to have that discussion with. I would do that, yeah.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Rustico-Emerald.

B. Trivers: Thank you, Madam Speaker, and thanks, minister.

I know when you set your mind to it, you can get things accomplished, so I expect to see progress in this area.

The seniors navigators are a great resource, but they can't do it all. We have fantastic volunteers in our community. They're already working to support seniors. I can introduce you to people in my communities who have taken initiative on their own for years now and make a huge difference.

When I introduced the seniors navigator, my vision was to identify volunteers and create a seniors volunteer network that the navigators could engage to help with their work.

Seniors volunteer network

Question to the Minister of Seniors: Is your department still working to build a seniors volunteer network, a network of volunteers who support our Island seniors in our communities?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Social Development and Seniors.

Hon. B. Ramsay: Thank you very much for that question, Madam Speaker.

The navigators work very closely with the seniors. Our Seniors' Secretariat works closely with the seniors. Our federation of seniors, of course, has a large group of members and they do all work together. Our volunteer seniors are the best. We have so many across Prince Edward Island, and we're losing our volunteers, and it's sad.

Yes, we're always working with them to try and encourage the seniors to continue to

volunteer as long as they feel like doing that. We will continue to work as a department and our Seniors Secretariat as well.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Rustico-Emerald.

B. Trivers: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Our seniors volunteers are key to helping seniors in our communities. We don't need to lose them. I have an idea. That's where the seniors volunteer network could come into play. Once we've identified and engaged participants in a PEI seniors volunteer network, there are major opportunities to grow it then.

For example, in other jurisdictions like Japan, they have developed a currency of redeemable friendship tokens known as the Fureai Kippu, and these credits can be saved for one's own several years in the future, or used for family members in need of care now. On PEI, I could even see business sponsors being engaged and credits being redeemed for goods and services, whether it be a coffee at a local restaurant or maybe snow removal after a storm.

A question to the Minister of Seniors: Will you commit to having your department explore the concept of a seniors volunteer network, complete with incentives and possibly even a credit currency like Japan?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Social Development and Seniors.

Hon. B. Ramsay: Thank you very much for that question.

You have some wonderful ideas, member. I would be happy to sit down with you and our seniors navigator; navigators, I should say, because we have two now. I'd be happy to sit down with you and try and create some type of plan where that could work.

Thank you very much for that.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Summerside-Wilmot.

T. DesRoches: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Today, I'm going to gear my questions around not just the Prince County Hospital but our whole Island health care system; more directly, the ever-growing patient registry.

Process for patient registry

A question for the minister in the hotseat, the Minister of Health and Wellness: With our patient registry growing and some people coming off of it as fast as others are going back on, how does a patient win the lottery and become assigned to a doctor from the registry?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Hon. M. McLane: Thank you, Madam Speaker, and thank the member for the question.

The patient registry – again, it's pretty clearly outlined on the website about the process to do so. I want to remind that fee-for-service physicians do control their own destiny, so to speak, so they do make choices, although very rare, from time to time to take people on. Dr. Jason Chan was on CBC talking about how often he gets asked and how rarely he says yes to adding people to the patient registry.

It is a quite a manual process, as I talked about yesterday, but we'll continue to work on modernizing.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Summerside-Wilmot, your first supplementary.

T. DesRoches: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

I do not use the words of winning the lottery lightly because that's exactly how a couple of constituents explained it and portrayed it to me. I've heard concerns expressed from the constituents, something similar to what the minister just spoke about.

Minister of Health and Wellness: Does a person's condition impact the placement on the registry or when they're coming off? Constituents have heard of some patients who are more chronically ill being not

favoured so that a doctor can balance their workload.

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

[1:50 p.m.]

Hon. M. McLane: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

That would not be true. The basis for the patient registry is obviously geography, first of all; proximity to that practice. We're not going to assign somebody from Morell to a medical practitioner in Alberton, for example. So, again, chronological and geography are the two main factors in patient registry assignments.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Summerside-Wilmot, your second supplementary.

T. DesRoches: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

I hope that we are on a level playing field. Another problem that arises is when someone loses their doctor for one reason or another. Recently, Summerside learned of losing a doctor for health reasons on the heels of losing another a year ago for health reasons.

Question to the Minister of Health and Wellness: Are these patients automatically placed on the patient registry, or do the patients have to get in contact and do this themselves?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Hon. M. McLane: Thank you, Madam Speaker, and I thank the member for the question.

Obviously, we do communicate when we have a physician – they do send out letters based on the practice. The one you're talking about, his intent is to try to return to his practice. Good for him. In his mid-70s, he wants to battle his health concerns. Those patients, for now, will not be advised to go on the patient registry. But again, each situation is different, and we communicate

via letter to each patient about their situation.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-West Royalty.

G. McNeilly: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Long-term care improvements (further)

The Minister of Health referenced 54 families that will be receiving care when these beds are open. The families want to know, minister: Where and when will these beds be open for them, for their long-term care needs that they need now?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Hon. M. McLane: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

We have those nursing homes that have committed to adding beds. Some require a little bit of paint, some may require widening doors, or anything at the licensing board, too. So, the answer will be a variable on how fast that they can do it. All of them are working very diligently to get there. They want those beds open as soon as possible. We want them, too.

I know Health PEI is actually working on how they would decant those people from our hospitals. That's a great sign that they're working on that, to move those people in, but each situation will be different depending on their requirements.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-West Royalty.

G. McNeilly: You're talking about widening doors in private facilities. Minister, I have brought up a million times about widening doors at Beach Grove Home. You won't widen the doors there. They're not up to code. There are 11 doors that have to be done. You're investing in private long-term care facilities and we can't even get people out the doors at Beach Grove Home, in our public facilities.

Long-term care: public vs. private

Why the discrepancy between private and public long-term care facilities? Fix the doors at Beach Grove home. Will you?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Hon. M. McLane: I can certainly table the email from a couple weeks ago; we went back and forth on this. We've always made the commitment to you, in writing, that that project will happen, so you're aware of that. I appreciate the question. I can table an email between yourself and myself, but I don't see the point.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-West Royalty.

G. McNeilly: Minister, you talked about our reliance on the private sector to provide hundreds of long-term care beds in the future. What assurances do you have that this approach, as opposed to expanding public long-term care beds, will be quicker and more beneficial for Islanders? Why not do both?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Hon. M. McLane: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

I think we've been pretty clear that we have short-, mid-term, and long-term plans for our long-term care issues on PEI.

Also, one thing that we haven't talked about in this whole discussion is our improvement in home care services. We now serve about 2,500 people in home care, so we're keeping people at home longer. It's a better environment for them to stay. Home care improvements are part of this equation, and we need to pull all levers – short-, medium-, and long-term – and we want to get as many people out of hospitals because we know the health care system impacts that that has.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-West Royalty.

G. McNeilly: It does, minister, and I'm glad to hear that. We have work to do, and I'm just worried that the promises don't meet the timelines. That's what I'm worried about.

Long-term care improvements (further)

Regarding the expansion of the Stewart Memorial Home in Tyne Valley mentioned yesterday, when will construction begin to promptly address the pressing needs of long-term care facilities in that area?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Hon. M. McLane: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

I do want to thank the member from Tyne Valley who has done a tremendous amount of work.

[1:55 p.m.]

One thing about that facility that everybody needs to understand: it was built with some forethought. It has expanded facilities, including heating and kitchen facilities that can support an expansion, so that's why we're looking to that one first. It would be the easiest. Again – I wouldn't say simply, but we just have to add on beds to that facility, but all the infrastructure is in place. Thanks to the member for knocking on my door every third day reminding me of that fact.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition, final question.

Hon. H. Perry: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

Last year around this time, I stood up in this House asking the Minister of Health questions about recruiting nurses who are graduating from the University of Prince Edward Island who, at this time last year, did not have anyone from the government approach them on any of the recruitment or incentives.

Health care recruitment strategies (further)

Earlier this week, we heard the minister stand up in this House and talk about all the times that they met with them and talked to them. However, I'm hearing from UPEI nursing students who are graduating this spring that they have not been approached, and they don't know of anyone else in their class who has been approached. However, several of the UPEI graduating nurses this year have been recruited by Nova Scotia because PEI doesn't seem to be interested.

Is this correct, minister?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Hon. M. McLane: I'll say absolutely not. I'll say absolutely not. I don't think he listened to me that we were there in September. We invited the entire class. We had job offers in hand. All they had to do was sign the offer 30 days before they did, so if they choose not to attend those events that are very clearly –

[Interjections]

Speaker: The minister has the floor.

Hon. M. McLane: Well, I guess we can't force anybody to come to a job offer fair. I don't know if we can chase them around campus.

We will be, on March 4th, with the second-year nursing class, and on March 21st, we'll be meeting with the third-year nursing class. So, we are doing all we can to hire nurses.

Statements by Ministers

Presenting and Receiving Petitions

Tabling of Documents

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Hon. M. McLane: Madam Speaker, by leave of the House, I beg leave to table the list of organizations Health PEI has contracted to hire agency nurses since 2022, and I move, seconded by the hon. Minister of Finance, that the said document be now received and do lie on the Table.

Speaker: Shall it carry? Carried.

Reports by Committees

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Belvedere.

S. Dillon: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

As chair of the Standing Committee on Health and Social Development, I beg leave to introduce the report of the said committee regarding the Prince Edward Island Human Rights Committee, and I move, seconded by the hon. Member from Charlottetown-Winsloe, that the same be now received and do lie on the Table.

Speaker: Shall it carry? Carried.

S. Dillon: Madam Speaker, I would like to seek unanimous consent of the House to proceed with the motion of adoption of this report today.

Speaker: Does the member have unanimous consent? Yes.

Hon. member.

S. Dillon: Madam Speaker, I move, seconded by the hon. Member from Charlottetown-Winsloe, that the report of the committee be now adopted.

Speaker: Shall it carry? Carried.

S. Dillon: As a result of these deliberations, your committee is pleased to make the following recommendation to the Members of the Legislative Assembly regarding appointments to the Prince Edward Island Human Rights Commission:

1. That Ms. Carolyn Francis be re-appointed to the Prince Edward Island Human Rights Commission for a term of three years, starting July 9, 2024, and to expire on July 9, 2027.

Speaker: Thank you, member.

The hon. Member from Charlottetown-West Royalty.

G. McNeilly: Thanks a lot.

I just wanted to say a few words just on that, and just congratulate Carolyn on getting reappointed to the human rights board. They do a lot of great work in Prince Edward Island, and I just want to express that the time in the world, this year, is an important time for human rights all across the world. We have to remember how important that is both here in Prince Edward Island, in Canada, and across the globe. Human rights are essential and important to all people everywhere.

So, I just wanted to say congratulations, and I'm proud of the work that our Human Rights Commission does.

Thank you.

Speaker: Thank you, member.

Government Motions

Orders of the Day (Government)

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice, Public Safety and Attorney General.

[2:00 p.m.]

Hon. B. Thompson: Madam Speaker, I move, seconded by the hon. Minister of Finance, that the 1st order of the day be now read.

Speaker: Shall it carry? Carried.

Clerk: Order No. 1, Consideration of the Estimates, in Committee.

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice, Public Safety and Attorney General.

Hon. B. Thompson: Madam Speaker, I move, seconded by the hon. Minister of Finance, that this House do now resolve itself into a Committee of the Whole House to further consider the grant of supply to His Majesty.

Speaker: Shall it carry? Carried.

The hon. Member from Morell-Donagh, please chair Committee of the Whole House.

[S. MacEwen in the chair]

Chair: The House is now in a Committee of the Whole House to further consider the grant of supply to His Majesty.

Minister, would you like to make a motion to bring a stranger to the floor?

Hon. R. Lantz: Yes, please.

Chair: Shall it carry? Carried.

Welcome back, Matthew. Could you introduce yourself again, and your title, for Hansard?

Matthew Praught: Yes. My name is Matthew Praught. I'm the director of finance for the Department of Housing, Land and Communities.

Chair: Thank you. Hon. members, we continue to debate the PEI Housing Corporation on page 135. We've read all of the lines and we're debating it.

The hon. Member from Charlottetown-West Royalty.

G. McNeilly: Thank you, Chair.

Under consultants, the fire system inspections – were there any fires at any of the locations that the Province owns or manages for our shelter support systems, or anything in that field, in the last fiscal year?

Matthew Praught: Fires. I couldn't speak to whether there were any fires.

Hon. R. Lantz: We'll take that back for you.

Chair: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-West Royalty, I assume that is leading up to a budget question.

G. McNeilly: Yeah. Fire system inspections – where were those held? What locations are we inspecting our fire unit systems at?

Matthew Praught: There would be general inspections on any of the fire and security systems that we would have in buildings. Which specific ones, I don't have here, but there would be ongoing costs related to that.

G. McNeilly: I'm just saying, what's the scope? I know that you would do it at Hunt

Court and different places like that, but the newer buildings that we purchase and own, are those included in it, in that inspection circuit?

Matthew Praught: I don't have that specific detail with me, but I could bring that back.

G. McNeilly: Okay. A few questions have been asked about security services in Charlottetown in the four budget lines there. What is our prediction for security? Is that line going up? It looks like it's just an in and out. This shows what was spent last year. What are we forecasting to spend next year in this budget?

[2:05 p.m.]

Matthew Praught: We have included in security services \$778,000, for security.

G. McNeilly: How much was in this budget here? I can't do the math. It's too –

Matthew Praught: There was an addition of \$300,000 that we had spoken about yesterday around the security for our own shelters.

G. McNeilly: The security services for Summerside – what is that for?

Matthew Praught: That will be for our shelter that is established in Summerside.

G. McNeilly: That's for the shelter that is going to open? When is that going to open?

Hon. R. Lantz: Spring.

G. McNeilly: Is this money that was spent, the \$1,200? Is that money that was spent already? How much are planning on spending next year for the security at the shelter that was supposed to be open before snow flew?

Matthew Praught: We have an addition of basically \$150,000 for each, between Summerside and additional security in Charlottetown.

Chair: The hon. Leader of the Third Party.

K. Bernard: Thank you, Chair.

The \$42 million that you keep referring to in existing properties; I'm wondering if all of those properties are under the management of PEI Housing Corp. in order that we keep the affordable housing piece.

Hon. R. Lantz: You referenced a number?

K. Bernard: Yeah, the existing properties that you're talking about. They have – I thought you said \$42 million.

Hon. R. Lantz: That's what he said.

K. Bernard: Okay. So, how much is it, then?

Hon. R. Lantz: How much...?

K. Bernard: Existing properties.

Hon. R. Lantz: How many existing properties?

K. Bernard: Yeah.

Hon. R. Lantz: PEI Housing Corporation owns approximately 2,000 properties. That is between family and seniors housing. Then, obviously we have spaces in privately owned buildings through our Affordable Housing Development Program where we also put clients, so it would be on top of that number.

K. Bernard: With the Affordable Housing Development Program, are there new properties that you're looking...? You had mentioned it somewhere. I'm trying to remember what you had said, but you were talking about buying properties that already existed and taking those into government; buying those. Are there new ones?

Hon. R. Lantz: Sorry, try again?

K. Bernard: Is there new existing housing stock that we have purchased recently or that we plan on purchasing soon?

Hon. R. Lantz: Yes. Most of what we've purchased is practically brand new, if not newly built.

K. Bernard: My question is: Will these remain under the management of PEI Housing Corp.?

Hon. R. Lantz: Yes.

K. Bernard: To assure that it stays income plus 25 percent.

Hon. R. Lantz: Deeply affordable.

K. Bernard: Okay. I know there's been some conversation in this, but is there any new funding for the operations of the Park Street community outreach centre, above and beyond the contracts done?

Matthew Praught: We do have a contract established with the operator there, so it would just be the funds that we have with them.

K. Bernard: That's for the new Park Street. What about the current Community Outreach Centre? Are there any additional funds in there above and beyond the contract?

Matthew Praught: Not above and beyond the contract, I don't believe. We have a contract established for the outreach centre. As the scope of those things move, we evaluate those contracts, but we do have an established contract with that operator.

[2:10 p.m.]

K. Bernard: I'm wondering, there is going to be a move – perhaps this is a capital budget question – but there will be a move coming up. I'm assuming that there will be some operational costs with that that may not fall under the responsibility of the Adventure Group. Is there money in this budget for any of that stuff?

Matthew Praught: We have established some – just our general operating funds – for shelter support. We would encompass anything that we anticipate to spend within those figures.

K. Bernard: I'm wondering, in your budget – and again, this may be outside, above and beyond Adventure Group stuff – I'm wondering if, in the move, if there are, what sort of operational things you're anticipating with the move?

Hon. R. Lantz: There were some additional operation costs based on some conditions that the

City put on it, like policing and garbage clean-up.

Chair: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Hon. H. Perry: Thank you very much, Chair.

Yesterday, we had asked for some takebacks and I believe the minister made reference to it today earlier, in Question Period. I'm just wondering if he does have a copy of them, please.

Chair: Minister, would you like to table some documents?

Thank you. The minister is tabling some information now.

Do you have copies?

Hon. R. Lantz: I have more.

Chair: The minister does have copies.

Hon. Leader of the Opposition, would you like to keep questioning as our Pages distribute the tabled documents?

Hon. H. Perry: I will. Just give me one moment here. I'll have a look at this shortly.

I'm just going to go to another line item, under professional services for accounting; financial audit fees. Can you just describe what that audit process is? What are they auditing? Are they auditing the grants that come out of it or are they auditing the whole department? How does that work?

Matthew Praught: There would be an audit performed for the Housing Corporation itself. Also, there's some audit work that's required for some funding that relates to CMHC that they would have some fees in there for as well.

Hon. H. Perry: This is obviously an outside company that's doing the financial audit. Is that correct?

Matthew Praught: Yes.

Hon. H. Perry: What company would that be?

Matthew Praught: That was done through Grant Thornton.

Hon. H. Perry: Would the public have access to that audit report?

Matthew Praught: There were financial statements that were released for the Housing Corporation, yes.

Hon. H. Perry: And those would be included in that? That report would be included in that?

Matthew Praught: Their audit would be – those were the audited financial statements, yes.

Hon. H. Perry: Okay, thank you.

Chair: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Hon. H. Perry: Chair, actually, if you could put me back on the list. I just want to take this takeback and have a look at it. Thanks.

Chair: For sure.

The hon. Member from New Haven-Rocky Point.

P. Bevan-Baker: Thank you.

I see that in last year's budget address, the 2023-24, government said that it would "...invest a further \$250,000 this year to launch a Low-Income Home Repair Grant..."

I don't see any reference to that new grant in the handouts or on the government's website. I'm wondering what the status of that low-income home repair grant is.

Matthew Praught: That figure would basically be included, I believe, with any home renovation programs; would be in there.

P. Bevan-Baker: Can you tell me, then, Matthew, was that \$250,000 spent?

Matthew Praught: I don't have the breakdown on that. I have a Home Renovation Program line here, but that amount we have in there, there was a strong uptake on any home renovation program. That's in there, in the forecast, at \$6 million.

P. Bevan-Baker: Specifically the low-income home repair grant, we don't have a breakdown for this year, but is a similar figure budgeted for this year?

[2:15 p.m.]

Matthew Praught: I believe so. We have a number of different programs that fall within that Home Renovation Program.

P. Bevan-Baker: Right. On that note, Matthew, do you have a breakdown for each stream of that program, the Home Renovation Program? The Seniors Home Repair Program, Seniors Safe @ Home Program, for example? Do you have that at your fingertips?

Matthew Praught: I don't have a breakdown of everything individually. I just have the one rollup for all of the renovation programs.

P. Bevan-Baker: I wonder, because we get folks reaching out to us for accessing these programs, and it would be nice for us to know whether the numbers that we used last year are being continued this year, or whether they're going up, or what access to those programs is likely to be. Can you give us a breakdown this year of what those programs are going to be?

Matthew Praught: Again, I have the one rollup number for all of the renovation programs, and that's in our budget at the \$5.15 million.

P. Bevan-Baker: Where would I find a breakdown, then, for those programs, both what was spent last year and what you're budgeting for this year? Is there anywhere they could be found?

Matthew Praught: That's likely something I'd have to put together and provide.

P. Bevan-Baker: I'd appreciate that. I realize we'll probably be moving on to Health later today, but I'd still love to have that information, particularly for next year.

Going on to supportive housing, I'm wondering if you can explain the big jump in grants from last year to this year. Again, I apologize if a version of that question –

because I know that covers, in part at least, the Community Outreach Centre, so maybe that's the answer to the question.

Matthew Praught: Sorry, which line are you referencing there?

P. Bevan-Baker: The big jump in grants from last year to this year for supportive housing.

Matthew Praught: Supportive. Would that be in the book? The rental supports, do you mean?

P. Bevan-Baker: Yes. Gosh, I'm so sorry. Shoot, I can't – I'm sorry, Chair. I can't find that. Can you put me back on the list and I will find out where that is?

Chair: No problem at all. But it is a good point. I know this is a large section and we're kind of bouncing all around, I think. For our stranger and the minister, maybe, if we're referencing something other than the budget book, can we give specific direction to where it is so that we don't spend extra time looking for it?

I have the hon. Leader of the Third Party next on the list.

K. Bernard: Thank you, Chair.

When we finished talking, you had mentioned about additional funds for garbage pickup and policing around the new Community Outreach Centre. I'm wondering what this budget allows for in terms of garbage management, I guess, because I'm sure you've noticed yourself, minister, there seems to be – especially in parks where people tend to gather more, especially as we see the numbers of people experiencing homelessness going up, we do see a lot of garbage left in parks.

I'm wondering if this garbage management, I'm going to call it – will that be simply around the site or is that...? I recognize this is a City issue, but you did mention it under yours because that's something I think about a lot, is that this should be something that the City invests more money in, and the Province. Is that part of the plan?

Matthew Praught: Between ground maintenance and waste removal, we have an

additional \$240,000 in there for this coming budget.

Hon. R. Lantz: My understanding is for the duration of this one-year variance that we have, we've committed to that team that's monitoring and cleaning up the whole area of influence, as it's sometimes called, which is basically just a 20-minute walking radius from Park Street. That's ongoing. I've seen them out.

K. Bernard: Yeah. Do you have that on paper, the radius? I'd just be curious what that encompasses.

Hon. R. Lantz: I don't. The City does. I believe it was the Charlottetown police that developed that concept. I know that the planning department, in their mapping capabilities, have done that. I've seen it, but I don't have it.

[2:20 p.m.]

K. Bernard: Okay. I'm just looking here in the handouts. Under professional services, it says consultant, Park Street development plan. I'm wondering, is there flexibility in this budget to implement the recommendations from that? Because I know that this is largely in the hands of the Adventure Group; however, I anticipate some significant changes to programming and all that, which I'm not sure it's in their budget to handle on their own.

Is there flexibility in this budget to deal with those recommendations?

Matthew Praught: Well, I believe we would take the information from those recommendations and then assess those needs as they are. We have established budget in there for the operations of those facilities, so we'll take those recommendations under consideration.

K. Bernard: I do think that that's important because we know that there's going to be recommendations coming out of there.

The Kings County needs assessment, what was that?

Matthew Praught: I don't have any further information on that piece.

Hon. R. Lantz: Just a housing needs assessment in Kings County.

K. Bernard: When was that done?

Hon. R. Lantz: I believe it was completed a few months ago.

K. Bernard: There was a Kings County needs assessment completed by the Rotary Club on housing needs. Was that information not deep enough to act on?

Hon. R. Lantz: I don't know who produced this report –

K. Bernard: Rotary. Oh, sorry.

Hon. R. Lantz: No, the one I'm referencing. We received it more than a few months ago now; time flies. I think it was last summer.

K. Bernard: Is that something that's public?

Hon. R. Lantz: I think so. I believe it is.

Matthew Praught: Yeah, I believe it's online.

Hon. R. Lantz: Yeah.

K. Bernard: I google that a lot because I always lose my Kings County needs assessment that I have, and I've never stumbled upon it. If I look for it and can't find it, would you table that?

Hon. R. Lantz: Yes.

K. Bernard: Thank you. I have one more question, Chair.

I'm just looking at the handout that you provided here. The number of hotel bookings is approximately 3,900 nights. I'm wondering, are these hotels located all around the Island, or are they in Charlottetown or a specific area?

Matthew Praught: They are all around the Island.

Chair: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-West Royalty.

G. McNeilly: Just to pick up on the eastern Prince Edward Island study, I have looked at it, and I was just wondering – the question is: When are you going to put the recommendations in place, minister, from that study?

Hon. R. Lantz: First of all, it is online. A quick google finds it. The recommendations in that would be incorporated into our housing action plan as a whole.

Chair: Hon. Member from Charlottetown-West Royalty, just a reminder that that's a policy question and we're debating the budget right now. Thank you.

G. McNeilly: Okay. In this study, a lot of people were not from Kings County who participated. Was that by design, or is that...? Did you have the right representation in the assessment for \$11,138 that it cost?

Chair: Slid that in there nicely. [Laughter]

G. McNeilly: Did you catch that?

Chair: We are debating the budget, and I understand that there's a focus on that important policy document. If we could stick to the budget, it would be great. So, minister, if you want to address that....

Hon. R. Lantz: I think we got good value for money and we received lots of valuable data in the report.

G. McNeilly: Well, are you putting a shelter in eastern Prince Edward Island then, or any transitional housing at all?

Hon. R. Lantz: I don't believe the needs assessment recommended an emergency shelter.

G. McNeilly: It did have recommendations, and I asked you for which ones you're going to follow up on. I'd like to know what the plan is from that. I'm moving on, Chair.

[2:25 p.m.]

So, 3,900 – and it says approximately 3,900 – nights; is that over or under? What is approximately? Don't you have that figure? That's not an approximate; that's a definite number. Why does it say approximate here?

Matthew Praught: Well, given the limitation on time to bring it back for today, we pulled up some invoices and we were able to kind of do some analysis on that to approximate that number of nights.

G. McNeilly: Yeah, I was just surprised that we don't have that data already done.

With that, and with the – I think it's \$753,000 those nights cost us, each night costs about \$193 per night. This indicates that we have a problem in Prince Edward Island with people getting shelter, with people getting supports. This is not –

Hon. R. Lantz: I think it indicates the opposite, actually.

G. McNeilly: How does it do the opposite?

Hon. R. Lantz: You may have heard me say that no one needs to spend the night on the street or in a tent. They call our shelter support line. We find them a place to stay. In many cases, that includes a hotel room. We make every effort to put a roof over people's heads.

G. McNeilly: That's not the question, minister. The question is, demand is soaring. We've got 3,900 hotel rooms. I'm not questioning the fact that the shelter support line is there. I'm questioning the fact that people don't have a place to live; that's what I'm questioning. I'm questioning the fact that it would get to the point that we're spending a lot of money on this. I'm not saying that it's not the right thing to do.

We have a problem upstream. We have a problem with shelters. We have a problem with transitional housing. We have a problem with supportive housing that's not being rectified. Would you agree with that?

Hon. R. Lantz: We're working to address all those problems as best we can.

G. McNeilly: When I look in the main budget book, in the estimates where it says shelter supports, we spent an extra \$2.6 million on shelter supports. But you know what we didn't spend more on? We were down \$2 million on rent supports. People need that to be reversed eventually, minister. We need to make sure we get people out of poverty and out of the shelter system and

supporting their rental (Indistinct). We don't have places, especially in Charlottetown. You know the percentages are there. These numbers are backwards in our province.

So, I'm just saying, and the last thing I'll say is we need to reverse this. I know the minister is quite capable of that and will work very hard, but these numbers are backwards; 3,900 nights and a lot of money spent is not moving in the right direction. I'll be watching very carefully.

Chair: The hon. Member from New Haven-Rocky Point.

P. Bevan-Baker: Thank you, Chair.

Can I start off by making a suggestion? You mentioned a couple of minutes ago, Chair, that we're jumping around in this section. Just in the last couple of minutes, I have questions on shelter supports and rental subsidies, both of which are covered in the Housing Corp., but unlike other – for example, in Education, where we have a single line for all of the teachers' salaries, that's a sort of mono-block of one thing. But here in the Housing Corporation, we've got six or seven headings for large expenditures, and under those headings, we have perhaps dozens of programs.

Can I make a suggestion that next year, rather than making this a Housing Corp. section, that we actually break it down and each of those specific grant sub-lines becomes its own section so we can focus our questions on one thing rather than jumping around? Because I'm constantly coming up here for questions, not sure if I'm repeating what was said perhaps two days ago on exactly the same subject. I just wanted to put that out there.

Chair: It's always the will of the House.

P. Bevan-Baker: Thank you, Chair.

I'm going to go to – I called it supportive housing and I misspoke. It's shelter supports that I'm looking at. Again, I'm sure this has been discussed in part, but I'm looking at the big jump in the grants from last year to this year from \$4.1 million to \$7.3 million. I'm wondering whether that funding increase represents a larger number of beds on the Island.

Matthew Praught: There would be Summerside shelter that would be included in that. Yes, there would be additional beds in there for Summerside, for sure.

P. Bevan-Baker: Okay. How about the totals, Matthew? It didn't quite double, but it up went substantially. I'm wondering whether the total number of beds for the province shelter beds has gone up.

[2:30 p.m.]

Matthew Praught: The total number of beds. Again, Summerside would be included in there, and on the other numbers, I'm not sure if you have any of those.

Hon. R. Lantz: Winter Street, we added more. Yes, we've added more shelter beds.

P. Bevan-Baker: Okay, can you tell us, considering the large increase, how many extra beds we got for that \$3 million?

Hon. R. Lantz: That \$3 million does not include just shelter beds; it's shelter supports, so there would be various things under there.

P. Bevan-Baker: Right.

Hon. R. Lantz: It would include the 10 new beds in Summerside.

P. Bevan-Baker: Okay. The *Poverty Elimination Strategy Act* that was passed a couple years ago calls on government to end homelessness by the end of next year, the end of 2025. I'm wondering whether you think this budget, the amount of money dedicated to meeting that goal, has us on track.

Hon. R. Lantz: It's a very difficult goal to achieve, but I think it's the best we can do to keep us on that track, yeah.

P. Bevan-Baker: The housing strategy includes an action to establish a task force to "build a renewed model of programs and services for vulnerable Islanders based on *Housing First principles*...."

I'm wondering whether there's any specific money set aside to support that; a statement I'm fully in alignment with, but I don't see

any money here that is attached specifically to Housing First.

Hon. R. Lantz: To Housing First or the task force?

P. Bevan-Baker: Well, yeah, I guess the commitment was to establish a task force based on Housing First principles. I guess the task force comes first, and then the money for the Housing First. Is there money set aside for the task force?

Matthew Praught: I don't have a specific line item related to that. It may be built in within a few different areas, but I don't have that in a specific line.

Hon. R. Lantz: I don't know where it falls either, but I know we'll have it up and running soon.

P. Bevan-Baker: I think Charlottetown-West Royalty finished his questions with a statement around the \$2 million underspend on rental supports. That's not the first year that's happened. If I remember, the same thing was true – I don't know if it was to the same extent – in previous years. I'm wondering what the reason for that underspend – and it's in all areas of rental supports, whether it's mobile rental vouchers or rent supplements or the Canada housing benefit – why we continue to underspend in all those areas?

Matthew Praught: The specific underspend, a lot of these programs are application-based, so the numbers that we have in there in the forecast are what we have available to us for information. We haven't gone and decreased our estimate by \$2 million for next year or anything. These programs are application-based, and they're continually being assessed, so as those needs are there, we budget for them.

Chair: The hon. Leader of the Third Party.

K. Bernard: Thank you, Chair.

Back to Kings County, I know I've had conversations with every single Transportation and Infrastructure minister since being elected, asking for a copy of the assessment that tells us the Rosedale centre or manor in Montague is going to be demolished. From what I understand, there's

been a tender that has gone out for it to be demolished, but no one will give me that assessment.

Is that building one that has been considered for anything, whether it be emergency shelter or transitional housing? Is there anything that you can say on that?

Hon. R. Lantz: We're going to build housing there; seniors housing, I believe. I stand to be corrected, but I think that's it.

K. Bernard: Do you have your hands on that assessment? I know it's not a budget question.

Hon. R. Lantz: I'm not sure what assessment.

[2:35 p.m.]

K. Bernard: A building assessment that says this building should no longer be standing. It should be torn down.

Hon. R. Lantz: All I know is it's coming down.

K. Bernard: I think that's a real shame if it's still okay, like what I hear, but anyway. I'm good for now, Chair.

Chair: The hon. Member from Kensington-Malpeque.

M. MacKay: Thank you, Chair.

On the handout that you just provided with the number of night stays, hotel bookings: at 3,900, what is the overall cost of that? Do you have that?

Matthew Praught: For that specific line item, we had discussed previously that to date, there was \$753,000. Now, that isn't all stays. There may be some other items that are included in that, including transit costs and those types of things. So, it would be less than that \$753,000. I would have to do some kind of quick math here but....

M. MacKay: No, no, just a ballpark.

Over the winter, I was talking to a hotel operator who will no longer deal with the Province because of the damages that are

being done. My question is: Who pays for the damages?

This one operator was telling me that one of the rooms cost over \$2,000 in 24 hours, and he will no longer rent. I'm curious, who pays for the damages? Is it on the owner, or is it the Province paying, and if so, is there a budget line or where does that come out of, and what's that cost?

Matthew Praught: I don't have a line of sight on damages or anything like that. If there was something – and I can't confirm that there was or wasn't – it may be in here, but I don't have further information on that exact example.

M. MacKay: I'm just more curious because if we're looking to, I guess, different areas of the province for hotel rooms and whatever, I think we need to make sure that the operators are renting and that there's support there if something like this happens. I'd like to think that operator – he was still getting the bills and whatever, but I'd like to think that the operator wasn't left on the hook.

I'm just curious to see: Was it a one-off or is this something that happens? Because over \$2,000 is a lot of money for one room. Maybe it's only been a one-off, but I'm curious, is this something we see often? I just know that this owner will not rent to us anymore, and that's a concern.

Matthew Praught: Yeah, and again, I don't have that kind of operational piece of it. That doesn't fall within the information that I have.

M. MacKay: Okay, I appreciate that. Thank you, Chair.

Chair: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Hon. H. Perry: Thank you very much, Chair.

Just a follow-up on Kensington-Malpeque, that is something that's also been brought up to me on occasion too. Many hotel operators who are considering not renting – I mean, they want to rent out. Of course, they want income coming in. But the problem is that they're having too much damage and too many other issues at the hotel, and that may

deter them from participating in this kind of project or program.

I guess, is there any information that you can bring back to this House on that? Because I'm sure your department has heard.

Matthew Praught: They may have. Again, I can't say that I've heard it specifically.

Hon. H. Perry: Okay, we'll move onto to something else.

Yesterday, we had a little bit of a discussion here at the end of the day regarding the minister's comments last fall when he said he purchased a number of houses to add to the inventory. I asked if he could bring back the locations of those houses and he said he would.

So, in this – today – takeback, I see there are communities where the PEI Housing Corporation has social housing units, including the senior and family housing units. They listed them by the names of the municipalities within counties, but I already know this; where seniors and family housing are. But what I wanted to know and what I asked for yesterday specifically was with regards to the approximate 140 homes that were purchased last fall to add to the provincial inventory for the Housing Corp.

Hon. R. Lantz: My staff reviewed the video and tell me that this is what we had agreed to bring back, was all of – I think I asked you if you wanted just the location of the units that we purchased or all the units owned by the PEI Housing Corporation. They tell me that that's what we had agreed to.

Hon. H. Perry: Well then, there's a little bit of –

[2:40 p.m.]

Hon. R. Lantz: But since 2019, we have purchased units in East Royalty, Borden, Vernon River, Charlottetown, Alberton, Cornwall, Georgetown, Hunter River, Murray River, Souris, Wellington, Summerside, and Georgetown.

Hon. H. Perry: Could you please table that?

Hon. R. Lantz: I'll get it for you. I'll bring it back.

Hon. H. Perry: I know that these housing purchases come out of capital expenditures. We went over that last fall. But the management of it, the development of the purchase of this housing would come under the staffing within the PEI Housing Corporation. In order to purchase these houses, your staff would have to or – I guess my question is: Who is the one that's going out looking to buy or purchase/search for these houses to add to your inventory?

Hon. R. Lantz: Housing staff.

Hon. H. Perry: Okay. In last's year capital expenditures, there's \$175 million for social housing. There were only two line items in it. One was for repairs, and the other was – I think it was \$65 million for construction and renovation. That's for construction and renovation. Where does the money come from to purchase these new housing units?

Matthew Praught: From the capital budget.

Hon. H. Perry: But the capital budget line says for construction and renovation. It didn't specifically say for purchasing of existing homes. That was \$65 million. Are you saying that's where it would come out of, that particular line?

Matthew Praught: I can't say that particular line, but that's a capital budget item that we're not looking at today.

Chair: The hon. Leader of the Opposition, it's probably unfair to ask him...

Hon. H. Perry: I know we're not looking at it.

Chair: ...questions about the capital budget lines when we're debating the operating budget.

Hon. H. Perry: I guess my question, Chair, is that I'm trying to figure out where this money is coming from to purchase 140 new homes.

Chair: I believe they just said the capital budget.

Hon. H. Perry: Okay, but when I go back to the capital budget – they were making reference to the capital budget – I'm asking about that line item specifically, to ensure that it comes out of that line.

Chair: I understand, and legitimate question, but it's not in the operating budget, so it's hard to debate a different budget when we're debating the operating budget right now. Your questions are very legitimate, but just, we're debating the operating budget.

Hon. H. Perry: Okay, I'll ask a question. In the operating budget here, it was just stated that your staff are the ones who would look for new homes, make the offers, I guess, on these new homes, and purchase these new homes. Is that correct?

Hon. R. Lantz: Yes.

Matthew Praught: Yes.

Hon. H. Perry: Okay. Do you also use any outside help on that, for real estate agents, let's say, to go out and help you find these homes?

Hon. R. Lantz: I don't know.

Hon. H. Perry: But it's your department. You should know. If there's that many millions of dollars being spent – taxpayers' dollars – one would think you'd have an interest in knowing how that money is being spent. It's not \$10,000; we're talking millions of dollars.

Hon. R. Lantz: Our staff manages the purchases on behalf of our department.

Hon. H. Perry: Would it be safe in saying that the average home that was purchased was around the \$300,000 mark?

Matthew Praught: Again, these would be capital in nature.

Chair: Yeah, hon. member –

Hon. H. Perry: I guess what I'm going back to, Chair, is that it's their staff that's doing it.

Chair: That's right.

Hon. H. Perry: Their staff is paid through this budget expenditures, right? So, I'm just trying to get what their job is and what they're doing and, I guess, what, within their duties – they have specific requests, I guess, from either the minister or those above them to go out and to purchase homes. So, within that ask, I'm wanting to know what the amount that they can spend on these homes is.

Chair: Very legitimate question for any time other than the operating budget.

Hon. H. Perry: Okay. I'm trying to get in there and get these questions answered, but I'm not –

Chair: You're trying to get into something, hon. member, but (Indistinct)

[2:45 p.m.]

Hon. H. Perry: I know, I know, but this very important. There's millions and millions of taxpayers' dollars on Prince Edward Island, and we have a serious housing crisis on Prince Edward Island that needs to be addressed.

I'm just trying to get answers to how this is being approached and how and where these units are because the housing crisis just doesn't happen in Charlottetown. That's why I wanted to know from tip to tip – as you said yesterday, we're purchasing from tip to tip – specifically where they are. That's why I asked for that particular information that you just mentioned earlier to be tabled, so I know specifically where these homes were purchased.

Is it possible to have that tabled at the present time?

Hon. R. Lantz: I don't think so. I can get you the information you've requested, but that page contains other information.

Hon. H. Perry: So, does it contain other information that's in reference to the operational budget?

Hon. R. Lantz: Yes.

Hon. H. Perry: Then I wonder why we can't see it. [Laughter]

Chair: One more follow-up and then we can move on.

Hon. H. Perry: Okay. So, what information are you hiding?

Hon. R. Lantz: Oh, sorry, I thought you meant the capital budget. It's all capital budget.

Hon. H. Perry: Okay, put me back on the list, please.

Chair: No problem.

The hon. Member from New Haven-Rocky Point.

P. Bevan-Baker: Thanks, Chair.

Just a couple of wrap-up questions on the rental supports. I know that some of the underspend was on mobile rental vouchers and some was on rent supplements. Is the difference between those two that the recipient of the funding with the mobile rental vouchers is the individual renting the unit, and the one receiving the rent supplement, does that go directly to the landlord or the owner of the building? Is that correct?

Matthew Praught: Yeah, the rental supplements would be more the units that we would, ourselves, own and that's the supplement that they receive for renting. Also, there may be some units that we have arrangements with landlords to have tenants placed there as well. The mobile rental vouchers are more where they are themselves renting a location and that's the support that's provided there.

P. Bevan-Baker: Okay. Given that we've underspent on both of those areas and the Canada CMHC benefits, Canada Housing Benefit, I'm wondering whether you're going to consider expanding the eligibility for that. Just given the current financial environment for renters, where things are certainly not getting any cheaper, I'm just surprised that we're underspending, first of all, and if we are, is it because of an eligibility issue, that people are not meeting the parameters?

Matthew Praught: Any of our programs, we're always assessing the needs for that.

So, depending on how those programs are going, we would kind of explore how they're delivered and the criteria.

P. Bevan-Baker: Okay. Is it fair to say, then, the fact that we have underspent by \$2 million – is it because people are not applying for those programs?

Matthew Praught: I can't say specifically that they're not applying. Those are the forecast numbers that we had coming in at for the year.

P. Bevan-Baker: It would be really nice to know that because if people are applying and not meeting eligibility, and we're not spending all the money that we had budgeted for this, then the logical reaction to that would be to change the eligibility criteria to make sure that everybody who does need help is getting it.

I don't know if there's any way you can – can you tell us if there are more people applying for this who are not meeting eligibility criteria?

Matthew Praught: I wouldn't have that on hand. Regarding the eligibility criteria, that's more of a policy side question, but I don't have a specific answer for that.

P. Bevan-Baker: Okay. I'm good, Chair. Thanks.

Chair: Shall the section carry? Carried.

Thank you, minister.

Hon. R. Lantz: Thank you.

[2:50 p.m.]

Chair: Alright, hon. members, we're moving on to the Department of Health and Wellness.

Minister, would you like to make a motion to bring a stranger to the floor?

Hon. M. McLane: I would.

Chair: Shall it carry? Carried.

Welcome. Could you introduce yourself and your title for Hansard, please?

Kellie Hawes: My name is Kellie Hawes. I'm the chief financial officer with Health PEI.

Chair: Thank you, Kellie.

Hon. members, we are on page 108, as I think I said. Minister, do you have anything to start with before we get into questions?

Hon. M. McLane: No, I just want to acknowledge Kellie. Last year, we set a record for being on the floor for 10 hours straight. So, I just want to recognize Kellie and her efforts last year. [Applause]

And as she said to me in briefings, it's 80,000 lines of spreadsheet data that she deals with, so it's very impressive.

Chair: Okay. I hope that wasn't a challenge. [Laughter]

Hon. M. McLane: (Indistinct) no, it was not.

Chair: Minister and Deputy Minister's Office

“Appropriations provided for the administration of the office of the Minister and Deputy Minister.” Administration: 22,700. Equipment: 1,500. Materials, Supplies, and Services: 7,500. Professional Services: 25,000. Salaries: 569,700. Travel and Training: 22,700.

Total Minister and Deputy Minister's Office: 649,100

Minister, sorry, did you have something to say?

Hon. M. McLane: Yes, we're actually doing Health PEI, not the department.

Chair: My apologies. I had read out the Department of Health and Wellness, but we can start with Health PEI.

Okay, members, we'll start with Health PEI instead. We're on page 116.

Corporate Services

Corporate Services

“Appropriations provided for the operations of the office of the Chief Executive Officer and for the provision of corporate services in the areas of corporate communications, legal services, policy, planning and evaluation, and emergency management and business continuity. This section supports the operations of the Board of Health PEI.”
Administration: 142,500. Equipment: 40,000. Materials, Supplies, and Services: 207,900. Professional Services: 573,400. Salaries: 4,901,900. Travel and Training: 92,800.

Total Corporate Services: 5,958,500

Shall it carry? [Laughter]

The hon. Member from Charlottetown-West
Royalty.

G. McNeilly: That was funny.

Thank you for coming, Kellie. Thank you, minister, for being here. I think if I do recall, we were well into the evening last session, this time last year, so thanks for putting your time into the evening. I wonder why that happened. [Laughter]

Kellie Hawes: A real mystery.

G. McNeilly: Interesting. Let’s get to some questions here.

Administration – we see that you underspent on administration. Can you tell me a little bit about that line?

Kellie Hawes: Fewer office supply needs, lower telephone costs, and fewer meetings and expenses.

G. McNeilly: Thank you for that.

So, Corporate Services is the Chief Executive Officer; that’s the CEO?

Kellie Hawes: Yes.

[2:55 p.m.]

G. McNeilly: So, how does the CEO deal with – we’re talking about the minister and minister defending the budget for government. How does that work? How does the CEO communicate with the

department? Are those scheduled meetings, or how does that...?

Hon. M. McLane: I’m going to start early. Let’s stick to the budget, please. Please. That’s not related to investments.

G. McNeilly: Does the question stand? The question doesn’t stand?

Chair: Repeat it again.

G. McNeilly: Are there scheduled meetings? Is there enough funding in here to schedule meetings between the CEO of Health PEI and the Minister of Health?

Chair: Your question is, is there enough money in the budget so that the CEO of Health PEI can meet with who?

G. McNeilly: Sorry, with the minister. It doesn’t seem like these meetings maybe took place very often. I’m just wondering if there’s enough money in this budget to do that. Is there enough communication there?

Hon. M. McLane: I buy the coffee at the meetings, Chair.

Chair: Do you think there’s enough – so, the coffee is covered for the meetings, hon. Member from Charlottetown-West Royalty.

Hon. M. McLane: Sorry. (Indistinct)

G. McNeilly: My original question is: Are these set meetings? Is there a set meeting time between the department to get – minister, you are setting the policy direction for both Health PEI and the department. Do you coordinate meetings enough with the CEO?

Hon. M. McLane: I had a very good relationship with our past CEO and I’m very confident that I’ll have a strong relationship with our new CEO.

G. McNeilly: Thank you very much. Materials, supplies, and services budget was \$204,000. We only spent \$5,000. That means we underspent on services for Corporate Services. Why was there such a lack of spending? The budget is going up. The forecast goes back up to \$200,000. Why is that?

Kellie Hawes: The forecast was lower as there was an underspend in relation to funding for a new learning management system, which is in the process of being implemented.

G. McNeilly: I didn't catch the title of that.

Kellie Hawes: Learning management system.

G. McNeilly: Okay. So, it didn't go in. Could you tell me a little bit more about that learning management system?

Kellie Hawes: Alright, I'll check to see if I have some information on that system.

The learning management system was an annualized investment introduced last year. It will support the implementation of such at Health PEI. It will allow for better tracking controls for mandatory and compliance health-related system training. Centralized learning management will allow for an online access to learning and development content.

G. McNeilly: Yeah, I'm looking forward to that going in. Does it mean that when we had it forecasted that it was delayed in some kind of way?

Kellie Hawes: It was delayed through the purchasing process, and the value there was supports for that system. It was continuing to move forward.

G. McNeilly: I'll look for that. That's what encompasses the future forecast in that. When do we expect to have this fully operational this year? When is it going to start? When is it going to be available?

Kellie Hawes: I don't have exact dates with me, but we could bring that back. It is planned for later this year.

G. McNeilly: Great.

Chair: The hon. Leader of the Third Party.

K. Bernard: Thank you, Chair.

Welcome back, Kellie. Our staff was reviewing the budget debate last year and she said you could tell when 10 o'clock hit because things just went crazy, so I would

be scared to go back and watch that. Thank you for being here. Hopefully, this time we won't be deliriously tired.

I'm just looking at the handout with salaries. I don't have my book open to salaries right now; I'm sorry about that. There are raises for some positions upwards of 20 percent. I'm wondering if there's been some reclassifications done within Health PEI.

Kellie Hawes: I will say yes because there's a significant number of positions within Health PEI. Individual employees have the right to seek a reclassification or a classification review of their position. So, yes.

K. Bernard: Okay.

Chair: The hon. Leader of the Third Party, on Corporate Services.

K. Bernard: Yeah?

Chair: You're on the salaries section, are you?

K. Bernard: Yeah. Now you're making me second-guess myself here, Chair.

[3:00 p.m.]

Chair: No, no. I just was confirming.

K. Bernard: Is there anyone on your list?

Chair: No. Yes, there is, sorry.

K. Bernard: Can you go to them and then –

Chair: The hon. Member from Borden-Kinkora.

M. MacFarlane: Just to clarify, Chair, we're in Corporate Services, which includes salaries of \$4.9 million?

Chair: That's right, yeah. I was just confirming with the Leader of the Third Party if that's what she was speaking about.

M. MacFarlane: Okay. Further on that, I'm sorry if I didn't catch the full answer to that question, but over two years, there seems to be increases of up 40 percent. I think I heard your answer say that individual employees have the right to seek a reclassification?

Kellie Hawes: That's correct, but if the question is about the increase in the budget from '23-24 to '24-25, I can provide information on what that increase is.

M. MacFarlane: Maybe we'll start with that, please.

Kellie Hawes: Sure. Accordingly, it's a collective agreement in premium and benefit increases, as per the collective agreements. It is in relation to an annualized investment for the office of academics, for chief academic officer and supports. It's for change management positions; three staff. It's for one solicitor. It's for annualized funding for communications officers.

When I say annualized funding, I'm referencing investments that were approved through the budget process in our '23-24 fiscal year with a part-year start. Therefore, there's annualized or additional dollars in this year to complete that funding.

Hon. M. McLane: You'll hear the annualized answer quite often. They start last year and then become a 12-month expense. It's a very common answer in Health.

[Interjections]

Hon. M. McLane: What's that?

[Interjections]

Hon. M. McLane: Annualized, yeah. A lot of annualized costs.

Chair: The hon. Member from Borden-Kinkora.

M. MacFarlane: You've named off a number of different positions. Are those new positions, did I hear you say?

Kellie Hawes: Yes, that's correct.

M. MacFarlane: Is there a particular motivation or a strategy in mind with respect to those new positions over last year, over the previous year?

Hon. M. McLane: Again, another common answer. A significant part of it is with collective agreement premium and benefit increases. It will be significant expense in

almost every line that you see because of the new agreements in the health system.

Back to communication officers, we've also been short on comms. We're trying to improve our communications in health. That would be an investment that we've made in this budget.

M. MacFarlane: In addition to the pension and in addition to – I heard communications. But I heard quite a few new positions or titles included in there. Is the strategy simply communications or is there more...? There must be more to it than that for the increase in the price tag.

Kellie Hawes: I can tell a little about some of the investments. I noted change management consultants, or project management staffs, which are three. That's an investment to support change management and project management on a permanent basis for Health PEI to support management and change. A solicitor – this will bring a total of three solicitors to Health PEI with the addition of one solicitor.

When we look at the office of academics, the investment is to establish that, which will report to the CEO. It will be responsible for undergraduates in the future medical residency and will maintain liaison with other groups. And it's for a chief administrative officer.

We talked about the communication officer.

As it relates to planning and evaluation resources that were annualized, the demand for policy, planning, and evaluation support is significantly increased, and it's support to implement new programs and services requiring policy and planning. It was to support the expansion and update of the website and the programs.

M. MacFarlane: Is the change management tied to the medical school?

Kellie Hawes: No, it would be for the whole organization. We're taking a look at all activities accordingly to support.

M. MacFarlane: Sorry, all activities?

Kellie Hawes: All activities.

M. MacFarlane: You mentioned some of the funds are directed towards the medical school. Obviously, there are other sections in here that would speak to that, as well, in addition to what we're just looking at in Corporate Services now?

[3:05 p.m.]

Kellie Hawes: Primarily, this section would be – that position represents creation of the office of academics, which will in the future, of course, have a very close relationship with the medical school accordingly, and will be responsible for the activities related to the residency program, et cetera.

Throughout this budget, whether it's in primary care or other things, there would be support from our system, as far as our investments, to support our population growth and the needs of Islanders. Of course, many of those investments will eventually support the medical school as well, depending on what we're looking at.

M. MacFarlane: Is there anything in this section that we're on now that would speak to the initiative of moving towards patient medical homes?

Kellie Hawes: Not in this section.

M. MacFarlane: Not in this section, okay. Thank you.

Chair: Hon. Leader of the Third Party, I might have thrown you off there. I was just asking my clarification question. It was just the salaries.

Do you want to continue on with your line of questioning?

K. Bernard: Yes.

Chair: Okay, go ahead then.

The hon. Leader of the Third Party.

K. Bernard: Thank you.

Back to the reclassifying of positions, I know that one of things we learned yesterday or the day before – whenever it was, when we looked at kind of the hiring process – we learned that when positions are reclassified, it can take months.

I'm wondering what positions were reclassified, and what sparked the reclassification?

Kellie Hawes: I don't have a list of any positions that were all reclassified within Health PEI over the past year. I would have to go back to our HR division and seek that information accordingly if that's required.

K. Bernard: It was just interesting to me because it appears almost all the positions were the leadership positions, and from my understanding, if you do the leadership positions, I'm wondering if then the people who work for them – would they not be reclassified at the same time?

I'm wondering if it is leadership positions and the people who work for them. So, maybe not necessarily a specific list, but just if that's the case, or if it's just leadership positions that are being...?

Kellie Hawes: I'll start by saying that any new position that's created must be classified by the Public Service Commission. An individual, whether employed with Health PEI or another government department can seek to have their position classified.

Oftentimes, if there's a review of one, there could be a review of others because that classification review may be due to a change in what that work is. So, through consultation with the Public Service Commission, oftentimes that could be the case. It could be one position, but if there's a strong relationship with other positions, it's very possible that other positions could be reviewed at that same time.

K. Bernard: So, were these increases recommended by the Public Service Commission, or was it kind of a...? You had said people can decide if they want their position reclassified, or people can put in a request?

Kellie Hawes: My reference is in general to all of the positions that would have. Is there a specific one that you are thinking of, or...?

K. Bernard: I'm just kind of thinking in general.

Kellie Hawes: Okay. So, again, I'll say, any brand-new position that's created, similar to the ones I mentioned, must be classified by the Public Service Commission. So, that would be considered a classification. There could be a review requested by a leader or a manager for a position, or an individual within a position can request to have their position classified. So, it could be one of those three.

K. Bernard: You mentioned reviews. Have the leadership positions been reviewed in this past couple of years?

Kellie Hawes: I believe a number of them have.

K. Bernard: Sorry, I'm just trying to understand this. How often would you review a leadership position? Is that something that happens automatically, or is that something that is done based on a certain series of events?

[3:10 p.m.]

Kellie Hawes: Like other positions, you would be looking to see if there are significant changes. So, if there was a significant move from the responsibility of that division, of having more responsibility, it might be so that it's reviewed. But there's no set period of time. It's really about – the position would be originally reviewed, and then subject to changes, it could be reviewed again. It will be based on that determination of criteria.

K. Bernard: Just looking at the significant increases to several positions in '23-24, and again in '24-25, would that mean that there were a couple of reclassifications? Just wondering why there were bumps; those significant bumps those two consecutive years.

Kellie Hawes: If you're looking at the salaries, it would be through collective agreement increases. If we were to look at Corporate Services last year – and I don't have all of that information from last year's budget with me – there were a significant number of investments last year to support Corporate Services and human resources accordingly. They're trying to strengthen up that area.

K. Bernard: Okay. There were also a few changes in staff level positions. Can you tell us what sort of increase the frontline staff are getting this year?

Kellie Hawes: From a collective agreement?

K. Bernard: Yes.

Chair: Is that this section?

Hon. M. McLane: It's not this section.

Kellie Hawes: It's all throughout.

Chair: Go ahead.

Kellie Hawes: In general, all the increases are based on the collective agreements. I'm not going to mention ones that are under negotiation, but we do identify a value within the budget to support those negotiations that will be occurring this year. For that reason, I won't mention those values.

In particular – and these are based on the collective agreements – when we look at IUOE, 1.75 percent effective April 1st and 1 percent in October. When we look at – sorry, I'm just reading about the negotiations part while I'm doing this.

K. Bernard: That's okay. Sorry.

Kellie Hawes: The excluded, it's a 1.25 percent increase, April 1, and 1.5 in October. PEINU, the base is 1.75 and one, but there were, I believe, other particulars with that as well, as far as a designated unit premium and other premiums. I didn't bring that level of detail with me, but in general.

K. Bernard: Okay, thank you.

Chair: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-West Royalty.

G. McNeilly: Thank you, Chair.

Under Corporate Services, the dean of the med school, in a meeting, and I think he said publicly, that he was going to be compensated through Health PEI as well as the university. Is that in Corporate Services?

Kellie Hawes: That's the position I just mentioned.

G. McNeilly: Okay. Can you tell me how much that's for?

Kellie Hawes: It's a couple of positions, so I don't have the exact breakdown. I'd have to get that exact breakdown for you, but it is two FTEs, and the grand total of that investment is \$350,000. Part of it was for last year and part of it was for this year.

G. McNeilly: I think he mentioned that he was working 0.8 for UPEI and 0.2 for us.

Kellie Hawes: That's for one FTE of those two positions. I understand he will be taking on a 0.2 role, so it would be 0.2 of the funding available.

G. McNeilly: So, a 0.2 is going to cost us \$350,000?

Kellie Hawes: No. The \$350,000 represents two positions. Of those two positions, there is funding for one FTE for chief academic officer. The dean will be taking a 0.2 of that 1.0 FTE.

[3:15 p.m.]

G. McNeilly: Is that the clearest way we could do this? It doesn't seem very clear.

Kellie Hawes: My explanation's not clear? My apologies. It's budgeted for two positions, one of which is a 1.0 FTE for a chief academic officer. The dean will be taking on a 0.2 FTE. So, a portion of that funding that is available through that investment is what will be filled.

G. McNeilly: How much will that 0.2 FTE cost Health PEI?

Kellie Hawes: I believe it's approximately \$80,000. I can confirm (Indistinct)

G. McNeilly: Okay, I appreciate that.

Have we checked out to see if that's the best way to do it? Between a medical school that's at separate lengths and Health PEI, that we will be using – to have somebody in both; is that the best way to do it from Health PEI's perspective? Is this what we need, or do we need to keep those separate

to make sure we move forward? I don't know yet.

Hon. M. McLane: Well, I guess back to – we're very fortunate to have Dr. Smith as our hire. I don't think we could have done much better, to be quite honest with you, with his work history and in working in conjunction with health authorities. Integration and communication are important, so I think this is a good model, I would assume, to ensure that the coordination takes place between UPEI and our health authority. He has experience. I'm not sure what his structure was in his previous job, but I'm sure he would have led some of this responsibility.

G. McNeilly: Thank you, minister.

Did the former CEO sign off on that 0.2 FTE in this, how this went? Who signed off on that? Was it the acting or the former CEO?

Kellie Hawes: I don't have that contract in front of me so I can't say for certain.

Hon. M. McLane: ELT ultimately has responsibility. The executive leadership team would make those types of decisions.

G. McNeilly: Will you table the contract?

Hon. M. McLane: I think we'd have to ask. Personal information.

Chair: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-West Royalty, Corporate Services.

G. McNeilly: Are there any more secondments from this section; people who are in Corporate Services who have been seconded in the last year to the med school, or any people who would be working in Corporate Services that are now working in the med school? And who would pay their salary?

Kellie Hawes: Not that I'm aware of, for secondments.

G. McNeilly: In consulting fees, it says the CEO's office, and under the consulting fees, all it says is medical school; \$450,000 was spent, \$325,000 was budgeted. That was one of three different things. How much was

spent on the med school consulting, and what was that?

Kellie Hawes: The \$450,000 noted is a forecast value and it was consulting dollars to support the master program. That's what the budget will be for next year. The forecast for this year was supporting master programming for the QEH. In the future, it will be for Prince County Hospital and west. It was for medical school work. Specifically, I guess I can say Spindle would be one example. And the approximate value would be just less than \$70,000. That was the majority of that forecast value.

G. McNeilly: Thank you. Put me back on the list.

[3:20 p.m.]

Chair: My apologies, hon. Member from Charlottetown-West Royalty. I don't have anybody else on my list, so you can keep –

M. MacFarlane: (Indistinct)

Chair: The hon. Member from Borden-Kinkora.

I didn't have you on, but go ahead.

M. MacFarlane: Oh, sorry.

G. McNeilly: The floor is yours.

M. MacFarlane: Thank you.

Chair: He's asked an allotment of questions. I'll put him back on the list. He knows the routine well. [Laughter]

M. MacFarlane: Further to the discussion I think we're having with respect to the salaries, and I apologize if I missed it, but it looks like we underspent by about \$800,000 last year. I'm just wondering where that would have come from. What result? Would that have been difficult (Indistinct)?

Kellie Hawes: It was in relation to vacancies. For example, there were two FTE program policy analysts that were vacant. We did have some delays in the investment for some other policy analyst positions. As I noted, the investment for the office of academics was initiated last year. That individual will be starting in April.

[Z. Bell in the chair]

M. MacFarlane: I guess, continuing along looking at them higher level, on the administration side, it looks like about \$50,000 was underspent, but yet we're budgeting for more than last year's. Was there a reason for the underspend?

Kellie Hawes: I noted that earlier as an underspend in relation to office supplies. With the delays of some of those investments, that relates to fewer supplies, telephone costs, and that sort of thing.

M. MacFarlane: Maybe we'll just look at the grants. Maybe this was asked (Indistinct). I apologize. What was the \$2 million? And there's nothing for this year?

Kellie Hawes: That is in relation to an innovation fund that is payable to the Department of Health and Wellness to support innovation projects.

M. MacFarlane: It was unbudgeted, but was spent and not budgeted again?

Kellie Hawes: That is correct. What I'll share at this point, because you'll hear me say this throughout our discussions, is Health PEI very closely monitors our financial spend against our budgets on a daily, monthly, quarterly, annual basis. Early on last fall, we were able to identify – due to vacancies and some delays in implementing some of our investments – that we are going to have a surplus.

We had significant discussions with the Department of Health and Wellness and the Department of Finance to identify possible spends and investments that would help support our health organization, as well as our population and others accordingly, and these were agreed upon. This would be one of those.

M. MacFarlane: Is the surplus roughly the same, \$2 million? And it was meant to reflect that?

Kellie Hawes: In that particular, but we looked at it from a bottom-line perspective.

M. MacFarlane: Is that normal, that there'd be such a surplus like that, of \$2 million?

Kellie Hawes: No, we certainly try to spend all the health budget, for sure. When we reflect back, where our budget was not approved until, I believe it was late June, when we look at the timing of the election, and a lot of our investments (Indistinct) so there was a series of delays due to that, unfortunately. It's another reason why we very closely monitor to identify: What can we do? What can we look at?

Chair: Thank you, member.

The hon. Leader of the Third Party.

K. Bernard: Thank you, Chair.

I'm kind of stuck on this reclassification thing. The positions that I'm looking at, in particular, are the leadership positions. But the leadership positions – because like I said, they've jumped up significantly in the last two years; close to 40 percent, in some cases. Did you mention something about collective agreements being part of the reason in there, or was that for a different question?

Kellie Hawes: For the increase in the budget?

[3:25 p.m.]

K. Bernard: For the leadership positions in particular.

Kellie Hawes: Some leadership – yeah, leadership positions would be classified as excluded, so I did mention those increases, based on the collective agreements.

K. Bernard: But leadership positions – do they fall under a collective agreement?

Kellie Hawes: They do follow the excluded agreement.

K. Bernard: Is there anyone else on your list?

Chair: There is, yeah.

K. Bernard: Can I go back on, please?

Chair: You can.

The hon. Member from New Haven-Rocky Point.

P. Bevan-Baker: Thank you.

I guess I'm suffering from the same lack of clarity on the salary ranges – hi, Kellie, by the way; it's nice to see you again – as the Leader of the Third Party.

The leadership positions, again, some of them – these are high salaried positions, of course – have gone up 40 percent in one year. Would all leadership positions fall under a collective agreement and, therefore, would a 40 percent increase in a particular salary be something that's negotiated within that collective agreement?

Kellie Hawes: Without looking at the specific position, I can't identify or clarify the percentage increase that you're reviewing, but I can say that those classifications are completed by the Public Service Commission. They're not completed by Health PEI. So, we do follow their lead and recommendation.

P. Bevan-Baker: Right. I'll look at one in particular; I won't mention any names here, but the positions of chief financial officer, chief of nursing, for example, where the salaries have gone up, again, 40 percent in one year. I'm wondering whether that recommendation for that sort of increase would have originated with the PSC.

Kellie Hawes: I'll speak to my own position. It was recommended that my position be reviewed because of the responsibility my role had. The Public Service Commission reviewed the position and the responsibilities and recommended the reclassification of the position.

P. Bevan-Baker: And I guess, by implication, you're suggesting that the same process would be true for the individuals that we have on the list here in the handout.

Kellie Hawes: Without me seeing that, I would say yes. That's the process that we follow.

P. Bevan-Baker: Are there ever any suggested increases coming back from the Public Service Commission of 40 percent for lower-salaried positions? It seems to me like a substantial increase.

Kellie Hawes: I would have to go back and review them, but there's often times that positions are reviewed and, because of changes with them, they could increase a couple of levels or more.

P. Bevan-Baker: Again, I get that, and I'm thinking about all of the negotiated positions and salaries that go on between the various unions and Health PEI or government and how those are typically settled for single-digit amounts. I'm just trying to get my head around why particular leadership positions would be recommended for a 40 percent increase. I'm sticking on that.

I guess I don't have any more questions. I'm just struggling to understand why that leap would have happened.

Thank you, Chair.

Chair: Okay. Thank you.

The hon. Member from Charlottetown-West
Royalty.

G. McNeilly: Thank you, Chair.

Just going back to the \$2 million. I think I understand. You weren't able to spend all your money. I know the budget was late. Then, \$2 million gets put aside where you can put to specific projects and programs that might come up in the future. Is that correct, how that works?

Kellie Hawes: That will be payable to the Department of Health and Wellness for innovation projects. Some of those innovation projects that we would have considered in the past would have been working on Pharmacy Plus, as an example.

G. McNeilly: Works on Pharmacy Plus. It goes there; that's \$2 million. How did you come to that dollar amount? You said projects' possible spending. How do you define possible spending? Is it money that's earmarked or is it...? I'm not clear about...

[3:30 p.m.]

Kellie Hawes: I have some initiatives that were provided by the Department of Health and Wellness that I can name. When you ask how that dollar was identified, again, through consultation with the Department of

Health and Wellness and the Department of Finance, initiatives were identified, and this was one that, based on those discussions, was approved accordingly.

Some of those initiatives are noted as Healthwise, SeamlessMD, Merge, just to name a few.

Hon. M. McLane: Virtual Hallway is another one. Again, execution; we were able to execute on it. I wouldn't say it's easy, but we had done some work and we were able to use that money to stand up Virtual Hallway.

G. McNeilly: And I'm in support of that, that the money doesn't come back to general revenues. I love that. But my question is because, talking to people within Health PEI, they get a certain budget and if they don't spend it or they need more money, they can't get it. You can't move around money within Health PEI, is that correct? For the most part? From different units as you see fit?

Kellie Hawes: We have the authority to transfer money, up to \$10 million, in one year without Treasury Board authority.

G. McNeilly: I think, Kellie, we were here in Public Accounts where we talked about this. I'm just trying to make sure if there's anything that we can do in this Chamber to give Health PEI the authority to move things around easily. I would have to go back and watch the standing committee to figure out – but it was a fascinating conversation.

Is it working properly? When the money goes to you, I know there's some frustration in Corporate Services and different places about how the money moves. What can we do to help in the future? What does that look like?

Hon. M. McLane: Every government department – again, the battle for the budget.

Kellie Hawes: My comment would be the exemption that I just described is relatively recent. We've had great conversations with the Department of Finance and Treasury staff. We continue to work together every day to make things the best we can.

G. McNeilly: That's great news because I just want you to have your money and to get

it done. Then when I see here that we're giving it back to the department, I don't –

Hon. M. McLane: But they can execute on Virtual Hallway. They're ready to execute. That's the issue; that health innovation group is always ready to implement because they do a lot of workups. Okay, Virtual Hallway, let's go. So, it's good that flexibility happened in this particular case, but again, back to the June rollover, that's what really caused some drag.

G. McNeilly: Then, my question is that Health PEI doesn't have a business plan. They have a strategic plan; there's no business plan right now as far as I know. It was over in 2022. I don't see it in the budget. There's no business plan. On your charts, it says strategic plan, business plan, public accounts, and then, that's how the – am I wrong by saying that Health PEI does not have a business plan?

Hon. M. McLane: I think there's an opportunity with a new CEO to put that in place. Back to management plan and execution, you're seeing it right here. This is it. This is the meat.

G. McNeilly: I'll ask questions later.

Chair: Thank you, member.

The hon. Leader of the Third Party.

K. Bernard: I think I'm good for now, Chair.

Chair: The hon. Member from New Haven-Rocky Point.

P. Bevan-Baker: Thank you.

Can I just confirm the questions regarding comparative salaries in leadership positions here and salaries that may be offered for folks at the medical school, whether it's appropriate to ask questions about that in this section?

Kellie Hawes: I can't speak to salaries at the medical school. It's not under my authority.

P. Bevan-Baker: Okay. I understand that, the specifics, but I was wondering about comparables because as we know, we've lost the CEO from Prince County Hospital,

we've lost the director of surgical services, and perhaps others because, as I've been told, the salaries at the medical school are 30 percent higher than they are here.

I guess that's a first question. Is that a correct statistic that we've been told?

Kellie Hawes: I have not presented with a report that I could verify that, so I can't answer that question.

P. Bevan-Baker: Alright. I wonder if the minister has any thoughts (Indistinct)

Hon. M. McLane: I guess my issue, again, is there a perfect alignment in those positions from Health PEI to the medical school? I think there would be some – are we comparing apples to apples, is a short answer from that perspective.

[3:35 p.m.]

P. Bevan-Baker: Are there currently any positions attached to the medical school that are being paid through Health PEI?

Kellie Hawes: No.

P. Bevan-Baker: Are they all being paid through the University of Prince Edward Island?

Hon. M. McLane: Just the academic officer, I guess, would be the only tie with the med school, from a Corporate Services perspective.

Kellie Hawes: Yeah, the medical school is responsible for the salaries of their staff.

P. Bevan-Baker: Again, I'm not sure exactly where these salary lines might fall, so if I'm out of line by asking for it now I will move on, obviously. We know that the medical school, in short order, just over a year from now, will be accepting its first cohort of students. Part of the medical school is to create a 10,000-person primary care centre, which I presume will be staffed by Health PEI staff. Is that correct?

Kellie Hawes: Correct.

P. Bevan-Baker: Do we have a sense of how many staff will be required to staff that portion of the medical school?

Kellie Hawes: That's not in that section. That's more in our primary care and I can respond to some of that –

Hon. M. McLane: Yeah, we'll get to primary care; the whole umbrella of primary care. So, it's kind of not relevant to this section. You'll see some of the –

P. Bevan-Baker: That's fine then, Chair. We'll move on. I'll just make sure that I get those questions (Indistinct)

Thank you.

Chair: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-West Royalty.

G. McNeilly: Thank you.

What I was asking before was: Minister, does Health PEI have an active current business plan or not?

Kellie Hawes: Tied into some of the investments here for positions, we've been a little late on the business plans, but I understand that one was actually emailed today for reference and review and approval.

Hon. M. McLane: It will be public.

Kellie Hawes: And there are strong efforts to get that caught up. For the past couple of years, that whole unit has been very supportive of, in the past, our COVID response and other urgent needs. So, the additional staff to support that area is well needed and we're trying to get caught up.

Hon. M. McLane: I have to approve it by mid-April.

G. McNeilly: You must have been like, "Was he on the emails or something?" Because I just happened to ask, and it was coming through today. So, that was a draft. It's a draft, and that's what I was getting at: Do we have enough people to provide a business plan? We have a strategic plan and no business plan. How do we know what we're doing? We need a business plan ASAP; Health PEI does. The department has one, and this is a crucial document, so I'm glad to hear that.

Minister, I'd just say to the staff: Thanks for working on it, this is an important

document, and I want you to maybe – don't rush it, but we have to get this out pretty timely, I do believe.

In this section, Corporate Services, this is about emergency management. The Prince County Hospital emergency operations committee – how many people from Corporate Services are on that?

Hon. M. McLane: Oh, gosh. I'm not sure how it ties to a budgetary question, member.

Chair: Well, he is asking under the Prince County emergency management, how many would be through Corporate Services.

Hon. M. McLane: I have it. I don't know if I have it quickly at hand.

We could table it. I think it would be quicker, hon. member, to table it. I mean, there's no – we had questions in the House about who's on it, so I do have – again, back to the structure of the provincial EOC and the EOCs at the QEH and the PCH. I might have tabled that document actually, to be quite honest. Pretty sure I did, but I can provide it to you.

Chair: Hon. Member from Borden-Kinkora, do you have an interjection, or do you want to be on the list?

M. MacFarlane: Just on the list.

Chair: Okay, sorry.

G. McNeilly: I'll let him – yeah, he can....

Chair: You're done, hon. Member from Charlottetown-West Royalty?

G. McNeilly: Well, done for now. You can put me back on.

Chair: The hon. Member from Borden-Kinkora.

M. MacFarlane: Thank you, Chair.

I noticed that this section includes support for the operations of the board. You may have already answered this indirectly as part of another question, but I'm just wondering, how much of the budget, whether it be under salaries or other items here, could be

specifically said to support the actual board of directors of Health PEI?

[3:40 p.m.]

Kellie Hawes: Within the Corporate Services budget for '24-25 fiscal year, the board of trustees budget is \$257,300.

M. MacFarlane: That's for the board of trustees budget?

Kellie Hawes: Yes.

M. MacFarlane: And is that the board of directors?

Kellie Hawes: Yes, we have that line item titled board of trustees.

M. MacFarlane: Okay, just making sure we're talking the same thing. What administrative support is made available through that line item for the support of the board, or trustees?

Kellie Hawes: There is one support position specifically for the board; one board administrative assistant.

M. MacFarlane: As part of the budgeting process, does the board – through the chair or through somebody else – report up to say they need more, they can do with less? How does it get determined?

Kellie Hawes: For their support?

M. MacFarlane: Yes.

Kellie Hawes: It's a great question. There's active involvement with Health PEI and the board. They are very involved in our broader budgeting process. We start our budgeting process – our management plan process – in September of each year, where we gather the basis of our information and work with our leaders and ask them to identify what their needs are.

Throughout that process, when we pull and compile that information together, we present that information to the board. So, there would be an opportunity for them, while they're reviewing that information with us, to also share with us any concerns that they have about their own funding.

But it is something that certainly could be asked of them, if they feel that they need additional supports.

M. MacFarlane: Of that, I don't have it open to the page you were at, but was it \$257,000? Was that the number?

Kellie Hawes: Yes, I'll get number for you again. Yeah, \$257,300.

M. MacFarlane: In addition to the administrative support, does that also include a training component?

Kellie Hawes: I might not have that level of detail with me. Oh, I do, actually. There's travel and training, administration, a value for supplies, and an allotment for professional contract services.

M. MacFarlane: What was that last part?

Kellie Hawes: Professional contract services.

M. MacFarlane: Okay. That's all that I had. Thank you.

Chair: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-West Royalty.

G. McNeilly: Thank you.

The CEO of Health PEI was into the standing committee. The next day, he went on the press and said that he was asked to pack up his stuff and leave. I'm just confirming with Health PEI, who had the authority at Health PEI to make that decision?

Chair: Member, if you could turn that into a budget question....

G. McNeilly: Okay. In Corporate Services, that's where the former CEO worked, correct?

Kellie Hawes: Correct.

G. McNeilly: When he was let go, did Health PEI – or whatever. He had a little bit of time left. Who asked him to leave, and did we pay out the rest of his contract?

Chair: So, if your question is if we paid out the contract, that is, I guess, a budget

question, but the first part of your question is not a budget question, if you want to rephrase the question.

G. McNeilly: I don't want to rephrase the question. I shouldn't have to rephrase the question. This is a budget question. I've tied it in three different ways to Sunday.

Chair: What is your specific budget question? Specific question to the budget.

G. McNeilly: I asked the question.

Hon. M. McLane: I mean, the quick and short answer, there would be no cost savings in the release of our CEO. It was literally two to three days, I think, from an obligation perspective. I'm not privy to that, but he might have had two to three working days remaining.

G. McNeilly: Minister, was he let go?

Hon. M. McLane: Pardon me?

G. McNeilly: Who let him go?

Hon. M. McLane: Is that a budget question?

Chair: Again, I'll remind you, hon. member. I understand your question, it's a very important question, but you have to tie into a budget. Your last question, you did. If you can tie it to a budget item....

[3:45 p.m.]

G. McNeilly: He was a staff member. This is a \$6 million budget line. We let somebody go. There's nothing more to tie into than asking that question. The minister just said he had literally two or three days left. Who made the decision to not let him finish out his two or three days?

Chair: Again, hon. member – no, you know what? We have ample opportunities. We'll have Question Period tomorrow. It's a great question to ask during Question Period.

G. McNeilly: So, you're blocking my question, Chair?

Chair: I'm not blocking your question.

G. McNeilly: You are blocking my question.

Chair: I'm asking you to rephrase your question to the budget.

G. McNeilly: The position's not there, Chair. There's nothing more – I just asked a simple question: Who had the authority to do that? Who had the authority to save the \$1,000 that we had on the last two or three days by not paying him? Who made that decision?

Hon. M. McLane: We did not save any – we fulfilled our contractual obligations to our CEO.

G. McNeilly: So, was he let go, minister?

Hon. M. McLane: He was on a contract, actually. He was contractually with us.

G. McNeilly: So, who at Health PEI has the authority to let the CEO of health go? We paid out his contract. That's a budget question, Chair.

Hon. M. McLane: I don't know how it applies to a spend or an expense. (Indistinct) my further answer, that we fulfilled our obligations to our former CEO. We did not realize any cost savings.

G. McNeilly: I'm not asking – I'm asking who has the authority to do it. This is the CEO of our health organization. I don't know who has the authority to do that.

Chair: Hon. member, I appreciate it. I've asked you a few times now to tie it into a budget question. You did once; the minister responded. If you have another question, I'll allow it; if not, I'm going to ask to carry this section.

G. McNeilly: No, we're not – we can't –

Chair: You're the only one on my list right now, hon. member.

G. McNeilly: Okay, perfect. I'll ask some more questions.

Minister, you just said it was two or three days. How much time did he have left in his contract?

Hon. M. McLane: I'm not sure.

G. McNeilly: I'm just confused. Do most people in Health PEI – if they're ending a contract, who makes that decision to end the contract? Who has the authority to end just general contracts? How does that work?

Hon. M. McLane: I don't sign employment contracts, sorry. I wasn't in the position when the CEO was hired, so I did not sign a contract at that time. I can't comment on a previous minister.

G. McNeilly: Thank you for that.

So, when you're looking at this section, it says this section supports the board of Health PEI. The CEO reports to the board of Health PEI. When was the board of Health PEI advised that the CEO would no longer be completing his term?

Chair: Alright, hon. member, I've asked you many times to tie it into the budget.

The hon. Member from New Haven-Rocky Point.

P. Bevan-Baker: Thank you, Chair.

How much did the premature departure of the previous CEO cost us?

Hon. M. McLane: Cost us? There was no severance, I don't believe. I can't comment on that.

Kellie Hawes: Yeah, I don't have that information with me here.

P. Bevan-Baker: It seemed like a very abrupt and sudden termination, and I know when the individual left, there were comments made about certain meetings that had been set up for the days or weeks that he had left in his tenure. I'm assuming he was simply asked not to come into work. Somebody else must have done that work.

You're saying there was no severance involved? He just reached the end of the contract, and the contract was paid out as previously arranged?

Chair: I think that's what the answer was before, to your previous question.

Hon. M. McLane: Yeah. Again, my understanding is he had literally two to three days of time to serve to fulfill his obligations to us.

P. Bevan-Baker: Okay. Those are all the questions I have on this.

Thank you, Chair.

Chair: Shall the section carry? Carried.

[3:50 p.m.]

Human Resources

“Appropriations provided for the provision of leadership, assistance and support to all divisions within Health PEI in the areas of human resource policy and planning, staffing, labour relations, and occupational health and safety. The division also provides payroll services, French language services, and integrated disability management.”
Administration: 38,500. Equipment: 5,700. Materials, Supplies, and Services: 1,668,000. Professional Services: 1,209,100. Salaries: 10,672,800. Travel and Training: 1,793,000. Grants: 930,000.

Total Human Resources: 16,317,100

The hon. Member from Borden-Kinkora.

M. MacFarlane: Thank you, Chair.

I guess similar to some of the questions I asked in the previous section, minister, just of the variances that we see, maybe starting with the administration line with \$30,000; went to \$87,800, and now we're budgeting for \$38,500. Is that an under budget, given what was actually spent?

Kellie Hawes: When we look at the forecast for administration, we had additional staff in this area to support human resources, so it was for additional telephones, delivering courier, general office supplies; so, really to support those additional staff within human resources.

When we look at the increase in the budget, it was a cost-of-living adjustment for all of those items accordingly, for office supplies, et cetera.

M. MacFarlane: Returning to a number closer to what was originally estimated isn't going to result in being in a deficit on that particular line?

Kellie Hawes: We will closely monitor that. We're not expecting it, but it will be closely monitored.

M. MacFarlane: The same question with respect to the next line under equipment.

Kellie Hawes: Under equipment?

M. MacFarlane: Equipment.

Kellie Hawes: Those were actually laptops for those additional staff, (Indistinct) equipment.

M. MacFarlane: Under the next line, if we keep going down, we see quite a variance in what was budgeted, what was actually spent, and then what we're planning for next. Can you speak to that, please?

Kellie Hawes: Absolutely. When we look at materials and supplies, I'll start with the increase in the budget. There was an investment here for administrative office space. Currently, if we look at the Charlottetown area, many of our staff were at Garfield space, and we've outgrown that. So, there's additional requirement for space, so there's an allotment of funding for additional space.

We're working with DTI in relation with that, and when it's determined where that space is and what that looks like, eventually that value for the lease will be transferred to the Department of Transportation and Infrastructure, as they're responsible for leases. We have it in our budget while we're going through that process, but we work very closely with them.

In addition to that, there's a scheduling system, and this is an annualized cost. It's a scheduling system for human resources, and the scheduling system will support the entire organization to be able to schedule staff accordingly, whether that's nurses (Indistinct), et cetera.

We have another annualized investment – again, continuing from last year – for human resources HR strategy development

programs. We had seven positions that started our last fiscal year, which are annualized, and they are also in the area of HR.

We have additional payroll staff as well, for the materials and supplies. So, that represents the increase in the budget.

When we look at the forecast value, there was a delay in the implementation of some of those investments – again, looking at when the budget was approved – and some of those start dates; those have continued and are in the process of being implemented now.

M. MacFarlane: There's a lot in there. Has that line grown to a point where it should be dissected out to include some of those additional spends? There was reference in your answer to the communications, to space issues, moving out of Garfield Street. Should some of that be pulled out into another place on the budget line?

Kellie Hawes: I'm not sure I understand the question.

[3:55 p.m.]

Chair: I won't put words in your mouth, but I think you were trying to ask if it should be more of an expansion or an added budget line. Is that kind of what you were getting at, hon. Member from Borden-Kinkora?

M. MacFarlane: Thank you.

Hon. M. McLane: It supports human resource activities. This space is related to human resource activities.

Kellie Hawes: Yeah. If your question is should that line for administrative office space be somewhere else, that's a great question. It could be in Corporate Services. We are going to RFP for that space. And it's space in addition to the Garfield space; it's not rather than, it's in addition to.

As that process moves forward, because the Department of Transportation and Infrastructure is responsible for all leases, it will, in the future, be transferred. We are responsible, as an organization, if there's a need for funding to support additional space, we are required to ask for it within our

budget and we would transfer it through an inner vote in the future.

Chair: Thank you. Is that clearer for you, hon. Member from Borden-Kinkora?

M. MacFarlane: It is, if I could just ask one more?

Chair: Yeah. One more, and then I'll put you back on the list.

M. MacFarlane: So, it is contemplated then that within this upcoming year, that additional space would be secured and the spend would occur?

Kellie Hawes: We're hoping so. It's certainly moving forward in relation to the RFP process.

M. MacFarlane: Okay.

Chair: Thank you, hon. member.

The hon. Member from Charlottetown-West
Royalty.

G. McNeilly: Thank you very much.

Just to pick up on that, that is important. I know that you see space all over. I know everybody is working hard. Do we need a backup plan at this point?

Kellie Hawes: I can speak to that if you want me to. Right now, many of us are back at Garfield Street, but many of you know that we lost the roof of Garfield Street in Fiona. We're gradually getting back there, but we do staff also located at the Atlantic Technology Centre, and there's a location on Queen Street. We're very much looking forward to getting back together with everybody and having secured space accordingly.

G. McNeilly: Absolutely. That's great. I know there was a lot of damage to that building and a lot of confusion all over the place. It's good to get everybody back. Hopefully, you'll have a better year this year. It's amazing how long it's taken, really, in the end.

Salaries are there. We're looking at, obviously – I know about the adjustments and everything, but can you talk about any

new positions that are important in this section?

Kellie Hawes: In this section, we have additional HR operational supports. I had mentioned the materials portion of seven additional HR positions that are annualized, so the final allotment of the funding from last year. Again, annualized HR and labour relations team; we talked about those positions last year. Employee health nursing, annualized, and HR strategy leadership and employee development programs, annualized.

G. McNeilly: I know it's been maybe a little bit more difficult to hire at Health PEI. How are we doing now in comparison to maybe last year? Are we getting closer to a full complement of staff at Health PEI?

Kellie Hawes: As it relates to HR?

G. McNeilly: Well, HR, yes, I guess. Just the supportive groups, I guess, within HR; not the actual on-the-grounds operation. Just thinking about management – maybe I should have asked that in Corporate Services, for corporate and human resources.

Chair: Sorry, hon. member, what specifically is your question?

G. McNeilly: How are we doing for staffing levels in the supportive – in Health PEI? There's a lot of positions. There were a lot of jobs going out. It just seems like we're short at Health PEI.

Kellie Hawes: Working hard every day, but when I look at this particular section, the forecast was \$8.23 million on a budgeted \$8.5 million, so we had significant success in recruiting to those positions.

Chair: Hon. member, I thank you. I think we are going to report progress.

[4:00 p.m.]

Hon. M. McLane: Mr. Chair, I move that the Speaker take the chair and the Chair report progress and beg leave to sit again.

Chair: Shall it carry? Carried.

[Hon. D. Compton in the chair]

Z. Bell: Madam Speaker, as Chair of a Committee of the Whole House having under consideration the grant of supply to His Majesty, I beg leave to report that the committee has made some progress and begs leave to sit again. I move that the report of the committee be adopted.

Speaker: Shall it carry? Carried.

Orders Other Than Government

Motions Other Than Government

Speaker: The hon. Member from Souris-Elmira.

R. Croucher: Madam Speaker, I beg leave to introduce a bill to be intituled *Cyberbullying Awareness Day Act*, and I move, seconded by the hon. Member from Morell-Donagh, that the same be now received and read a first time.

Speaker: Shall it carry? Carried.

Clerk: Bill No. 115, *Cyberbullying Awareness Day Act*, read a first time.

Speaker: Hon. member, do you have an explanation?

R. Croucher: Madam Speaker, the intent of this bill is to designate a day each year to raise awareness for the problem that is cyberbullying. I've requested that this day of awareness be held on April 25th of each year. This day is significant in that it is the day that someone very near and dear to me lost his life to cyberbullying.

It is my hope, through this day each year, we will have the opportunity to talk about cyberbullying and harassment in all forms, in hopes that tragedies like this never occur again.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Kensington-Malpeque.

M. MacKay: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

I would like to call Motion 38 to the floor.

Speaker: Shall it carry? Carried.

Committee Clerk (Lilley): Motion No. 38: Protecting our youth from online threats.

The hon. Member from Souris-Elmira moves, seconded by the hon. Member from Morell-Donagh, the following motion:

WHEREAS Island youth today face a unique array of pressures and challenges, both in person and online;

AND WHEREAS increasingly many Island youth are subject to victimization and exploitation schemes online;

AND WHEREAS one of the most vile and insidious ways in which our youth are targeted online is through sexual exploitation schemes;

AND WHEREAS these vile and insidious schemes can have a devastating effect on youth being targeted, sometimes with tragic consequences;

AND WHEREAS these events can leave lasting scars on victims, families and communities;

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the Legislative Assembly strongly encourage our educational, health and law enforcement partners to increase awareness through public education of the danger to Island youth from online activities such as sexual exploitation;

AND THEREFORE BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that this Assembly strongly encourage consideration by government of any legislative and enforcement measures, either independently or in conjunction with the federal government, to levy effective penalties that serve as a deterrent to this abhorrent practice.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Souris-Elmira.

R. Croucher: Thank you, Madam Speaker, and thank you for the opportunity to bring this motion forward.

Welcome to Harry's mom and dad, Carl and Barbie.

I cannot express how honoured but also saddened I am to bring forward this motion

today to highlight how important it is, now more than ever, to protect our youth from online threats. This is a topic that I feel must be addressed. Urgent action needs to be taken to protect our youth.

[4:05 p.m.]

Island youth today are at all an all-time high risk of experiencing online harassment, threats, exploitation, sextortion, and cyberbullying. This is an unprecedented scenario, and it is no different on the grounds at our Island schools, on our school buses, at the rink, on the soccer turf, within our communities, or in what used to be the safety of our own homes.

The pressures and challenges that Island youth are experiencing come at a time most crucial. This motion is a call to action that now is the time to do something, anything, to protect our youth.

Island youth are most often victims of sextortion, exploitation, or cyberbullying in online spaces. This is just one of the negative effects of the rise in social media and online presences.

As a father of three and as a paramedic, I have seen first-hand the extremes to which some of the online threats have reached. It is not easy to grow up in this world. It's even harder when you are a victim of bullying or exploitation on the internet.

I think it is fair to say the reality is that it is happening to our youth in this province every day, on every social media platform, while they are at school or once they get home for the day, and sometimes around the clock. This is the new world of technology we are in, and access to the internet makes it very accessible for those perpetrators to reach their victims.

I do not need to sugarcoat this. We are all adults. Some of us have children. I have no doubt, a lot of ourselves in here have been victims to online threats. But our youth need our support. They need our leadership to assist them in this nasty new trend of online threats, cyberbullying, and cases of sextortion.

As the motion says, some of the most vile ways our youth are being targeted online is

through sexual exploitation. This can look like many things, but the reality is that our youth are vulnerable.

The term “sextortion” – it's a word I never heard until recently. It is the act of exploiting someone by the use of sexual acts or images for financial gain in the form of blackmail. These sexual threats, or sextortion, are experienced by our young people in the form of harassment and blackmail.

These are incredibly unfortunate scenarios that our youths find themselves in. It is of no fault of the individual or of the parents for the situation. I want to emphasize how vital it is that we raise awareness of these scenarios.

I want to take this time I have today while speaking to this motion to highlight where this motion comes from for me. Like I said, I have three young adult children, and I have had many eye-opening experiences during my time as a paramedic.

Unfortunately, I want and I need this House to understand how deeply this affects our youth by using a real-life example. I say unfortunately because it saddens me to my core when I reflect on a very sad situation that my community, my family, and my friends have experienced.

On April 25th, 2023, between the hours of seven and 7:30 a.m., I received a phone call – a phone call that would change a lot of lives that day. In fact, it changed mine and my family's in ways that you cannot imagine.

I answered my phone that morning to a frantic call from a friend and a mom who had just lost her son to suicide. I raced out to their home. I was there ahead of any of my first responder colleagues. His mom, his dad, his sister, and his grandparents were all in a state of shock. I was also in shock.

[4:10 p.m.]

What I saw will never leave my memory, no matter how hard I try. What I felt, I still can't explain. It was a mix of disbelief, of confusion, of denial, of anger. I still remember those long moments and the

thought that this cannot be real. How could it be real?

I'm going to talk about this young man for a moment. His name is Harry Burke. He was a strong, handsome, charismatic, confident young man. He was kind, he was caring, devoted to his family and his community. He was easygoing, always took the time to have a conversation with you, and he was one of those kids that truly listened. That was Harry Burke.

He always gave you his undivided attention. You always felt a little better after talking with Harry. He was a patriot to the highest sense of the word; loved the military, loved his country. I heard many stories about how he wanted to go on and do something really great and make a difference in this world. I truly believe and I know in my heart that he would have. That was Harry Burke.

Harry excelled in school. He excelled in his social life. Everyone was Harry's friend. If you weren't, Harry went out of his way to make you his friend. He was nonjudgmental. He never discriminated. He made everyone feel loved and important. That was Harry Burke.

Harry was one of my son's closest friends. He spent many hours at my house. I still remember Harry's first attempt at a sleepover. He made it to perhaps 11 or 12 o'clock, and he came into our room and asked if we could take him home. He was scared and lonely for his mom and dad, or maybe it was the ghost stories that my son had told him; I'm not quite sure. But he had the softest heart. That was Harry Burke.

I guess that's where my confusion, my disbelief, and my denial came from on that day. How could a young man – who for all intents and purposes had everything going for him in this life – resort to ending his own life?

I learned it was from an isolated case of online bullying, and more specifically, sextortion. One isolated case that lasted not more than a 12-hour span, concocted by mean and vile people on the other side of our world, caused Harry to feel that he couldn't face the threats that were sent to him by a coward behind a computer screen.

There are no words to explain how much of a need there is to protect our youth and our families by raising awareness about the dangers of being online. Additionally, we need to put this on the perpetrators by levying effective penalties and surveillance to limit the number of people becoming victimized on the internet or in person.

I hope the Assembly today will support my motion and join me in fighting for stronger penalties for bullies, more awareness and supports for victims of online threats, and to ensure that our youth have the opportunity to grow and learn and experience life in a safe space: a space free of harassment, free of exploitation; a place where the word "sextortion" does not need to exist; a world where we build our communities to become resilient for the betterment of future generations and in preparation for the online activity that is undeniably growing larger and more profound, faster than we can keep up.

My goal today for this motion is that if it even helps one person, one family, from enduring what this family here today in the gallery has gone through, then I feel that this motion and this conversation was well worthwhile.

[4:15 p.m.]

I want to thank the seconder of this motion, the hon. Member from Morell-Donagh, and I want to thank the House for the opportunity to speak on something that is so important to me, and most importantly, I want to thank Harry's dad, Carl, and his mom, Barbie, for the courage in being here today.

Thank you, Madam Speaker. [Applause]

Speaker: Thank you, hon. member.

Seconding the motion, the hon. Member from Morell-Donagh.

S. MacEwen: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

I'm nine years in the Legislature and I don't know if I've been as nervous to stand up and speak to a motion, but proud to.

I rise today to second this motion put forward by the hon. Member from Souris-

Elmira. To start, I'd like to extend my sincere condolences to Harry's family. Thank you for allowing the Member from Souris-Elmira to tell this story and bring attention to this important issue.

There are no words that I could put together to describe how deeply this affects all of us. My son is your son's age. He knows the same friend groups; they hang out. This could clearly happen to any one of our families.

We've heard many times, in this Legislature and in public, the concerns related to online safety for our children and our youth in our province and our country. As our lives have shifted online, the reports of online incidents are rising. In 2022 alone, there were 160 incidents reported for every 100,000 Canadian youth. I can only assume that number increases.

Unfortunately, these online spaces are not always safe for our youth. Internet-related harassment or exploitation is too often the reality in the spaces our youth are lingering in. Additionally, sexual exploitation, in particular, is on the rise. Imagine how many cases go unreported. Eighty-two percent of online stalking cases in the last 10 years were youth aged 12 to 17.

The first clause states again that, "Therefore be it resolved that the Legislative Assembly strongly encourage our educational, health and law enforcement partners to increase awareness through public education of the danger to Island youth from online activities such as sexual exploitation."

It's hard to talk about the exploitation without talking broadly of the sharing of intimate images as well. It starts with open lines of communication with our family and those that are close to us.

I think, firstly, we need to be aware. It's happening. An acceptance of the new reality. Kids do it. It's common. We can tell them 100 times not to share images, but they do. Research shows that the sharing of intimate images is no longer atypical; it's common. These are impulsive teens who may not be able to understand the potential consequences of their actions.

So, how do we talk? The experts recommend when you're talking to your kids about sexting, about sharing intimate images, asking open-ended questions, avoiding judgment, coming at the conversation from a sense of curiosity, asking: "How is the sharing of images playing out at your school? Are kids talking about it?" Coming at it from a sense of curiosity, as I say.

We have to talk to our kids and to our society about the requesting of intimate images; the soliciting of photos. We have to talk about consent – that is a real, real big problem – true intended consent and what that means. I've heard members in this Legislature who are much better at talking about this stuff than me, too, explain about consent and what it means.

[4:20 p.m.]

Then, also about how to be safe online. The Province does have an excellent resource, frankly. It's called cybersafecarepei.ca. There are links there to talk about cyberbullying, what to do, how to talk about it – excellent resources. There's a really amazing video series online, easily assessable. I encourage people to go look through them, view them yourself, and then pick out the ones that you feel are appropriate, and watch them with your children, and then go back to that asking – curiosity – after.

My youngest son, my middle guy, was very lucky to have a police officer come in to speak to their sports team, to talk about the sharing of intimate images, talking about the consequences; in a relaxed space kind of thing, too. We quite appreciate that happening.

Our world is rapidly changing around us, sometimes much faster than we can get our head around. The fact that we are debating this motion today speaks to the urgency of the situation. I am proud to second this motion.

The Member from Souris-Elmira, for this past year, has spoken so glowingly of your son. The stories I've heard from your community are amazing. I just want to say thank you so much for allowing this story to be public, allowing the member to bring a

bill forward, to bring a motion forward. It's very difficult, I can understand that, but I hope that there is good that comes from this tragedy. So, thank you for doing it.

Thank you to the hon. member for being a good friend to that family; for your courage, as well, for being a first responder. I can't even imagine the awful situation.

Just thank you for being here today.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: Speaking to the motion, the hon. Leader of the Third Party.

K. Bernard: Thank you, Madam Speaker, and thank you to the mover and the seconder for bringing this really important conversation forward.

I thought I might be able to make it through the first few minutes, but we'll see how this goes.

I'd just really like to genuinely welcome Carl and Barbie here with us today.

As I consider cyberbullying – and bullying in general, but cyberbullying in particular – it's so relentless. Like it was said, there's no break from it. As long as you've got a device in your hand, people have access to pull those acts on you. Technology can be a wonderful tool, and it can also be a life-threatening tool.

I have added layers of emotion here, as I... Sorry.... As I consider my former role. Sorry.

I was a school counsellor with the Public Schools Branch and had a couple of students who were dealing with quite severe cyberbullying issues. As a school counsellor, there just weren't the tools available. We just don't have those tools. It's a fairly new thing, it's a complex thing, and there are no real tools to support people in trying to support youth going through this.

So, I would have to say, if somebody said pick a low point in your career, it would be helping youth through cyberbullying because it's relentless. It can happen at any time. Our youth are so vulnerable because of

this, and I often sit and think about some of the things that our youth are going through, and I'm so thankful that I grew up in a time before there were cell phones that were there for every single event in your life – the good, the bad, and the ugly – because they're going to get recorded and they're going to get shared.

It feels like no matter how much education we do, that's a message that's not getting through, or I guess young people don't see the role that they may play in that. And as you consider social media as a whole, as a parent, how overwhelming that is when you're not very techy – I don't consider myself very techy – and trying to monitor your children's social media, which is really important, and it's something that – again, the tools. As parents, we need the tools to be able to deal with it, and to support our children and their friends.

[4:25 p.m.]

I appreciate what the Member from Souris-Elmira said when he said “cowards behind a computer screen.” Whether that's how they want to see themselves or not, that's exactly what they are, because if they had to face a person and say it to their face, would they do that?

I don't want to take much time with this, but it got me to thinking about the *Intimate Images Protection Act*, which we passed in this Legislature, where the onus is on the person sharing the intimate images to prove that they had consent. So, we've kind of turned the tables. And of course, it goes deeper than that, but an important aspect of that, which was mentioned, is that of consent.

Consent is not something that is presumed, and consent is not something that is static. Consent can change at the drop of a hat. So, if someone has shared an image and you didn't explicitly say you didn't want it shared, you can change – at any point in time, you can change your mind on something. That's your right, and the person has to honour that if that's what they're choosing to do.

So, I guess I would just kind of wrap things up by saying I want to thank the members for bringing this forward. I think that the

only way that we work towards something as complex as cyberbullying is to talk about it, to send the message that we don't tolerate that, that there are severe consequences to that, and something that you have to live with for the rest of your life.

So, I guess just in wrapping up, I would say that I thank Carl and Barbie for sharing this story and allowing us to speak to this because as was mentioned by the hon. member, Harry wanted to do something great with this life, and I would argue that by having these discussions here today and by keeping this conversation, he is going to make a great difference.

Thank you for being here today, and thank you to the members for bringing that forward.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-West Royalty.

G. McNeilly: Thank you, Madam Speaker, and thank you, Morell-Donagh, for speaking so well to this motion.

Souris-Elmira, that was incredible what you did, and what you're doing, and what you're going to do.

I look at this and I think Harry was lucky to have you in his life. I want to thank you for – some things on Prince Edward Island, we'd like to put up a shield against. I think that you started to do that here today, to protect our children from this, and to bring the conversation to this floor of the Legislature.

Carl and Barbie, thank you for joining us here today. Your bravery and your memory of Harry will live on for sure here, and I can't wait to support the member for what he's going to do in the future.

Youth need our support. That was said in here. The thing that I'll take away from today is not only our conversation, Souris-Elmira, this morning; it was just the way you cared about Harry. I could see it. I could feel it. You said you always felt a little bit better after speaking with Harry. We talked, too, about keeping his name alive, and talking, and being there. Well, every time I think of Harry or hear his name, I'll always

remember Harry Burke. I'll do whatever I can to help you and to help fight against this.

Thanks again for being here. I appreciate it.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from New Haven-Rocky Point.

P. Bevan-Baker: Thank you so much, Madam Speaker, and thank you to those who have spoken before. Welcome, Barbie and Carl.

I'm not going to speak for long, but I wanted to say what a touching, poignant half hour this has been, and how knowing how sensitive and vulnerable children are and can be, that it's always the most beautiful, the most delicate ones, who are most deeply touched by things like this.

I never met Harry and I'm sad that I didn't because clearly, he was a very special young man. I think that the work that is going on here today and the bill that will be brought forward shortly will ensure that Harry's name is always remembered, and never forgotten.

I offer huge condolences to you both.

Thanks to the member who brought this forward and everybody who spoke to it.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

[4:30 p.m.]

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Social Development and Seniors.

Hon. B. Ramsay: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker, and I just want to thank the Member from Souris-Elmira for bringing this motion forward. I totally support it. It's a heartbreaking afternoon.

Carl and Barbie, thank you for coming in; my deepest condolences at the loss of Harry, your son. He was just a fabulous person. The member certainly spoke of him very highly on a number of occasions.

I just wanted to rise and thank you. Thank you.

Speaker: To close debate, the mover, the hon. Member from Souris-Elmira.

R. Croucher: I'm not sure what my role here is now, but while I'm standing, I want to thank everyone for their kind words and their thoughts. You're right, this has been a really tough half hour, but I'm really thankful that we were able to have this conversation, that we were able to bring this story forward.

I can't thank you, Carl and Barbie, enough for allowing for me to do that. I hope this is just the first of many conversations that are had concerning this.

Again, I hope that everyone can support this motion. I thank you all very much.

I would now like to call the vote on Motion 38.

Speaker: Hon. members, all those in favour of the vote by saying "aye."

Some Hon. Members: Aye!

Contrary minded, "nay."

Hon. member, your motion has passed unanimously.

[Applause]

Speaker: Hon. members, the hon. Member from Kensington-Malpeque.

M. MacKay: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

We would like to call Motion 68 to the floor.

Speaker: Shall it carry? Carried.

Committee Clerk: Motion No. 68:
Reviewing the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act.

The hon. Member from Rustico-Emerald moves, seconded by the hon. Member from Morell-Donagh, the following motion:

WHEREAS the *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act* is one of the most important laws in the province;

AND WHEREAS the legislation serves an important accountability function for citizens;

AND WHEREAS the volume and complexity of matters considered under this legislation continues to grow, sometimes leading to administrative backlogs and delays in citizens accessing services under the Act;

AND WHEREAS government periodically conducts reviews of the FOIPP Act, typically on a five year cycle;

AND WHEREAS there is a public interest in ensuring that the FOIPP Act is effective and meets the needs of Islanders;

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the Legislative Assembly refer the matter to an appropriate standing committee, tasked with soliciting public feedback on the legislation and report on any suggested changes.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Rustico-Emerald.

B. Trivers: Thank you, Madam Speaker. It's a pleasure to rise and be the mover of this motion.

One of the bedrocks of democracy, really, is freedom of information. I know as a member who's sat now – well, really, on three sides of the House, I suppose – in opposition, in government, and now on the backbench, I fully appreciate how important legislation like the *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act* is.

It's important for Islanders and all constituents to be able to access information that may, really, at the end of the day, not allow for the proper running of our province and the proper scrutiny of that. It's important to note that there's a reason we have the system that we do. It's held up for so long, and that's because there's a role – a very important role – for opposition to play, and a very important role for citizens of Prince Edward Island to play. The *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act* is key to that.

[4:35 p.m.]

Over the years, there have been various frustrations, I think, with the act. It includes things like having to pay a fee in order to get it, and on the other side, frivolous use of the act to put in hundreds of requests that may tie up the office. Of course, there's always limited resources in the ability to get back.

There's the matter of whether the process is indeed confidential, and it's supposed to be, but quite often there are rumours: "Oh, there's a... I think I know who submitted that," or this sort and the other thing.

So, it's really important that we get this right, and we strike that right balance of making sure that we have enough resources assigned, that the number of requests that go in don't overwhelm the system. That includes being financially prudent and making sure that if we do have to charge, we charge the right amount, and ensuring, of course – I believe the confidentiality of the process is extremely important.

One other party sometimes is overlooked, although they are very much in our face all the time as politicians and Members of the Legislative Assembly, and that's the media. This is one of the tools the media has at their disposal. They're probably one of the groups that use it the most. I think it's important that when any sort of review of this Legislature is done, that the media has their input as well.

It's interesting because obviously as Members of the Legislative Assembly, we're elected and we sit hopefully for four years at a time between elections, and we do have members that have had longevity and have sat for four terms, five terms, but when it comes down to it, there are those in the media who professionally cover the Legislative Assembly, and the FOIPP act is something that they use and they can see over the course of a career to help hold government to account.

So, it's my pleasure to move this motion. I really do ask that all the members consider it carefully and hopefully offer their support for it as well.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: Seconding the motion, the hon. Member from Morell-Donagh.

S. MacEwen: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

I'm honoured today to rise and second this motion put forward by the Member from Rustico-Emerald.

This motion was actually tabled back last year in November. I think it's an excellent idea. The motion puts forth a great recommendation that this Assembly refer the *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act* to a standing committee to solicit public feedback in an effort to ensure that the legislation is still meeting the needs of Islanders.

Transparency and open government are examples of values that are extremely important to me as an elected member. I heard the Member from Rustico-Emerald talk about being on all sides of the Legislature as well, and I was privileged to serve in opposition with him, and I do see the extreme value.

Otherwise known as the FOIPP act, this legislation serves as a source of accountability for government and to the public. As times changes, the needs grow, and it's our job to make sure that the FOIPP continues to serve people in all the ways it was originally intended; again, having it referred to a standing committee.

I remember before, getting briefings on exactly the whole FOIPP process, and I was quite ignorant to it. I remember many times in opposition being frustrated why we couldn't get access to information, and what was taking so long. It was quite educational to realize the entire process. The member would certainly know, from the time of being a minister as well, about that process and the coordination and everything that has to happen to get information out to whoever is looking for it.

[4:40 p.m.]

I think that going to a standing committee will give ways for them to bring in witnesses to talk about people's frustrations with this, to talk about what's going right, what's not going well. Quite frankly, I think the mover of the motion would appreciate hearing about better ways to have open data with government as well, and ways to limit the number of inquiries that are coming in.

It is certainly something that we had pushed for as an opposition; certainly pushed heavy by the member from Rustico. I've heard members of our current opposition parties, as well, talk to this. So, I think it's a way to talk about how we declutter that queue as well. What can we proactively release? It could be part of that conversation to a standing committee as well.

But like I said, going back to that educational thing for those who wonder why it takes so long or what's happening, certainly, it's a detailed process to get information back and quite useful when it does come back timely. The service is used extensively by Islanders to access information needed for many reasons, whether it be research, reporting, or just out of curiosity.

This motion is necessary so that the House can highlight the growing needs of the offices of this Legislature as well. Just recently, the provincial office has signed an agreement with other levels of government acknowledging the rights of the public to access any government-held information. The FOIPP act represents important pillars of government for transparent, accessible information and for a renewed trust in the work being done.

I want to thank the hon. member for bringing forward this motion. I'm looking forward to a discussion on this motion to hear what my colleagues have to say regarding this conversation, and hopefully the passing of this motion as well.

Let's serve Islanders as best we can through the actions that we do make in this House.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: Thank you, member.

Is there anyone else speaking to the motion?

The hon. Member from New Haven-Rocky Point.

P. Bevan-Baker: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

I appreciate the mover bringing this forward and the comments from both the mover and the seconder of this motion.

I think they both used the word "important" in their remarks, and indeed it is important for a number of reasons. It's important for the work of the media, as was mentioned. It's important for the work of opposition members, as many who now sit in government were at one time, and they would absolutely appreciate how critical access to information is in order for opposition members to hold government to account properly.

But I would add to that it's equally, perhaps even more important, for the public because democracy depends on openness and transparency and the ability of Islanders, in our case, to have access to information about how their government operates. If there is an opacity there, if there's a difficulty or barriers placed in getting that information, then democracy is not well served. So, for me, access to information actually strikes to the very heart of a healthy democracy and that's why it's so important.

It's so important that the *Freedom of Information Protection of Privacy Act* mandates that we have a review of the act every six years. I'm glad this motion is coming forward now, but it's actually a legislative, statutory mandate that we review this act, and we did it last in 2018, so we're now at the six-year limit where we have to do a review.

I remember I was involved in the last review, which was a very extensive process. The standing committee that was tasked with reviewing the act had many, many meetings and a lot of submissions, and also a bunch of written submissions, and a lengthy report back to the Legislative Assembly on what changes we would like to see. I'm looking forward to a similar process this time around.

I'm just going to read the section from the FOIPP act which mandates this review, and it's section 79, "Review." I'm quoting from the act here:

"Within six years after this section comes into force and every six years after that, a committee of the Legislative Assembly designated or established for the purposes of this section by the Legislative Assembly shall (a) undertake a comprehensive review of this Act; and (b)

within one year after beginning the review, submit a report on the review, including any recommendations for amendments, to the Legislative Assembly.”

So, this is a statutory requirement that falls to the members of this Legislative Assembly, and I’m really looking forward to doing this review.

[4:45 p.m.]

I have one concern, and it is that in this motion, Motion 68, it is specifically referring the work of this review to a particular committee, the Standing Committee on Health and Social Development, which is indeed appropriately charged with justice and public safety. The issue I have, though, is that those of us who sit on that committee will know how heavy the workload is. We cover enormous files, health being – I mean, you really don’t need to go any further than that.

I’m concerned that doing a thorough proper review which reflects the importance of the task at hand, sending it to this committee is perhaps not the best place for it to go. In fact, of the standing committees, I would argue it’s the worst place to go because of the workload associated with the Standing Committee on Health and Social Development.

I would like to make an amendment – hopefully, it will be considered a friendly amendment – to this motion. As I read from the *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act* a few minutes ago, the committee of the Legislative Assembly to whom this review would be sent can be either designated or established for the purposes.

My preference would be to establish a special committee specifically to do the work of reviewing the FOIPP act on this occasion. I say that because when we did the review six years ago, the committee work was spread out amongst more committees, there were more members who were available for committees at that time, and I think that, in order for us to do the best job possible, we need to create a special committee rather than send it to a standing committee.

I have an amendment that I would like to read into the record here.

Speaker: Okay.

P. Bevan-Baker: That Motion No. 68 be amended, in the operative clause, by the deletion of the words “refer the matter to an appropriate standing committee, tasked with soliciting public feedback on the legislation and report on any suggested changes.” and the substitution of the words “establish a Special Committee, consisting of two members from each recognized party, to undertake a comprehensive review of the *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act*, solicit public feedback on the legislation, and submit a report on the review to the Legislative Assembly within one year of beginning the review.”

Speaker: Member, do you have a seconder?

P. Bevan-Baker: Seconded by the Member from Borden-Kinkora.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: Anyone to speak to the amendment?

The hon. Member from Rustico-Emerald.

B. Trivers: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

I really appreciate the Member from New Haven-Rocky Point for bringing forward this amendment. He makes a very good point. Standing committees, especially with the changes that were made in 2019 with the advent of this administration to ensure that party representation is equal on standing committees, has meant the work that they do and the amount they meet is significant. Really, the work plan is quite full already, especially if indeed the appropriate standing committee would have been deemed health and social development.

I fully understand why this amendment is being made. It’s a big step, to start a special committee. I know here, sitting on the government backbench, what are we at now, eight? We’re eight members on the government backbench, and I look across, and in the third party, there are three

members, and in the official opposition, there are three.

So, I fully appreciate the member's willingness to commit two people to sitting on such a committee because it's a big time commitment. I know the Leader of the Third Party thought that maybe she was finally free of sitting on all committees all the time. This could be her chance to get back on another standing committee.

That said, it is going to be tight, I think, to fit in the work of an additional standing committee, but it would have been tight to fit in this work into an existing standing committee.

At this point, I believe I will support the amendment, without having thought it through for a long time, but it does appear very reasonable.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: Hon. members, we are getting copies of the amendment, but I think it's fairly straightforward. Anyone else to speak to the amendment?

We are getting copies, so we'll wait for the copies.

[4:50 p.m.]

Speaker: Hon. members, we all have copies? Reading through it?

Is there anyone to speak to the amendment?

All those in favour of the amendment, signify by saying "aye."

Some Hon. Members: Aye!

Speaker: Contrary minded?

Some Hon. Members: Nay!

Speaker: The amendment has passed.

Anyone else to speak to the motion?

The hon. Minister of Environment, Energy and Climate Action.

Hon. S. Myers: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

It's a good motion. I appreciate the member taking it forward. I've spent – I don't know; I'm in my 13th year here, so I've spent a lot of time in a lot of different roles in the Legislative Assembly, and I know it probably took us a while to really figure out the mechanism of freedom of information and how we could use it to our advantage.

Actually, the Minister of Tourism, when he worked in our office upstairs, became an absolute expert, so if you're looking for some tips on how to get the information you're looking for, I would say that he might be the foremost expert on Prince Edward Island on how to do requests.

There were a lot of things that we found probably frustrating when we were in opposition about it. What we found is as we got better at asking the question, we got better at finding the information. I guess that's like any other research you may go out and do; you might find that.

I do want to talk about the other side of it, though. I'll go back to our opposition days, but I'll talk you from this side, as the minister's side.

Sometimes I read stories about how the system is hard, and it's complicated, and that it costs too much. I always kind of feel like it's a tad inflammatory towards government that we're not providing information. I can tell you as a Cabinet minister, I would have no idea what gets FOIPPed in my department unless it's me or my emails or whatever, directly. I would have no idea what's being asked for. I have no idea what's being provided, and I don't know who it's going to, which is precisely how the act is supposed to work.

So, I think from a privacy protection side, that is being done now. Now, I do hear from people from time to time who are in private industry, who get notified by the FOIPP office that their information has been requested. I think there's a sign-off where they can ask to have information protected, or not released, or whatever.

So, I think that makes the process long, but I think that there's kind of a level of – I don't know if I'd say fear so much as sometimes people will reach out and say, "Hey, what's going on here?" and I'm like – just say yes

or no. I mean, the commissioner will now decide; it's kind of out of your hands. Those are really the only times I would ever know that the process is even happening.

From time to time, I will be doing a story with a reporter, and they might mention a further story or a different story they're doing, and they're waiting for documents that they FOIPPed. I'm like, "You can have them. We will give them to you." We don't withhold anything. I consider the work I do in the public domain, so I'm always like, "You want those? Here, have at it," and we release them.

[4:55 p.m.]

When I was Minister of Transportation, I was really adamant that we post as much stuff on the website as possible that we had. As part of our implementation of the *Water Act*, we have the most information available ever on water on Prince Edward Island. You can go right now and see who's doing what. There are gauges and there are all kinds of complicated things, even in the open data stream, that people are able to analyze.

I think that's a wonderful thing so that the people can really have a bird's-eye view of what government is doing or how that piece of legislation is actually working for the people, or not for the people, if that happens to end up being the case; that people have an opportunity to know.

Our wind data is all online. You can go to our wind energy page at any time and all the gauges are there. You can see how much we're producing. You can see what the total load of the Island is, what percentage we're producing towards the total load, what's being exported off the Island – which is a question I get a lot about, why is the power going off the Island? It's because we don't own it all.

I think that those are the things that are important to have. I think it's important to put the information out there.

I probably haven't been as diligent in Environment. A lot of the stuff, because it's so regulatory based – I remember the act that Lynne Lund had brought forward. We worked with her. I can't remember the name of it now.

P. Bevan-Baker: Environmental Bill of Rights.

Hon. S. Myers: Environmental Bill of Rights. And we were like, yeah, we'll post all that stuff online. I'm still very much in favour of pursuing that. I don't know if she ever brought that back for third reading. I don't believe it came, but I'm like, yeah, why shouldn't you know what's going on, particularly where we're involved? I don't really have any opposition to that.

But the problem for me becomes not wanting to break the privacy act. The issue that I'm going to have in releasing some of these things is that the privacy act has to be considered. I can't just say that the Member from Rustico-Emerald has applied for a permit that requires environmental work without at least getting his permission to do so. Some of those things get a little bit complicated when your department is a regulatory body where you're dealing with individuals and individual properties and those types of things.

I think it's a good project for somebody in my department to go back and look through and say, "What are the things that we can do? What are the things that we can just put on that website?" I know Katie, who was with me in Transportation, who took care of posting all the stuff, is now still with me in Environment doing my communications work. I know Katie listens; at least when I'm up here, I think she tunes in. But I'll go back and ask Katie just from our perspective, can we do a scan of our department and say, "What are the things that we can just put up online so that people don't have to FOIPP them?" And that's not to take away from this motion. I think it's just to help the public.

This what I said to a reporter the last time it came up. I said, "We'll give you the information. If you think it's not true, FOIPP it. If you think I didn't provide you with true information, then FOIPP it." But I consider the stuff that we have as accessible. We try to share everything unless we're in a position where we think that we're going to break another act by doing it.

Now, when we were in opposition, I didn't feel like we had that. I don't feel like anybody was trying to give us better access

to information. I think it was quite the opposite sometimes.

One of the ones that we had volumes of information on was e-gaming. The information that we had was not that easy to understand. In the absence of knowing what else to ask for, we were asking for information and coming up with pieces of information, and then left to try to sew together what we were missing in the middle, or what the parts were that were in the middle. We kind of had an incomplete tapestry of e-gaming.

[5:00 p.m.]

But in the end, the pieces all kind of came together –

An Hon. Member: Call the hour.

Speaker: The hour has been called.

Hon. member, would you please adjourn debate with a seconder?

Hon. S. Myers: Madam Speaker, I adjourn debate.

Speaker: Secunder.

Hon. S. Myers: The Minister of Transportation.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Kensington-Malpeque.

M. MacKay: I move, seconded by the hon. Member from Rustico-Emerald, that this House adjourn until Friday morning at 10:00 a.m.

Speaker: Shall it carry? Carried.

Have a good evening.

[The Legislature adjourned until Friday, March 15th, at 10:00 a.m.]