

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Title: Tuesday, April 4, 2006

1:30 p.m.

Date: 06/04/04

[The Speaker in the chair]

head:

Prayers

The Speaker: Good afternoon.

Let us pray. In our mind's eye let us see the awesome grandeur of the Rockies, the denseness of our forests, the fertility of our farmland, the splendour of our rivers, the richness of our resources, the energy of our people. Then let us rededicate ourselves as wise stewards of such bounty on behalf of all Albertans. Amen.

head:

Introduction of Guests

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Curry.

Mr. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is my pleasure today to introduce five people from CAUS, the Council of Alberta University Students, who I had the honour of meeting with earlier this morning. In the public gallery today are Jen Smith, Samantha Power, Jason Blades, Duncan Wojtaszek, and Gaurav Singh. If you would please stand and accept the traditional warm welcome of this House.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have two classrooms to introduce to you and through you to all hon. Members of this Legislative Assembly. This group is visiting the Legislative Assembly today from St. Gabriel school, and the group consists of 40 individuals with two teachers, Mrs. Svetlana Sech and Miss Kandise Perry. Also in attendance today are three teacher assistants, Mrs. Louise Depuis, Mrs. Anu Khurana, and Mrs. Tammy Toronchuk. They're in the public gallery, and I would now ask them to please rise and receive the warm traditional welcome of this Assembly.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

Mr. Agnihotri: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my great honour to rise and introduce to you and through you to the members of the Assembly 38 brilliant students from Holy Family Catholic school from my riding accompanied by their teachers, Mrs. Beth Devlin, Mr. Karol Wawrykiewicz, Mrs. Marlene Norsworthy, and the parents are Renée Laporte and Mrs. Theresa Gibeau. They're all seated in the gallery behind me, and I want to thank them for coming to the Legislature. I request them to please rise and receive the traditional warm welcome of the Assembly.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Strathmore-Brooks.

Dr. Oberg: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It's a distinct pleasure to introduce to you and through you today a group from Rosemary, Alberta. Before I introduce them, I'll just draw to your attention that this is the 14th year that Mr. David Blumell has brought his school students to the Legislative Assembly, and it's the 14th time that I have introduced them. The teachers are David Blumell and Laurel Nickel with parent helpers Scott Simpson, who also happens to be the mayor of Rosemary, as well as Harold Unruh, Marina Petker, Mary Laforest, Chris Dyck, Pam Byers, and Chad Fika. I would ask them all to please rise and receive the warm welcome of the Legislative Assembly.

head:

Oral Question Period

The Speaker: First Official Opposition main question. The hon. Leader of the Official Opposition.

Water for Life Strategy

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In Alberta a combination of economic growth, population increase, years of drought conditions, and climate change has raised dire warnings about the sustainability of our water supply. Today a renowned water expert is voicing his concern that if we don't put a water conservation plan in place immediately, critical water shortages will occur in the near future. My questions are to the Minister of Environment. Will the minister commit to full implementation of the Water for Life strategy now, backed by legislation and full funding rather than the piecemeal approach that's occurring?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and I thank the hon. member for the question. As Dr. Schindler from the University of Alberta pointed out yesterday, the Alberta government's Water for Life strategy is perhaps the most progressive water strategy in all of Canada. I want to commit to all Albertans that with this blue gold that the hon. member talks about, we will endeavour to continue to carry out the good work on our Water for Life strategy with the water councils and watershed councils that we have across Alberta because that is so important. Information is power when it comes to protecting such a valuable resource that the hon. member has mentioned.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: when will he lift this progressive plan off the paper and put it into action with full funding?

Mr. Boutilier: I want to thank the Minister of Finance for the last budget, where she committed \$52 million for infrastructure. Fifty-two million dollars. As the hon. member has mentioned – and I still have that gleam in my eye – about a hundred million dollars a year for an environmental endowment and such important initiatives as Water for Life. I do know this. This government is committed to the strategy, we are acting on this strategy, and we will continue to act on this strategy in terms of protecting and sustaining the water that we enjoy in this province.

The Speaker: The hon. leader.

Dr. Taft: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. A gleam in his eye isn't enough to protect the water of this province. When is the Water for Life strategy going to be fully funded?

Mr. Boutilier: Mr. Speaker, as we speak it is being funded. It will continue to be funded today, tomorrow, and the next day because it's so important to us.

[Standing ovation as Premier Klein entered the Chamber]

The Speaker: Second Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford.

Fee-for-service Contracts

Mr. R. Miller: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Another day, another skeleton. Public accounts documents from 2004 show that the Premier's former chief of staff, Rod Love, received \$46,000 from Alberta Finance. Access to information requests regarding this contract failed to show adequate documentation for the services received. My questions are for the Minister of Finance. Can the Finance minister tell us what reports Rod Love Consulting completed for the Department of Finance in order to receive 46,000 taxpayer dollars?

Mrs. McClellan: Well, Mr. Speaker, I can't tell him off the top of my head exactly what they all were, but I can tell you that there was a significant amount of advice that was provided verbally, some probably in written form. But I would remind the hon. member that when we contract for consulting services, much of the advice you receive might be strategic, might be in written form but quite often will be in verbal form as well. I will undertake to review this for the hon. member and respond.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. R. Miller: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Given that access to information documents failed to show any reports, studies, or significant frameworks for services provided by Rod Love, how can Albertans know that they got value for their hard-earned taxpayer dollars?

1:40

Mrs. McClellan: Well, Mr. Speaker, I think Albertans can know they got value for their hard-earned dollars when they look at the success of this province and what we have achieved. So advice that we've received from this consultant and others that help us formulate our policy and, more importantly, carry it out is invaluable to the people of this province.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. R. Miller: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Would the minister have us believe that it is just a coincidence that Alberta Finance toughened up its contract policy just months after these access to information requests were filed?

Mrs. McClellan: What I would say to the hon. member and to all members is that I think you should be very, very encouraged by the fact that we review all of our contracting policies on a regular basis, and if there are ways that we can make those contracting policies better, we do. We did do a review of our contracting policies and others. We've made some changes in those, and I think the policies are very good. But I can say this, Mr. Speaker. That won't be the last review of the contracting policies. We will continue to do that as the province grows and evolves.

The Speaker: Third Official Opposition main question. The hon. Member for Edmonton Gold Bar.

Sale of Edmonton Ring Road Land

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. After purchasing 503 acres of land in the Edmonton restricted development area for \$10.2 million in 1987 from the late Joseph Shekter, Ernie Isley, the Progressive Conservative public works minister at the time, stated: if you were to talk to some of the affected property owners in those

RDA's, I don't think you'd get too many of them who would use the word "generous" with respect to my dealings. My questions are to the Minister of Infrastructure and Transportation. Does this Progressive Conservative government now consider the sale of 160 acres of prime real estate in southwest Edmonton by Ernie Isley for \$2 in 1988 to the late Joseph Shekter to be generous or very generous?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Lund: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Of course, as we all know, this transaction happened back in 1987-88. We are continuing to research it. In due course, as we get all of the information, we will be able to share it with the House. I suspect that there is another side to the story as well.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again to the same minister: can the minister explain why this government sold an additional 100 acres of prime residential land at the same time in southwest Edmonton for \$1, bringing the total now to 260 acres for \$3. Did Mr. Shekter hit the jackpot?

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, obviously, the hon. member is bringing up another sale that happened back in the '80s. If he would be kind enough to give me the information as to the location, we would then be able to expedite the finding of all the facts.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It will be tabled at the appropriate time.

Again to the same minister: were any of these parcels of land sold to the late Joseph Shekter for \$3 pledged as security to refinance the West Edmonton Mall in 1994?

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, I have to repeat that this is virtually 20 years ago that these transactions occurred. Certainly, we don't have at our fingertips the information that the hon. member is asking for, but we are looking for it.

Health Care Reform

Mr. Mason: Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Health and Wellness is pushing for private, two-tier health care with no regard for the impact on Albertans. The greatest harm of all will fall on those Albertans who live in small towns and rural areas, yet the minister has failed to answer concerns that this will leave rural areas with fewer doctors as they leave to make more money in the big cities. To the minister: other than vague personal guarantees and other trust me types of lines what, specifically, is going to keep doctors in small towns and rural communities if the third way proposals are adopted?

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, fundamentally the one important thing to remember is that we indicated clearly in the policy document that we would not be moving on any access proposal if, in fact, it would in any way imperil a strong public health system. We indicated that whatever access proposal came forward would have to make sure that it did not damage the public health system, so that doesn't matter if it's in Lloydminster, in Grande Prairie, in Lethbridge, or in Calgary.

Mr. Mason: Mr. Speaker, what research has the minister or her department conducted to show the impact of the third way on rural health care?

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, the policy framework and our discussions of it have gone out to a number of people, and we've had considerable response from rural Alberta. I think the most important thing that we can do is follow up on the initiatives in the rural physician action plan to look at some of the other things like the medical bursary program, the endeavors that we've got under way with the minister of advanced learning to make sure that we are doing a recruitment in a proper way. We have been looking recently at funding for international medical graduates so that we can train more specialists and place them in other parts of Alberta. The alternative relationship plans with physicians enable us to draft business plans and agreements with physicians that support them being located in places where there are vacancies.

Mr. Speaker, we are making every effort on the side of the workforce initiative to make sure that we have the appropriate number of staff. In Calgary recently in discussions about the third-way policy Calgary, for example, identified that until at least 2010 they're quite optimistic that they can fill their spots. That's a good-news story because then we're less likely to lose physicians from rural or outposts to fill up the urban spaces.

So, Mr. Speaker, there is a plan in place. We are working on workforce on a number of fronts. Stay tuned. We'll continue to do that.

Mr. Mason: Sounds like a plan to move doctors to Calgary, Mr. Speaker.

Given that the minister has failed to do her homework and cannot tell us the impact of the third way on rural and small-town health care, will she now do the right thing and withdraw the third-way proposals altogether?

Ms Evans: No.

Physician Supply in Rural Alberta

Mr. Mitzel: Mr. Speaker, in my constituency the Palliser health region is experiencing among other specialist shortages a shortage of anaesthetists. The regional hospital in Medicine Hat requires up to six of these specialists, and it's had to cancel over 200 surgeries over the past four weeks until more anaesthetists are recruited. My question is to the Minister of Health and Wellness. Could this minister explain how this problem is being resolved?

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, this was a very unfortunate situation in Medicine Hat where we had illness, a personal leave, and a sudden resignation. When this occurred, at least half of the residents that were anaesthetists were not available to perform their duties. We've been working with the Palliser region, the health region in Medicine Hat, to resolve these issues.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Mitzel: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My next question is also to the Minister of Health and Wellness. Can the minister outline what is being done to deal with the shortage of medical specialists, including anaesthetists, especially in meeting the health needs of rural Alberta?

Ms Evans: Well, Mr. Speaker, the idea of a pool for physicians,

both for rural family practitioners and specialists, is in place in Alberta, and that's one of the things that we've been evaluating. The Alberta Medical Association specialist locum program makes it easier for specialists to locate into regions when something like this occurs: when anaesthetists leave suddenly, for a placement, then, for five days up to a number of weeks. We are looking at this very favourable evaluation of this locum program to be able to assist in circumstances like we have found ourselves in in Medicine Hat.

Mr. Speaker, I've given a number of other answers on the previous question that might accommodate some of the responses.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

1:50

Mr. Mitzel: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To the same minister: what is Alberta and Alberta Health and Wellness doing to train, recruit, and retain more medical students?

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, I think it was evident in the budget this year that there were more physicians being educated at the University of Calgary. In the provincial nominee program since April 2002 280 foreign-trained physicians have been put in place. Eleven of these have been anaesthetists, and I understand that Palliser health region has availed themselves of some of these specialists.

Mr. Speaker, beyond getting the active plan for workforce in place, we're working with health regions to see if we can level the playing field a bit, especially in rural Alberta, so that access to physicians or attracting physicians from out of country, trained professionals to come in and fill spots, is something that will be more smoothly undertaken without the pullback from other urban areas to conflict with their progress.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark, followed by the hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar.

Métis Hunting Rights

Mr. Tougas: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On March 10 Provincial Court Judge D.C. Norheim found a Hinton area Métis man guilty of hunting without a licence. Judge Norheim found that the man could not claim the right to hunt without a licence under the interim Métis harvesting agreement. In his ruling the judge said, "I recognize that this defendant and others may have been misled by the actions of the province in stipulating in the Interim Métis Harvesting Agreements that any Métis would be able to harvest wildlife anywhere in the province." My question is for the minister of aboriginal affairs. With the harvesting accord now in shambles, what does the minister tell Alberta's Métis population now? What are they supposed to do?

Ms Calahasen: Mr. Speaker, I'm aware of the decision that was rendered. At this point we can't discuss it because the appeal period has not elapsed.

Mr. Tougas: This dates back to March 10.

How does the minister respond to the judge's ruling that "the IMHA purports to extend to all Métis in the province, for all areas of the province, the rights defined by the Supreme Court in *Powley* . . . It cannot do so." How do you respond to that?

Ms Calahasen: Well, Mr. Speaker, once again I cannot respond to what's going to happen or could happen, and as a matter of fact, if the time frame hasn't elapsed, I cannot discuss anything relative to that.

But on that note, let me just talk about the Métis. First of all, they come at me saying that they did not support anything to do with Métis, and now all of a sudden here they are. They can't suck and blow at the same time, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Tougas: That's not true at all. Never said any such thing.

Now, since the minister has clearly botched the writing of this accord, will the minister now hand this important negotiation to another of the signatories of the agreement, Sustainable Resource Development or Community Development, who might actually get it right?

Ms Calahasen: Well, Mr. Speaker, I'll have the Justice minister speak on this issue if he wishes, but let me just talk about process. He is taking the lead on this issue. [interjections] Well, either you want to listen or you don't.

The Speaker: The hon. minister has the floor.

Ms Calahasen: Just so that you know, Mr. Speaker, let me first of all talk about what has been going on in terms of the issue. We are working with the Métis, and it will be decided in terms of when the information comes forward from the MLA committee.

On the IMHAs, Mr. Speaker, it wasn't only the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development that was involved in the negotiation. There was also Sustainable Resource Development. There was also the Minister of Justice's department who was involved. It was not only the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, and I want to make sure that every Albertan understands that because the misinformation that has been given by a lot of people is really wrong. I think that, first of all, it's important for Albertans to really understand what has been going on.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Drayton Valley-Calmar, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Currie.

Internet Luring Related to Children

Rev. Abbott: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. My questions today are for the Minister of Justice. It's been reported that adult men are using the Internet to lure young girls into sexual conversation and invitation. Recently our hard-working police forces have found some of these men and charged them, but it seems that the charges are not holding up in court. Will the minister strengthen Alberta's laws so that we can put these child molesters in jail?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice and Attorney General.

Mr. Stevens: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm aware of the specific case that the hon. member is referring to. It has just recently been decided, and the Crown prosecutor is currently reviewing a potential appeal of the matter. So stay tuned. We'll be able to tell you more about that particular case as we go forward.

The provisions under which these charges are laid are Criminal Code, which is a federal jurisdiction, and therefore ultimately we have to work with the federal government, as we do, to make changes to the Criminal Code or suggest changes, and that's an ongoing process.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Rev. Abbott: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thanks for that answer. Given that we have a new, common-sense Conservative

federal government, will the minister now lobby the feds to raise the age of consent to 16 so as to help curb the Internet child luring?

Mr. Stevens: Mr. Speaker, the hon. member would be happy to hear that even when we had a Liberal government, this government lobbied for an increase in the age of consent to 16, and we will continue to work towards that goal, hon. member.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Rev. Abbott: Well, thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am happy to hear that, but what else can the Department of Justice do to assure the parents of Alberta that their kids are safe when using the Internet?

Mr. Stevens: Your question raises a very important matter because the Internet has given rise to a new breed of crime. Alberta was the first jurisdiction in Canada to have a special prosecutor. We did that in I believe February of 2003, and since that point in time our prosecutors work closely with the police to very good success. I believe it was two weeks ago that there was a press conference in Chicago indicating that a national and international ring of child pornographers was busted. I can tell you that this particular budget that we have has provision for additional Crown prosecutors, some of whom will be put into this particular area of specialty.

Lastly, I can tell the hon. member that while there are an increasing number of cases, the success ratio of our prosecuting team is at present in excess of 90 per cent, which is an incredible success ratio in the area of prosecution of crime.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Currie, followed by the hon. Member for West Yellowhead.

Affordability of Postsecondary Education

Mr. Taylor: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Unlike their predecessors, the elected student leaders I met with again today are determined to convince this government that enough is enough. Tuition and debt loads are too high, and the cost of postsecondary education is a genuine barrier for too many students. I along with these students want to make sure that the government delivers on the Premier's promise that the new tuition fee policy will be the most affordable in the nation. To the Minister of Advanced Education: given that the draft tuition policy has apparently been delayed again until May and that he may not be the Minister of Advanced Education after June 1, could he please tell us what becomes of the draft policy and his promised consultation process?

The Speaker: Hon. minister, a bit hypothetical: presumably, maybe, who knows?

Mr. Hancock: I was just going to say, Mr. Speaker, that the presumptions are invalid.

Mr. Taylor: Can the minister perhaps guarantee that under the new policy tuition fees in Alberta will be lower than they are today? A simple yes or no will suffice.

Mr. Hancock: No, Mr. Speaker. It would be impossible to make that guarantee.

Mr. Taylor: Is the minister prepared today to say no to the flawed income contingent loan repayment schemes that may ease repayment but which actually increase total costs for students?

Mr. Hancock: Mr. Speaker, I've always found it prudent that when you ask knowledgeable people to form a committee and to examine all the possible options that might be available and to make recommendations about which ones are most appropriate for students in our province, to make sure that affordability is key, that every Albertan has the opportunity to access an education and can afford that education, one ought not to make presumptions about the conclusions until they've actually got the recommendations.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for West Yellowhead, followed by the hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity.

Softwood Lumber Trade Dispute

Mr. Strang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Albertans are heartened to see the glimmer of hope that the long-standing Canada/United States softwood lumber dispute may be on its final legs. Last week President Bush and Prime Minister Harper discussed the softwood lumber dispute at the summit meeting in Cancún, Mexico. Over the weekend the U.S. ambassador, David Wilkins, predicted that the dispute would be resolved before the year-end. My question is to the Acting Minister of International and Intergovernmental Relations. Does the Alberta government see these developments as an indication that an end to this dispute is finally in sight?

2:00

Ms Calahasen: Mr. Speaker, first of all, this is really a long-standing dispute. I wish I could give an easy answer, but that's not basically what's happening. We welcome, however, President Bush's intervention in this respect. I know that Albertans and the Alberta government will continue to work with the Canadian government, with other provinces and, of course, industry to prepare for the resumption of negotiations, and I know that the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development is also involved to find a solution.

Mr. Speaker, Alberta's bottom line is this, and it's unchanged. Industry must be guaranteed access to the U.S. markets, and number two, duties collected by the U.S. must be returned to Canadian industry. In the end any resolution of the dispute depends largely on the U.S. industry's willingness to settle this dispute.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Strang: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My first supplementary question is to the Minister of Sustainable Resource Development. Yesterday the World Trade Organization issued a softwood ruling against Canada. What significance does this ruling hold for the Alberta forest products producers?

Mr. Coutts: Mr. Speaker, the World Trade Organization ruling does not weaken our resolve to work with industry for a fair and just settlement. It does not stop us from continuing to insist on Alberta getting the \$500 million in duties back to Alberta and into the economy. Yesterday's decision did not rule on the validity of the duties. It focused on the formula alone. That's all it did. The NAFTA panel has already agreed and determined that the duties are not justified. When I speak with my federal and provincial counterparts on forestry in the upcoming weeks, I will ensure that the concerns of the Alberta forest industry are brought forward to help solve this dispute.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

Fort McMurray Infrastructure Needs

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The citizens of Fort McMurray are being sacrificed by this government's insatiable appetite for unsustainable, without infrastructure support, oil sands extraction. While billions of dollars in royalties flow south, scarce dollars remain or return. This message was echoed by residents at their doorsteps and in a series of our Liberal caucus outreach meetings last week in Fort Mac. My first question is to the Acting Minister of Infrastructure and Transportation. How much has the much-needed upgrading of highway 881 been shelved completely or put on hold while the twinning of head-on highway 63 takes place?

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, there is good progress being made on highway 881, and none of it has been put on the shelf. There are sectors, the overlay, that are going to be completed this year and sections that are going to be completely restructured this year.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Chase: Thank you very much. Fort McMurray people will be pleased to hear that.

My second question is again to the acting minister. What is your ministry doing to address Fort McMurray residents' concerns about the ever-increasing volume of industrial traffic going through the centre of the city, with the potential for toxic spills?

Mr. Lund: Mr. Speaker, certainly, this is a big issue for Fort McMurray. There are a number of things that we're doing. We're looking at how more traffic could go around. We're also looking at the possibility of some rail service that would go across the river and up into some of those areas. That, of course, would alleviate a lot of the heavy traffic that is currently in the centre of the city.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My final question is to the Minister of Seniors and Community Supports. Given that the sons and daughters of long-time Fort McMurray residents as well as teachers, nurses, RCMP, and municipal employees cannot afford to buy or rent a home in Fort McMurray, what is your ministry doing to make affordable housing available?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As I've addressed in the Assembly before, we have worked hard in Fort McMurray to ensure that we have a thousand acres of land come available on the market in 90-day increments. We have one parcel that has been completely through the request for proposals, which we anticipate will provide over 2,000 housing units, possibly more, as we work with planning with the municipality of Fort McMurray because of the increase in the density of that area. We are currently in the process of a second RFP, and I will speak more to that in my estimates today.

The Speaker: That's correct. The hon. minister's estimates are up today, and it's usually not normal to raise a question.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs.

Health Care Reform

(continued)

Mr. Martin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. After meeting with skepticism and outright opposition from average Albertans, the Minister

of Health and Wellness finally found a receptive audience last week at a Calgary Chamber of Commerce luncheon cosponsored by Radiology Consultants, which runs a for-profit MRI and CT scan clinic. The minister finally found a group who agreed with her ideas. My question is to the minister. Why did the minister go through a sham consultation process, in which she claimed that no good ideas for fixing public health care were brought forward, if she intended to only listen to groups, like the Calgary Chamber of Commerce, which agreed with her preconceived notions?

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, at some point in this Legislature I hope to table the list of people that I've met with across Alberta. They include seniors, community leagues. They include several people that gathered one day in Forest Lawn from various parts of the community: Millican, Ogden, a number of other points. They include people who represent municipalities as mayors and reeves. They include people who represent the professions – the physicians, the optometrists – people who came in and discussed glyconutrients with me. There is a broad range of people that have made representation.

In the case of the Calgary Chamber of Commerce, Mr. Speaker, they provided a release in February that talked about the third-way initiatives. They invited me to their health committee. They are the only chamber of commerce that has a health committee, I believe, across Alberta for sure, but it seems to me that it goes much broader than that. They had focused on the third way from a number of initiatives. So I met with them, and I was invited to speak about the third way at their luncheon.

Mr. Martin: Mr. Speaker, the point that I was making to the minister: given that she indicated to them that there were no good ideas previously from all her consultation, will she admit that the whole consultation process was just political window dressing and that she's only listening to people like the Calgary Chamber of Commerce privatizers who happen to agree with her?

Ms Evans: Mr. Speaker, what I said – and I should clarify. I didn't say that there were no good ideas. I said that in terms of sustainability, in terms of the kinds of things that would ensure that our health care system would go on for decades to come, in terms of innovative things that would look over the hill and challenge us to a higher level of thinking, in terms of things that would improve accessibility and be a departure from what we've provided in the provincial health policy framework, there were very few. Some of them that did come forward that were good ideas reflected on different ways to train, different ways to progress on prevention and wellness strategies, and different ways to build upon something that we're already doing, which is building upon the access proposals to expand to cardio, cancer, cataracts, et cetera.

Mr. Martin: Mr. Speaker, the minister just talked about the consultation. If she's truly – truly – listening to Albertans, will she now agree to pull the proposals on private, two-tier insurance and doctors working in both systems and concentrate instead on proposals to make the public system more sustainable, like a pharmaceutical savings agency and primary care reform?

Ms Evans: As part of Getting on with Better Health Care, that was published last July, the pharma strategy and a number of other strategies are already in place and are working. They are not as complete as they will be, but we're making significant progress in the numbers of ministries that are cosponsoring support for pharma purchases. We're doing a number of things already, Mr. Speaker,

that we've launched that are part of the health policy framework on areas that people have agreed on.

In terms of why we would still look at doctors opting in and opting out and working in part and what we define as the middle ground, I think it's clear that what we want to do is protect the public system, reinforce the importance of people serving the public system in terms of on call and extra supports. We don't want to lose those physicians, Mr. Speaker, to the private system.

I would be very pleased to sit and explain this to people and the detail of how we intend to advance that if, in fact, we move forward on this particular initiative.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-McClung.

2:10 Criminal Justice System

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Following some high-profile criminal cases in Alberta, Albertans are starting to be concerned with bail being issued to the accused. Would the Minister of Justice and Attorney General outline the judicial guidelines under which our judges and justices are now allowed to issue bail?

The Speaker: The hon. minister. Briefly, please.

Mr. Stevens: Yes, briefly, Mr. Speaker, but it is a good question because people read about this in the paper on a daily basis, and they'd like to know how the administration of justice occurs.

The Criminal Code deals with the circumstances surrounding bail, and the Crown, which is prosecuting the case, must prove to the judge on the evidence that's available at the time of the application that it's necessary for a particular accused to be detained, one, to ensure his attendance in court; two, to protect the safety of the public – in other words, to establish that there's a substantial risk that another crime will be committed if the accused is out – and lastly, to maintain the confidence of the public in the administration of justice, having regard to the circumstances of the case.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Thank you. Mr. Speaker, in view of these concerns some Albertans have taken the initiative to file petitions with the minister, MLAs, and the Crown prosecutors' office. Can the minister advise what result such petitions have on the actual dispensation of bail?

Mr. Stevens: I appreciate that the hon. member has had petitions raised in his area, that matters have occurred there that have, you know, engendered a lot of interest from the public. The matter of a petition I think is quite appropriate for the public to engage in. It's part of the expression of interest that we recognize here in the House. It is something that members can receive from their constituents and is quite appropriate to file here. I would encourage, given the nature of what we're talking about, that the petitions also be filed with the federal government because it is a Criminal Code matter.

However, as it relates to the administration of justice, Mr. Speaker, I think it is important for all members, all Albertans to understand that the judiciary is independent, that the Crown prosecutors' office, indeed, is independent of political considerations, and that a petition per se will have no influence whatsoever in a particular case that is before the courts relative to the issue of bail or any other matter.

Mr. Lukaszuk: Mr. Speaker, without interfering with the independence of the judiciary, how can Albertans constructively express their potential dissatisfaction with sentences or bail?

Mr. Stevens: I think that a petition, letter writing, and so on are appropriate, but what we have as politicians is an opportunity to dialogue with other AGs across the country, to dialogue with the federal Minister of Justice on the rules of criminal law, whether it be bail or conditional sentencing or the like, and to the extent that we determine that the rules we currently have fall short of what public expectation is – in other words, they aren't working the way we think they ought to – we can lobby through federal/provincial/territorial meetings, that are held on a regular basis, to try and effect change. That is a long-term prospect, but it all starts with the public indicating that they think there is need for a change, and then people will review it and determine whether or not there is some basis for that concern.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-McClung, followed by the hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere.

Municipal Funding

Mr. Elsalhy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Municipalities in Alberta are struggling to provide services due to limited financial resources. In areas like infrastructure and police funding Alberta's municipalities are being left on their own to foot the bill while the provincial government, awash in resource revenue, still cannot come up with a long-term, predictable funding solution. One-time unconditional grants are not the answer. My questions are all to the Minister of Municipal Affairs. Can the minister explain how one-time grants through the targeted investment initiative will provide long-term financial stability and security for Alberta's municipalities? There is no guarantee from one year to the next.

Mr. Renner: Mr. Speaker, I have explained to this member and to all members of the House a number of times the process that the government is engaged in right now. That is a process of working with members of the Minister's Council on Municipal Sustainability to put together the long-term plans and long-term, reliable sources of funding that the member makes reference to. In the meantime, I think it's appropriate, and the government has already indicated their strong support for municipalities through a couple of programs. One the member makes reference to, which deals with our smaller municipalities, but the big one, obviously, is \$3 billion in funding that flows through to municipalities to deal with their municipal infrastructure needs on an interim basis until we can put that long-term plan in place.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Elsalhy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. So the next question would be: how long would those municipalities have to wait before that long-term plan is in effect?

Mr. Renner: Well, Mr. Speaker, the minister's council has been advised by me that I expect them to have at least the basis of their recommendations in place by late this summer, early in the fall so that necessary changes, if possible, can be made during the spring session of next year's Legislature.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Elsalhy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Can the minister explain why this government will not sign a memorandum of understanding with Alberta's municipalities granting them full budget participation in those critical decisions and those areas that really affect them directly, involve them as partners?

Mr. Renner: Mr. Speaker, I suggest that the member might accompany me to the Federation of Canadian Municipalities convention this year in June because at that meeting last year Alberta was being shown as the example of excellence and participation and co-operation between the province and municipalities. We have a commitment to our municipalities to work with them, and we take that commitment very seriously.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Airdrie-Chestermere, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning.

Provincial Water Supply

Ms Haley: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. An earlier question today referred to Dr. David Schindler's report. I would like to further expand on Dr. Schindler's concerns. My question is to the Minister of Environment. Given that southern Alberta has had a long history of drought, which significantly impacts industry and farmers, what is the government doing to prepare for water shortages due to drought?

The Speaker: The hon. minister.

Mr. Boutilier: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. During a drought as part of our Water for Life strategy we bring together our farmers, communities, and industry to ensure that we have an adequate water supply. The natural steps, I want to say, will be this: as we collect that information from over 200 weather stations that we have, we need to be examining what are the other options for storage, such as off-stream storage. Also, part of our Water for Life strategy is on-stream storage. Now, for those members that's just a fancy way of saying the potential construction of another dam.

To be quite direct, as we go forward, we will be working with our watershed councils, such as in the Bow River and the Battle River and all over Alberta, to ensure that we have the best information possible to deal with the very serious question that Dr. Schindler has raised.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Ms Haley: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My final question is to the minister of agriculture. Given that Dr. Schindler's report also points to agriculture as one of the biggest users of water in southern Alberta, what is the government doing to limit agriculture's impact on this precious resource?

The Speaker: The hon. Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Development.

Mr. Horner: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We do know that agriculture has an impact on the water supplies in the province, but we also know how important water is to the livelihood of agriculture in this province and to thousands of farm families in the province. Irrigation is certainly a major user of water in the province. It does so, though, in a very efficient fashion. In fact, in the last 30 years the irrigation sector has made huge efficiency gains in the order of 50 to 70 per cent, and it is continuing to make further gains in terms

of the expertise that we use in irrigation and, really, the science of conservation of water in the agricultural sector. No one in the province would depend on water more than those trying to grow crops using it. We're very good stewards of the land, and we'll continue to be so.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder.

2:20 Retention of Provincial Government Employees

Mr. Backs: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. MLAs received a 5.23 per cent salary increase on April Fool's Day. Most provincial employees will receive a 3 per cent increase this year. The private sector and especially the conventional oil and gas industry is offering far more and with lots of extras. They're grabbing workers. Employee retention is an issue everywhere in Alberta. My question is to the Minister of Human Resources and Employment. What measures does the government have in place to retain Alberta government employees in the face of greener pastures and better offers in the private sector?

Mr. Cardinal: Mr. Speaker, that is a very, very good question. It is a very important question because without those employees this government would probably not be able to operate. When it comes to representation by their unions, we have what are called collective agreements – this person is aware of that – and 99.4 per cent of the collective agreements, of the 12,000 or so collective agreements, are settled without interruption. Therefore, I feel that what we have in place – to do appraisals, recommend increases, et cetera, et cetera, are all in place already.

The Speaker: The hon. member.

Mr. Backs: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. A second question to the same minister: what will this government do to maintain proper government services such as water safety and environmental regulation if it cannot replace employees lured to the private sector?

Mr. Cardinal: Mr. Speaker, just in the last couple of months we had 25,000 more people move to Alberta, and this member thinks that we can't operate the province. We have over a \$27 billion budget a year in ministries in our government to operate the province of Alberta, and we have the best – the best – civil servants anywhere across the country.

Mr. Backs: They are great civil servants, Mr. Speaker.

The third question to the same minister: will the minister finally catch up the 5 per cent rollbacks for all employees in the public sector who have never had that returned?

Mr. Cardinal: Mr. Speaker, I'll monitor that situation.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder, followed by hon. Member for Foothills-Rocky View.

Water for Life Strategy (continued)

Mr. Eggen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's become clear in recent years that there is a water crisis across not only Alberta but the prairie provinces and into the Northwest Territories. We are seeing a summertime flow reduction in our major river systems, between

30, 60, or even 70 per cent of the water that we depend on for our urban and rural areas. The questions are to the Minister of Environment. When will the minister bring out his Water for Life strategy and ensure that, in fact, we're going to have water for the future for our agriculture sector, our industrial sector, and for our urban areas? When are we going to see the Water for Life strategy unveiled?

Mr. Boutilier: Mr. Speaker, I thank the hon. member for the question, but perhaps I can speak in this way. First and foremost, I want to thank the Minister of Finance because in her most recent budget it was announced that \$175 million will be used for our Water for Life strategy. That \$175 million is clearly an important signal in terms of the money we are spending relative to protecting this valuable resource.

Mr. Eggen: To the same minister: considering that using dams and water diversion projects has been disproven as a means by which we can in fact retain water, will this minister please tell me whether or not he's willing to use dams as a way to preserve the water systems here in the future, or will he look for a conservation system by which to ensure water for the future in this province?

Mr. Boutilier: I think it's a very important point, and in fact there are three points to it. Number one, the Water for Life strategy indicates that by the year 2015 the usage of water in our province will be improved by 30 per cent. Albertans, though, have an attitude that we can even do better than that. I'm certain, in terms of their daily practices that the minister of agriculture talked about earlier, that will be and continues to be a key component of Water for Life. Also, though, step two is that of off-stream storage. How do we build reservoirs to be able to capture yet at the same time meet the obligations to our neighbouring provinces? I believe that we can do both. Also, point three, a dam would be a last resort after exploring, of course, these first two important steps that I've indicated this afternoon.

Mr. Eggen: Well, considering that the main increase in water usage in this province is for large industrial projects such as the oil sands, will the minister, then, commit to a conservation system that will reduce the water consumption of large industrial projects such as the oil sands, where most of that water, in fact, is being lost?

Mr. Boutilier: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I want to say this. In actual fact the water consumption that is being done by development in the oil sands is significant, but I also might add that their recycling, their conservation, and their off-stream storage that they have today are also excellent examples of how they have been working with our Water for Life strategy. I am imploring them and others: with the development that's taking place, we will protect so that nothing – absolutely nothing – will damage the Athabasca basin, where the water is drawn from. We will ensure that 25 and 50 years from now I will answer to my grandson and granddaughter that we have done our job by protecting the basin and this important resource we call blue gold.

The Speaker: Hon. members, today in the question period there were 92 questions and answers. That's very remarkable.

Speaker's Ruling Oral Question Period Rules

The Speaker: I do have some comments that I do want to make with respect to a number of questions.

First of all, the questions from the hon. Member for Edmonton-

Gold Bar. I would refer all hon. members to *Beauchesne* 410(6), that basically indicates that the chair should give “the greatest possible freedom . . . to Members consistent with the other rules and practices” in their questions. Having said that, I then want to take the member to *Beauchesne* 409(6), which says: “A question must be within the administrative competence of the Government. The Minister to whom the question is directed is responsible to the House for his or her present Ministry and not for any decisions taken in a previous portfolio.” *Beauchesne* 409(7), “A question must adhere to the proprieties of the House, in terms of inferences, imputing motives or casting aspersions upon persons within the House or out of it,” and 410(16), which says that “Ministers may be questioned only in relation to current portfolios.” The chair has listened attentively now on two occasions, yesterday and today, with respect to the questions. Unless there’s a connection to the current environment of 2006, I don’t know how we can proceed with a third question of something happening 20 years ago.

Now, to both the Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar and the Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark, I’ll expect that because both of you used quotations today, you will be tabling the source of those quotations in the House at the appropriate time for tablings.

As a result of the discretion given to the earlier two members that I’ve just mentioned, some discretion then was given to the hon. Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs with respect to his question because *Beauchesne* 408(1)(c) says that questions should “not require an answer involving a legal opinion.” I think we were right on the edge with respect to a legal opinion, but that was given because of discretion given earlier in the give-and-take of what we deal with on a daily basis.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre.

Point of Order

Explanation of Speaker’s Ruling

Ms Blakeman: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Under Standing Order 13(2) I’m wondering if I could ask the Speaker to explain his ruling on 409(6). My understanding is that the question is to be within the administrative competence of the minister to whom the question is directed, is responsible for the present ministry. The question was directed towards the Minister of Infrastructure and Transportation, for which that individual is minister. Your ruling seemed to indicate that one could not ask a question about something in the past. Could you clarify, please?

The Speaker: Well, 409(6) basically talks about “for his or her present Ministry and not for any decisions taken in a previous portfolio.” There has to be some flexibility given, as there was by the chair yesterday when he listened very attentively, and he listened very attentively today as well. But this is the year 2006. The current minister has only been the minister in this portfolio for some period of time, and if we’re talking about events that happened 20 years ago and they’re being asked of a current minister today, then what is the purpose of the Public Accounts Committee, which meets on a weekly basis and is supposed to review the events of the previous fiscal year with respect to the Auditor General’s reports and the like? I mean, if we’re going to stand up in this question period and a minister has to account for something that happened in 1923, then where’s the relevancy and the currency and the urgency that we find in all of these?

Citation 408 (1) says that such questions should

- (a) be asked only in respect of matters of sufficient urgency and importance as to require an immediate answer.

If we’re going to go back 20 years or 40 years or 60 years, hon. member, I don’t know how that works, quite frankly.

So the explanation has been given. I said that there would be some flexibility. Tie it together. We move forward.

2:30 Vignettes from the Assembly’s History

The Speaker: Hon. members, before I introduce the first of a number to participate today, let me fulfill you with some more knowledge about the previous history of the province of Alberta. The first provincial election held in Alberta on November 9, 1905, was governed by the regulations in the Ordinances of the North-West Territories. It was not until 1909 that the province enacted its own election legislation with An Act respecting Elections of Members of the Legislative Assembly. This act, like its predecessor, indicated that the Clerk of the Executive Council was responsible for overseeing the administration of general elections in the province.

The responsibility for administering general elections in Alberta remained with the Clerk of the Executive Council until The Election Statutes Amendment Act, 1972. Under this new legislation the Clerk of the Legislative Assembly, a nonpartisan officer of the Assembly, took on administrative responsibilities associated with elections. This legislative change coincided with an administrative change which saw the appointment of two different individuals to the position of the Clerk of the Executive Council and the Clerk of the Legislative Assembly. Although the two roles themselves were always distinct, it was the practice in Alberta from 1935 to 1973 to have the same individual serve in both offices concurrently.

It was not until 1977 that legislation came into effect to create an officer of the Legislature, the Chief Electoral Officer. Appointed by a special committee of Members of the Legislative Assembly, the office of the Chief Electoral Officer continues to administer all by-elections and general elections for the province of Alberta.

Since 1977 four individuals have occupied the role of Chief Electoral Officer: Kenneth Wark from 1977 to 1985, Patrick Ledgerwood from 1985 to 1994, Dermot Whelan from 1994 to 1998, and O. Brian Fjeldheim from 1998 to 2005. The Legislative Assembly will soon deal with the appointment of Alberta’s fifth Chief Electoral Officer.

In 30 seconds I’ll call upon the first.

In the interim might we proceed with Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: Introduction of Guests (reversion)

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Lacombe-Ponoka.

Mr. Prins: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It’s a great pleasure for me to introduce to you and through you to all the members of this Assembly my son Mr. Wayne Prins. He’s seated in the visitors’ gallery. He’s down from Fort McMurray, where he works very hard recruiting and training workers for the oil sands business. I’d like him to rise and receive the warm welcome of this Assembly.

head: Members’ Statements

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Egmont.

Alberta Adolescent Recovery Centre

Mr. Herard: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I’m particularly proud to celebrate the 300th graduation from the Alberta Adolescent Recovery Centre in my constituency. Matt and his family graduated from a life of addiction, pain, and desperation to a life full of hope and new opportunities. Congratulations to Matt and family.

Mr. Speaker, in 2005 an evaluation of the AARC program was conducted by a noted addiction program evaluation authority, Dr. Michael Patton, PhD. He studied and interviewed 100 consecutive cases and found that 85 per cent of the graduates were still clean and sober after five years. Those are enviable results, and Dr. Dean Vause and his staff are to be congratulated. The dedication and caring of the parent support group is also commendable and a major factor in the success of the AARC program.

I'm excited to say, Mr. Speaker, that AARC is currently in the ground on an expansion project that will see their facilities double to about 70 spaces. The project, estimated to cost around \$8 million, is more than fully funded through fundraising efforts of the board, chaired by Mrs. Ann McCaig. Congratulations to Ann, her board, and all volunteers and supporters.

AARC has rebuilt 300-plus addicted lives and that of their families. Well over a thousand souls have been touched. But, unfortunately, waiting lists are growing, and demand is accelerating. Addicted teens take drugs to feel good, Mr. Speaker. AARC rebuilds self-esteem and teaches addicts to feel good about themselves by harnessing the power within and sometimes external higher powers.

Hon. members, please help me thank and honour this marvellous miracle in Calgary-Egmont.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Red Deer-North.

Family Law Legislation

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last night in the Legislature there was a debate about grandparents' rights with respect to having contact with their grandchildren. Listening to the debate, one can see that this is a very difficult and sensitive issue that has no simple answer. In response to this and many other difficult family law issues the government developed the new Family Law Act, that came into effect on October 1, 2005. The idea behind this new legislation was to simplify legal procedures for families in distress. It is part of the Alberta Justice family law strategy aimed at creating a simple, integrated, and effective family law system that promotes the well-being of children and families.

This new Family Law Act updates family law and makes it easier and simpler for Albertans to understand. It protects the best interests of the child when families break down. It encourages parents to work together to reduce the effect of conflict on children and to reduce the emotional and financial costs to families during these troubled times. It supports, where appropriate, ways of resolving conflicts outside the courtroom.

The Family Law Act is supported by services to assist families as well as streamlined court procedures. Section 35 of the Family Law Act has attempted to make the process easier for grandparents whose access or contact with their grandchild has been interrupted as a result of the separation of their guardians.

Mr. Speaker, this is a good law, that intends to help families in distress. As with all new laws there may be some sections that require a little tweaking. However, I believe this bill is succeeding with the goal of making life a little easier for families during difficult times.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Varsity.

Fort McMurray Infrastructure Needs

Mr. Chase: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Fort McMurray is caught between the push and pull of two titans whose policies and practices directly determine the quality of daily life of its residents. The Alberta government plays the dual role of slum landlord and

carpetbagger. It keeps raising the rent without maintaining the tenement's infrastructure. When the building along with its tenants collapses, the landlord moves on.

The huge oil sands companies can quite legitimately claim that they have paid their dues to the government. They have lived up to the conditions, economic and environmental, that the government has required of them. Are they a good neighbour? To what extent do they share their growing good fortune with the citizens of Fort McMurray? Is their presence contributing to or taking away from the community?

City councillors accurately reflect the mood of their constituents. They are frustrated by the imbalance between the government's new oil sands project approvals and its failure to maintain and expand the most basic of infrastructure requirements: roads, hospitals, schools, waste and water treatment plants.

Every individual and group we spoke to last Monday and Tuesday, whether on their doorstep or in a series of outreach community meetings, despaired of the lack of affordable housing. The constant stress that temporary and permanent residents of Fort McMurray are feeling is showing up in the classrooms, in the divorce courts, in the hospitals, in the shelters, and at the food bank. Both government and industry have a responsibility to restore balance by promoting smart, sustainable, infrastructure-supported growth in the Fort Mac region.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Democratic Reform

Mrs. Mather: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On a day when political change is in the air in Ottawa and Alberta, I want to speak to the question of political parties in the democratic process. I am a member of the Alberta Liberal Party, but I do not speak primarily as a Liberal. I speak as a concerned citizen, an Albertan, and a Canadian in a world where partisan differences, like ethnic and religious ones, are secondary to our shared humanity.

Political parties began in an attempt to win control of the Crown, to make it accountable to parliament, but in Britain much of parliament's power was held by a hereditary upper house. Responsible government began in Canada in the 1840s, when the elected assembly won control of the Executive Council from the appointed governor. Strong party discipline was the only way to do this; otherwise, the government could play on factions to control the agenda.

Today the situation is different. Parties often hold power at the expense of citizens. It is time to recognize this, to focus on MLAs' responsibilities to their constituents, to increase the role of legislative committees, to make greater use of private members' bills, to permit debate that genuinely makes a difference.

I belong to a party that has no wish to be a 40-year dynasty. We want to change the system so no party can do that. Alberta needs to open government as we have opened the marketplace to citizen initiative. Let us look to a better way so that Alberta can lead in democracy as well as economy.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Leduc-Beaumont-Devon.

2:40 Canadian Senior Broomball Championships

Mr. Rogers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to congratulate the organizers, volunteers, and more than 500 athletes who were involved in the 30th Canadian Senior Broomball Championships, held in the great city of Leduc within my constituency of Leduc-Beaumont-Devon from March 27 to April 1.

These athletes came from across the country: from Quebec,

Newfoundland and Labrador, B.C., the Northwest Territories, and across the prairies. They came to work and they came to play, for this annual gathering was not just an athletic tournament but also a convention for delegates of the Canadian Broomball Federation. Over a period of four days approximately 66 games of broomball were played at Leduc's Black Gold Centre to determine the best in the land. The host teams from Alberta came from across the province: the Lethbridge Panthers, Leduc Fire, Edmonton Express on the men's side and two ladies teams, Edmonton Wasabi and the Calgary Bullets.

Mr. Speaker, like all good hosts, our athletes allowed their guests to enjoy the glory. This year the men's championship was won by the Bruno Axemen from Saskatchewan, and the women's championship was claimed by the defending champions, the QC Huskies from Quebec.

I would ask the members to join me in congratulating the organizing committee from Leduc broomball for staging a successful tournament and convention – Nathan Pountney, Jason Walters, Patrick Gillis, David Ramsey, Sharon Fenske, and Patrick Kesler – as well as a host of volunteers and all who made this championship possible.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Calgary-Lougheed.

Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission

Mr. Rodney: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased to inform the hon. members that AADAC has answered the call from Albertans to offer more addiction services for youth and their families.

Here's some of the good news. AADAC has received \$19 million in new funding this year, and that's going to go a long way in allowing the enhancement of services and continuing operation of 25 area offices, three urban clinics, three adult residential treatment centres, two adult detox facilities, two youth service centres, and two youth residential and detox facilities. This increase brings AADAC's annual operating budget to \$95 million, Mr. Speaker, and I can assure you that the dollars are being utilized wisely.

In addition to sustaining AADAC's ability to meet demands through regular operations, of which two new AADAC offices will be opening this summer, it will also provide funding support for 37 different nonprofit organizations across the province and add two new agencies to the network. These new services will build on considerable work already under way as AADAC follows through on commitments for the Alberta drug strategy.

In terms of youth focus, a total of \$14 million will be invested across the province to expand services. It will ensure that treatment is available to families who are experiencing problems associated with alcohol and other drugs, including crystal meth.

Key priorities for the upcoming year include, number one, doubling the number of voluntary treatment beds for youth by expanding programs to locations in southern and northern Alberta; number two, expanding AADAC's continuum in youth services in implementing detox and assessment services in support of the Protection of Children Abusing Drugs Act, or PCHAD, which comes into force July 1, and that will mean additional beds in five sites across Alberta; and, number three, continuing to build relationships with regional health authorities and other provincial partners to deliver addiction services in innovative ways, including continued work on concurrent disorders. Other projects include an aboriginal youth treatment pilot in Edmonton, working with national partners, and an expanded public awareness campaign on crystal meth and with schools.

Thank you and thank you to all hon. members for support of AADAC.

head: **Presenting Petitions**

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Red Deer-North.

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I wish to table a petition signed by 16 students and staff of Glendale middle school in Red Deer. This petition urges the government of Alberta to "introduce effective and immediate measures to curtail the . . . increase in teenage smoking in Alberta as reported by Health Canada."

head: **Introduction of Bills**

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Red Deer-North.

Bill 207

Traffic Safety (Driver Disqualification and Seizure of Vehicles Arising From Drug Offences) Amendment Act, 2006

Mrs. Jablonski: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I request leave to introduce a bill being Bill 207, Traffic Safety (Driver Disqualification and Seizure of Vehicles Arising From Drug Offences) Amendment Act, 2006.

[Motion carried; Bill 207 read a first time]

head: **Tabling Returns and Reports**

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

Mr. Elsalhy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My first tabling today is a letter from an Edmonton-McClung constituent, Mrs. Shauna Warrilow, LPN, in which she states her opposition to the third way. She highlights the issue of staff shortages and the growing demand on nurses to work longer shifts and put in overtime. She questions the rationale for wanting to go private and doesn't want the government to add to people's pain and suffering by requiring them to pay more for health care.

The second tabling is also with regard to the third way: a copy of a letter to the Premier from Ms Cheryl Touchings, in which she states her support for the Canada Health Act and her objection to any measure which could undermine Alberta's public health care system. She opposes allowing physicians to work in both public and private spheres and forcing Albertans to acquire private health insurance. Lastly, she comments that personal income should not determine the level of care one gets in this province.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Rutherford.

Mr. R. Miller: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Arising out of my questions in question period today to the Finance Minister, I'm pleased to rise and table the appropriate number of copies of documents obtained through the access to information for services provided by Rod Love Consulting. As I had indicated during question period, these documents are full of expense accounts and invoices from Rod Love Consulting; however, contain no reports, studies, or significant frameworks.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Mill Woods.

Mrs. Mather: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have letters from constituents. The first letter is from Sherry Ewing, in which she is expressing her extreme disappointment at the extreme short-sightedness of the government in not funding full-day kindergarten in our province.

My second letter is from Rod McConnell, stating that now that Alberta has dramatically increased the amount of money in its coffers, how much of this money is actually going to be in research, development, and deployment of alternative energy sources for this province?

The Speaker: Hon. Member for Edmonton-Centre, do you have a tabling?

Ms Blakeman: Yes, I do. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Several tablings. The first is from Ileene Breton: a letter to both the Leader of the Official Opposition and the Premier with her fears that the third way will lead to excellent private care for some and a poor public system for the rest.

A letter from Joan Buhr, appreciating the Official Opposition's attempts to fight the third-way proposal.

A letter from Brian Burke, sharing his disgust with the Alberta government's desire to privatize out the health care system.

A letter from Dave Burkhart, noting that the health policy framework is simply a play for profits by American insurance and health care corporations.

A letter from S. Burrows, expressing an opinion that the major reason for long wait times is a serious shortage of health care professionals.

From Elizabeth Carmichael, feeling that seniors, the disabled, and anyone with a pre-existing condition will be the victims of private health insurance.

From Catherine Carson, noting that the competitive advantage not just for Alberta but Canada in attracting transnational and global corporations to set up shop is our publicly funded system.

From Aaron Chubb, noting that the government is keeping taxes low for oil companies while claiming that we don't have enough money for health care.

And, finally, Darrell Clarkson, noting that he's a senior, a father, a grandfather, and someone who's taken time to research and study health care with a very long and thorough report on health care.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Gold Bar.

2:50

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have three tablings today. The first is a historical land title certificate from Alberta Registries for the short legal on 4;25;52;9;SE. In 1988 the registered owner of this property was the Galfour Development Corporation in Edmonton.

The second document I have today is from the Alberta Government Services land titles office. It is a document indicating that the value of a parcel of a land, a hundred acres of which is developable, is \$800,000, and it was sold by the public works minister at the time, Mr. Ernie Isley, for \$1. Again, this transaction occurred in 1988.

My third tabling is an article from the *Edmonton Journal* titled New Documents Show Middleman Assisted in 1994 WEM Refinancing, and this was part of my question today.

For the record, the quote that I used in my question earlier in question period today, Mr. Speaker, was from a tabling that I provided to all members of this House yesterday.

Thank you.

The Speaker: Hon. Member for Edmonton-Meadowlark, do you have a tabling?

Mr. Tougas: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to table the

appropriate number of copies of the judgment of the Hon. Judge D.C. Norheim, which I discussed earlier today in question period.

The Speaker: Thank you.

The hon. Member for Edmonton-Calder.

Mr. Eggen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I would like to table a letter from Sandra Stadnek of Wetaskiwin. Ms Stadnek is very concerned about the lack of details forthcoming about the government's so-called third-way reforms. In particular, she doesn't want to see physicians fast-tracking patients who are paying privately while allowing patients in the public system to wait.

Thank you.

The Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

Mr. Martin: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to table the appropriate number of copies of a letter from Rashpal Sehmy. Mr. Sehmy spent 12 hours on March 22 protesting in front of the Legislature to show his support for public health care. He strongly believes that a person's wealth should not determine the quality of care that they receive.

The Speaker: Hon. members, before going to the next step in the Routine, I'd just like to draw your attention to the Order Paper. There's a slight change in today's Order Paper. Bill 15, International Interests in Mobile Aircraft Equipment Act, now in Committee of the Whole and introduced by the former minister of International and Intergovernmental Relations, now appears under the name of the Acting Minister of International and Intergovernmental Relations.

head: **Orders of the Day**

head: **Committee of Supply**

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

The Deputy Chair: Hon. members, we'll call the committee to order.

head: **Main Estimates 2006-07**

Offices of the Legislative Assembly

The Deputy Chair: Pursuant to Standing Order 58(8), which requires that the estimates of the offices of the Legislative Assembly be the first item called in the Committee of Supply's consideration of the main estimates, I must now put the question without debate or amendment on all matters relating to the business plan and proposed estimates for offices of the Legislative Assembly for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2007.

Agreed to:

Support to the Legislative Assembly Expense	\$45,936,000
Office of the Auditor General Expense and Equipment/Inventory Purchases	\$19,166,000
Office of the Ombudsman Expense	\$2,327,000
Office of the Chief Electoral Officer Expense	\$2,515,000
Office of the Ethics Commissioner Expense	\$410,000
Office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner Expense	\$4,510,000

The Deputy Chair: Shall the vote be reported? Are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Chair: Opposed? Carried.

Seniors and Community Supports

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Minister of Seniors and Community Supports.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I am pleased to be here to present the Ministry of Seniors and Community Supports business plan and budget. It really is hard to believe that this is already the second budget for this ministry, and I think that the results we've achieved during the last 16 months speak for themselves. Together with our community partners we've accomplished a great deal on behalf of the people that this ministry serves: our seniors, Albertans with disabilities, and low-income Albertans who require housing services. I'll spend most of my time this afternoon outlining the key programs that assist these Albertans and how we are supporting those programs through Budget 2006.

This is certainly a good-news budget for this ministry. As I'll discuss shortly, the funding that we've been allocated will go a long way in making a difference for the people that we serve. As minister it is my responsibility to present the ministry's budget, but as I highlight our programs through this afternoon, you'll see that the ministry is more about the people we serve, the way we have developed comprehensive programs that are flexible and responsive to their unique needs.

Once again, I believe that our business plan for Seniors and Community Supports was the very best that it could be. It was a challenge bringing it together last year, and this year we were able to enhance it even further. Our ministry's vision is for "a vibrant province where all Albertans live with dignity as full participants in society and experience the best possible well-being and independence." Our mission, Mr. Chairman, is to "provide and co-ordinate support, services, programs, information, and strategic planning that contribute to the inclusion, well-being, and independence of seniors, persons with disabilities, and persons in need of housing supports."

Before I discuss our program areas in detail, I'd like to briefly mention to you our core businesses. The first is to "provide targeted financial and health-related benefits," which reflects the work we do on behalf of low-income seniors and persons with disabilities. Our second core business is to "provide a range of housing options and supports for lower-income Albertans," which speaks for itself, Mr. Chairman. Our third core business is to "provide and co-ordinate a range of supports for living in the community."

Our ministry's program expense budget for the coming 2006-07 fiscal year is \$1.8 billion, which is an increase of nearly \$190 million, or almost 12 per cent over last year. That's a significant increase in support of our programs, Mr. Chairman, and I'm very thankful for that.

3:00

Prior to being appointed to this portfolio, I remember the words of our former minister responsible for seniors, our Deputy Premier, and the ones that stand out for me are how she'd say that Alberta has one of the most comprehensive packages of seniors' benefits in the entire country. That was quite a statement 10 years ago, and it certainly remains true today.

The first program I'd mention is the Alberta seniors' benefit program, which has a budget of nearly \$274 million this year, and that's an increase of \$25 million over last year. This program

provides low-income seniors with monthly cash payments to supplement income from other federal income-support programs and/or their personal pensions or savings. This program continues to have the most generous monthly cash payments and eligibility thresholds of any provincial financial support program for seniors. That's something that we in this Assembly can all be very proud of, Mr. Chairman.

Some of the new funding will be used to address caseloads, which we expect to increase slightly this year. However, the vast majority of the increase will allow us to provide increased benefits to low-income seniors living in continuing care facilities. Specifically, this funding will allow us to increase the level of support being provided to Alberta seniors' benefit clients living in long-term care and provide the same level of assistance to low-income seniors residing in designated assisted living facilities. That is new, and it's important, and I'm so pleased that it's occurring this year. These changes are good, Mr. Chairman, as we administer our Alberta seniors' benefit program, and they respond directly to recommendations made by the MLA task force on continuing care.

When talking with seniors, many of them will often tell you of the impact that their dental and optical health have on their overall quality of life. Our dental and optical programs have made such a difference in our province, so much so that more than 14,000 seniors have received support from these two programs each month. That's 14,000 a month, Mr. Chairman, since it was introduced last April, which I think is just outstanding. Because it was so successful and well received, we did reallocate some funding last year from other programs to help meet the demand.

The program is available to seniors with incomes of up to \$30,310 and couples with incomes up to \$60,620, and it provides a range of dental and optical coverage depending on a senior's or senior couple's income level. Recognizing the demand we expect to see once again, we have increased the budget for the dental and optical assistance program by \$8 million, bringing total spending to \$60 million this year.

Before these programs were introduced, some assistance with dental and optical costs were provided under the special-needs assistance for seniors program, which provides financial coverage with one-time, emergent expenses that seniors simply cannot afford. The introduction of the dental and optical programs has reduced some pressure on the special-needs assistance program, and that is why the budget number for this year has stayed the same.

One of the programs that we reallocated funding from last year, Mr. Chairman, to assist with the demand for dental and optical assistance was the education property tax program. This program provides senior homeowners with a rebate for any increase in their household's education property taxes over the amount that they paid in 2004. Because education property taxes went up only slightly overall last year, the average benefit paid out to about 60,000 households was relatively low, around \$40, but because the base year of the program will remain at 2004, we expect to see an increase in the number of households receiving benefits and the average benefit paid to each household this year. That is why we've budgeted \$9 million for this program this year.

Before I move on to our housing programs, Mr. Chairman, I wanted to mention to you and to the Assembly our work to move forward with the new continuing care standards in the coming year. We have allocated additional funding to assist us in implementing the new accommodation standards which will cover the entire continuing care system, and that means our lodges, designated assisted living facilities, and long-term care facilities.

Prior to last week's break there was much discussion in the Assembly about the standards and our progress in implementing

them. My ministry is working closely with Alberta Health and Wellness, which is responsible for the health care services in continuing care, while Seniors and Community Supports is responsible for the accommodation side. As we bring the new standards into force, they will include new monitoring, reporting, and enforcement processes as well as the development of a new concerns resolution process for residents and their families. The funding that we've allocated, Mr. Chairman, through the budget will allow us to begin implementing the standards this year, which I know is important to all members of this Assembly and the Albertans that I've been hearing from as well.

When you consider continuing care, there is a full range of options available to Albertans, beginning with our lodges, where seniors receive assistance with their meals, housekeeping, and other accommodation services; designated assisted living, which is for Albertans with high health needs who also require accommodation services; and long-term care, which is reserved for those Albertans with the most complex or highest health care needs. When we refer to our standards, they will address the accommodation services in all these different facilities.

Through the lodge assistance program we provide grants on behalf of nearly 90 per cent of seniors living in provincially supported lodges. That funding helps lodge operators address increasing operating costs while ensuring that the program continues to support low- and moderate-income seniors. This year we will increase that budget by \$9 million, bringing total spending to more than \$30 million annually.

As you may know, Mr. Chairman, seniors entering lodges today are older, frailer, and have higher needs than ever before. About two-thirds of that funding increase will be used to support recommendations of the continuing care task force, which will allow us to provide increased support to some lodges that are providing special dietary meals, increased housekeeping services, and additional monitoring. These enhanced services are making a difference for those seniors, and with this funding we are working toward ensuring that lodge operators have the support that they need to continue offering those enhanced services.

Like the range of continuing care options, our province also has a range of housing programs which are responsive to the unique needs of low-income seniors, individuals, families, and persons with special needs. The most immediate need is to assist those who are homeless, those who require our assistance, usually in the form of emergency accommodations. We've substantially increased our support of homelessness and transitional housing spaces over the last two years, which demonstrates our commitment to addressing this issue and to working with community groups who are meeting the needs of homeless Albertans on a daily basis. I know that we have a very important conference in Calgary this week regarding this issue. It is important to note that significant funding – there was a 40 per cent increase in funding last year, and we've now increased the funding once again this year by nearly \$3 million, or 14 per cent. This support will help address the demand for emergency spaces and assist operators with the cost of providing services.

While most of this funding is for operating expenses, funding will also be allocated through the provincial homelessness initiative to meet the needs in our province's seven major urban centres, and you know that those are Calgary, Edmonton, Fort McMurray, Red Deer, Grande Prairie, Lethbridge, and Medicine Hat. This funding is allocated to these communities, and they can use it to address local priorities based on their community plan, which can include new capital projects or to expand capacity in their existing facilities.

This year as well, Mr. Chairman, we've also increased our support for our province's subsidized housing units in the new budget. We

currently have nearly 25,000 provincially owned or supported housing units that provide safe and affordable accommodations to over 47,000 low-income Albertans. What makes these units so effective is that the rent is subsidized at 30 per cent of a household's income. When you consider that these Albertans would otherwise struggle and pay substantially more than that in the private sector, you can imagine what a difference this program is actually making. We've increased our support to housing operators by about 9 per cent this year, primarily to cover increasing operating and maintenance costs for these projects.

3:10

I'd also like to briefly mention that we've increased our support to the rent supplement program, which subsidizes rents for low-income Albertans living in privately owned apartments. Like our provincially owned housing, the rent supplement program effectively caps the rent at 30 per cent of the household's income. We were assisting 4,000 households through this program, and with new funding allocated in Budget 2006, we will assist another 600, which is a significant increase of 15 per cent.

With that, I'd like to briefly discuss our capital funding. You will see, Mr. Chairman, that our capital funding allocation is reduced, but that is because we had some large, one-time funding to programs last year. This year we have \$44 million for the final year of the current phase of the Canada/Alberta affordable housing agreement. This program has made such a difference over the past four years. When I signed the phase 2 agreement with the former federal minister, Joe Fontana, back in August, he spoke very highly of Alberta's support of this program.

We are certainly leading the nation in this area, Mr. Chairman, with funding committed for nearly 3,070 units to date. While this program is focused primarily on high-growth urban centres, we also have \$24 million for the final instalment in our rural affordable supportive living program. This program will help establish new supportive living units in our rural communities throughout the province. These projects will help to keep families together and ensure that our seniors have access to services that they need in their own communities.

Before I finish speaking about capital projects, I'd also like to briefly mention that the ministry has been allocated a one-time increase of \$117 million to settle loans, first established in 1990, with the heritage trust fund. These loans were internal to government and have no effect on government's overall spending. Settling these loans, however, will simplify accounting for future years. These loans helped fund the construction of our provincially owned subsidized housing units, which, as I explained earlier, are certainly valuable to our work to assist Albertans who require housing services.

Now, Mr. Chairman, I'd like to talk about a very key area of our ministry, which is supports to persons with disabilities. This year we have an initiative link to the MLA task force that will allow us to provide younger Albertans with special needs with additional supports to participate in rural communities when they are residing in a continuing care facility. This is an important new initiative, and it is also a good example of how our programs have really evolved and moved to be more responsive and supportive of persons with disabilities.

In the context of our \$1.8 billion budget it is important to note that more than \$1.1 billion of that budget is allocated to only two programs: the assured income for the severely handicapped and the persons with developmental disability programs. These are very important programs because together they help address the unique needs of people with disabilities in our province. Part of the benefit

of having all programs that support adults with disabilities under one ministry is that we can consider their needs and respond to them in a more holistic way.

The AISH program provides both income and health supports for approximately 34,000 Albertans with disabilities. The AISH program has seen very substantial funding increases two years in a row, Mr. Chairman. Our budget has increased \$85.5 million this year, which is nearly 18 per cent for AISH recipients. That's very significant because it allows us to fully implement the recommendations which were made by the MLA committee which reviewed the AISH program last year. These changes include increasing the maximum living allowance to \$1,000 a month, which will start this month, providing personal income support benefits, and increasing the employment earning exemptions for the approximately 14 per cent of AISH clients who work. The budget will also allow us to cover anticipated caseload increases as well as cost increases to the comprehensive health benefits package that the program provides. In addition, we are providing additional support to assist AISH clients to cover the accommodation costs of living in continuing care facilities. These individuals are receiving what we call modified AISH benefits. We have also increased their living allowance so that they have additional funds at the end of the month for their personal expenses.

The AISH program has truly been renewed, Mr. Chairman, and with the new legislation currently being discussed in the Assembly, I'm confident that the program is more responsive to the disability needs of clients than ever before, which brings me to the persons with developmental disabilities program, known as PDD.

There have been some concerns raised about the funding to this important program. In February I announced a \$10 million increase for front-line, contracted agency staff wages, which was a much-needed wage increase, that was made retroactive to April 2005. Then on budget day the Finance minister announced an additional \$13 million for PDD. All together that's over \$22 million in new funding, a 4.6 per cent increase to the PDD program since last year, which has brought total funding to nearly \$509 million for the approximately 9,300 people receiving PDD support. That is very significant, Mr. Chairman, because, as you know, the funding has gone up by 84 per cent since 1999 while caseloads have grown less than 30 per cent during that same time. I've assured people in PDD that we have worked and will continue to work with individuals, families, and service providers to meet the needs of persons with developmental disabilities.

I would be more than pleased to answer any questions that may come about. I know that AADL, Mr. Chairman, is important as well. Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

Ms Pastoor: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'd certainly like to thank the minister. I think that was a very comprehensive overview. However, there are some questions that do remain. Many of my questions may well be philosophical in nature, perhaps, as opposed to actual dollars. I think the minister used the word "people." This department is about people, and people often come along with philosophical views of how things can be done. Attitudes can make a huge difference.

Over the last number of years long-term care has been slowly deregulated. Possibly that's because we don't have elected health care boards. Be that as it may, we now have housing under one ministry and care, which is often referred to as a service, under Health and Wellness, but it's still the same vulnerable members of our society that we're talking about. Sometimes the questions overlap, and it may be difficult to answer them specifically.

There was \$140 million for upgrades of facilities. My questions on that one would be: how many of these facilities are private, for-profit? How many were public and turned over to private operations that may be for profit or not for profit or actually turned over to local foundations? How many started off as public and have remained in the public system? What amounts of public dollars are going into these facilities? More importantly, I think my question would be: how are these dollars actually tracked after they've been given to the health regions? How many of the foundations actually have requisition rights? Is that a concept that's being considered for other foundations that may arise in the future or actually are, perhaps, public at this point? How many public dollars are actually going into seniors' centres? These are the centres where people meet to socialize and learn and those sorts of activities. Again, how are those dollars tracked, or do they go through municipalities, and the only way they can get it is through FCSS?

3:20

A figure of \$250 million was suggested to meet the recommendations identified from the Auditor General's report to improve continuing care throughout the province. Again, it becomes sticky because of the complexity of having it under two ministries. How are those dollars being divided between the ministries? Are those calculations being based on standards that haven't come out in their totality yet? One of my questions was going to be the date of release of the standards. You addressed that in a fashion, but I guess that I would like a date if I possibly could have that. It's unfortunate that the standards hadn't been released prior to the debate on Bill 205 because I think it would have made more sense, and certainly the arguments from my side would have been more in depth and perhaps might have pushed it forward into Committee of the Whole, where we could have discussed them in a much broader fashion and perhaps even more specifically if we knew exactly what they were.

The minister has often referred to the concerns resolution process. In relation to the bill that I had on the floor, Bill 205, I guess my question still would be: where exactly does the buck stop when there's a problem?

The business plan refers on page 327 to

the shift to supportive living from long-term care accommodation by facilitating the development of affordable supportive living options, and maintaining quality supportive living . . . In addition, the Ministry will work to adjust long-term care accommodation rates in a fair and incremental way.

A question that arises around that one would be: have there been any dollars put aside to actually evaluate the success of this changeover to supportive living? I had a question further on, but I'll put it into here. Are these standards actually going to come out with provincial definitions, that will be across the province as opposed to being different within the regions?

The seniors who aren't considered low income and wouldn't qualify for financial benefits: how can we ensure that they have safe, affordable care and housing without having to spend all of their savings or, in fact, in some cases having to bankrupt their families so that by the time that next family gets into long-term care, they won't have the dollars that they're going to require?

There's also confusion when it comes to identifying and understanding the basket of services and levels of care provided in homes. Again, this would refer to clear definitions. I'm hoping that that means it is across the entire continuum of long-term care. Systems must be in place so that residents and families know what level of care to expect, and then they can decide on the type of facility that would best meet their needs. I believe that that choice in some areas is not available. People are being assessed for a certain level of care; therefore, that's where you're going to live.

I think that despite the increases that have been given to PDD, I'm hearing that there is still a great deal of discontent out there, particularly in the segment of people who are functioning to the very best of their abilities within our society. Some are actually attending postsecondary schools, but they simply can't do it without their workers with them. I'm wondering if there's any contemplation of extra dollars coming out of supplementals because, as we know, budgets appear to have ways of finding magic dollars after they've actually been released.

I think that for the moment I would ask for responses from the minister on that, and as other people speak, I may have other questions. Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: Hon. minister, would you like to respond now or have a few speakers?

Mrs. Fritz: I'll respond to the last question now, I think, Mr. Chairman. Others may have more questions regarding the housing side, along with that, as they ask questions.

The question about PDD that was put forward, Mr. Chairman, was regarding funding and whether or not there would be further funding in supplementary estimates over the \$509 million, whether or not we're looking at that for the first, second, or third quarter of next year. That remains to be seen because this budget, as you know, has just been announced, and the community will be responding to their needs.

The way that the budget is allocated, Mr. Chairman, is that Treasury Board allocates the funding to the ministry. The ministry then allocates that funding to the provincial board for persons with developmental disabilities, and then that is allocated to the six regions. The regions then take that funding and allocate it to the agencies that they're going to contract services from, and the agencies hire contracted workers with that funding. Then, finally, it reaches the client. So there are a lot of steps in there.

We are looking to increase accountability and to more transparency with the funding. The reason I say that, though, is because this ministry for the first time has had persons with developmental disabilities under one umbrella along with our AISH recipients, so disabilities as a whole under one umbrella. Our AISH budget, as I indicated earlier, has increased by \$85 million this year, which is an increase of 18 per cent. That budget is accessed by persons with developmental disabilities, and their budget increased by approximately 5 per cent.

You can see that it's a little bit early to know, by the time it reaches down to the contracted agencies, whether or not they will be looking for further funding. I suspect that the one area where they may in the future be for staff providing the service to our people with disabilities. That's approximately 12,000 staff that would be looking for funding. So that's the answer to the question regarding a supplementary estimate increase in funding.

One other thing, Mr. Chairman. As I said earlier, this budget is \$1.8 billion. Of that money, \$1.1 billion is for persons with developmental disabilities and for persons on AISH, so a significant part of this budget is for that area.

Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

Ms Pastoor: Thank you. Further to that answer, if I might. I believe that I had sent a letter to the minister asking if the PDD boards may be reviewed. I think what I was asking for, after the explanation, is that it's very, very complex to get those dollars down to the front-line person, the person who's using it. I'm just wonder-

ing if the minister would be free to make a comment on that. I really believe that there's an easier way to get these dollars, which, quite frankly, would probably save a whole pile of dollars as we cut out some of these middlemen. I think that's probably what I'm getting at.

3:30

Another thing that I had forgotten to say, too, was that the Premier had mentioned that actually it was being considered to have continuing care, seniors, whatever we want to call it, under one umbrella. Having AISH and PDD I believe is probably a first very, very good step so that we can actually not have to divide it between two ministries. So a comment on perhaps where that process is going as well would be appreciated.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. We did have a good conversation, as the member mentioned, regarding the number of steps that are taken with the allocation of funding through the ministry to persons with developmental disabilities, a person receiving supports. I can tell you that it has worked for a number of years, but I agree with the member – she had brought that forward to me – that it is important that we re-evaluate and look at all the number of steps and see where we may be able to save costs, whether they're administrative costs, whether they're, you know, operational costs in a particular board. That is being contemplated, and I'd ask the member to stay tuned about that.

The question that was raised in the Assembly before through the member was that of having long-term care not divided between the two ministries but placed together, as you mentioned, hon. member, under one umbrella, and at this time that is not being contemplated to my knowledge.

Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview.

Mr. Martin: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Again, I thank the minister for the comprehensive approach. I'd like to go through, as I see it, sort of the four main areas and make a few comments and ask questions. I know that the minister probably can't get through all of it, and perhaps she'll have to reply to us by letter.

The first category is the seniors. Just some general comments if I may, first, Mr. Chairman. Last year the consumer price index for lower income households in Alberta increased much more than for higher income households, and unfortunately many seniors fall, as the minister is well aware, into that category. The government still did have the audacity to boast that our government will also reduce school property taxes by over 7 per cent and continue to protect Alberta seniors from paying increases in school property taxes, but we notice that there's still more money coming in as a result of the price of property going up.

I guess that the question we asked last year, I think, is still relevant, and perhaps the minister can take this: rather than sort of a selective tax break to perhaps the wealthier seniors, why not a tax break for all seniors, not just those still lucky enough to own their own houses? I know that this is all money, but I would remind the minister – and I know it's not in her department – that we did offer tax breaks of \$370 million to the wealthiest corporations in the province. A lot of seniors could have used that particular tax break.

I think, Mr. Chairman, the point that I'm making to the minister comes down to the priorities that we have. This money, if it had

been given to all seniors, low income and the rest of it, could have circulated among the economy and probably have been better for everybody in terms of even enhancing the economy. I guess that that's the point I'd make to the minister – I know it's not going to change in this budget – that the last thing we needed in an over-heated economy was that tax break, and certainly a lot of seniors, especially low income, could have used that particular tax break.

The other point would be a lobbying one, Mr. Chairman, coming back from question period. Again, we're talking about two departments here, but I take it that the two ministers work together. The ministry business plan, I think, lists pharmaceuticals, and certainly we agree. I think the minister of health in a speech to the Calgary chamber talked about a 17 per cent increase as the fastest growing component of health care costs. Obviously, this particular group is going to be the group that has the most cost here. Again, if she has any clout with the other minister and the government, we would really push our party's pharmaceutical savings agency program. I hope that the government is looking at this because in our estimation if we did what New Zealand did, then it would be the bulk of this that would save us \$75 million in the first year and after that over \$100 million. It would be good, again, for this particular group. So I pass that on to the minister and hope that she would push for that.

Let's look again briefly at long-term care. Admittedly, there's some more money, but I think that even the minister would admit that the supplementary funding in March of \$36 million was well below the minimum \$250 million recommended in the MLA review. Still to this day we're getting complaints in long-term care. As recently as last week I had people coming forward about problems there in terms of long-term care. We haven't even begun, I don't believe, to solve the problems in this area. Our seniors are receiving inconsistent service across the province. Some facilities charge for certain things, some don't, and the minister is well aware that not even the Auditor General could make sense of the billing schemes that are used across our 150 or so facilities.

Again, we come back to the point – we made it, I think, both of us last time – about the need for standards. The Member for Lethbridge-East talked about, you know, a commissioner or an advocate or something. We need to have some way to implement and to know what's going on, and we need to press for the standards that we've talked about. We need to legislate minimum requirements for the number of nursing staff and staff-to-resident ratios. We have no minimum requirements. We need at least four hours of care per day. Alberta's requirement of 1.9 hours is not enough. We need standard qualifications and training for staff – we have no legislated standards – and we have to take inspection seriously.

In all due respect, even if the MLAs that are going around the province were saints – and I've never accused them of being that – it's not the way to do it, where people know two or three weeks ahead that they're coming in. This is why we were suggesting a seniors' advocate or commissioner. They could begin to go in unannounced and toughen up the standards. To the minister, there are still things happening in seniors' care that are not acceptable.

We'll continue, I'm sure, to have this debate, but I asked the questions that went to the minister of health about, you know, the money. Were they tracking the money? The minister's aware, and in fairness to the minister of health, she said: no; maybe we should be. Again I would remind the minister that the massive long-term hike of 2003 – it seems that they're paying a lot more out of their pockets or their families' pockets for a lot less, and there's no tracking going on there. Now, I know that's under the other minister, the minister of health's department. She told me even as late as today that she's going to try to look into that. I think that we should be looking in this rich province at perhaps reversing some of

those long-term fee hikes because it has created a lot of hardship for a lot of families. Again, in a wealthy province like this surely we could afford it.

I keep coming back: if we can afford \$370 million in the budget to the wealthiest corporations in Canada and the world, surely we should be able to do this. We have to follow the money. There's no tracking. So if that minister is talking to the other minister, I hope that they can at least do that.

3:40

Let me move quickly from there to AISH. I guess that the one question I have is about the waiting times, and it's good that the minister is trying to get the waiting times down. The current wait time is 30 days, and the plan for this year is to drop it to 25 and then to 24. The question I'd have: if we can move that quickly down five days in one year, what's the ultimate goal of the waiting list? The sooner the better, but what's the ultimate goal that the minister wants to get to?

I was just a little curious: the government's 18 per cent announced last week will still leave AISH recipients with less than the MLA AISH Review Committee asked for, a little less than we advocated during the election. The thousand dollars which the AISH recipients will now be eligible to receive is certainly welcome, but it was \$25 less than requested. I've wondered why the \$25 difference from the review committee when they looked at it. Twenty-five dollars doesn't seem like a lot, but it certainly is a lot to these people when you live on that sort of amount.

Again, I make the case for indexation. If we can index MLA salaries, certainly we should be able to index the most vulnerable in society so that they don't have to wait for another review. The minister knows that there was – what? – six, seven years before they got any increase at all. I think the minister mentioned that they'll review it in a couple of years or something. It seems to me that if it works for MLAs, indexation should be automatic in terms of people on AISH and, I would argue, for other vulnerable people too.

The only other point I would like to make: there still are a lot of people falling through the holes. I raised this question about the Winspear fund with the minister of human resources, but there were a lot of AISH people on there too with emergency funding.

Just to give the minister a couple of examples to show that there's still some difficulty in the AISH area. For example, a man with terminal cancer requires coats and boots for his wife and three young children. This 43-year-old man has been diagnosed with terminal renal cell cancer. He's on AISH, admitted to palliative home care. On AISH he needed to go to a private firm to get \$500. I know the minister is not aware of this specifically. I can certainly send over this report. Another: a 64-year-old man was diagnosed with terminal prostate cancer that spread to his bones. He needed a grant for \$500 to help pay half a damage deposit. Another one, a grant of \$500: a young man moved to a new accommodation. He had to pay his damage deposit and utility hookups out of his AISH income, which then left him falling behind in his rent and utilities. There's a whole raft of them, these sorts of things, and I know that the minister from time to time will look at these.

This is still happening with the Winspear fund, and there were a number of cases, not all in AISH, some in Human Resources. But they looked at this and said: well, we just have to help these people out. I would suggest that this is the government's responsibility rather than a private fund. If the minister didn't see this particular report, I would certainly be glad to make sure she gets a copy of it. So that's the point I would like to make about AISH, Mr. Chairman.

The third is PDD, and I just have some questions for the minister. I've had discussions about the PDD and whether a 2 per cent

increase is a cut or not. My understanding from the minister – and I hope that she'd correct me if I'm wrong. I know about the \$10 million, and that was desperately needed, although some people are arguing, as the Member for Lethbridge-East said, that they're still not living in great luxury. But they certainly appreciate getting the \$10 million. Now, in the budget she's saying that there's another \$13 million for the service areas, if I heard her right, and I hope I did. That would raise it, rather than 2 per cent across the board, to I think she said 4.6 per cent. I'd just like to confirm that with the minister, if she could do that sometime while we're here. We're still getting a lot of letters and calls, you know, about the funding in this area.

I would point out what the reality was with the 2 per cent. I know that it was happening across the province, but in terms of the Edmonton area, which I know best, they were projecting – I don't know if this was before the budget, and the minister's aware of that – that they would have a budget deficit of nearly \$10 million. They laid out why they had that deficit. It was new people coming in during the year, for instance, that weren't covered to begin with, and there were all sorts of reasons. Then they would have a deficit of \$12 million for 2007-2008, and they just had no way to cover this deficit.

Now, I don't know if other districts are in the same position, but certainly that was their position, and they laid it out fairly dramatically, and it did mean cuts. Whether there was more money there or not, the reality is that with inflation and more clients to service, they were facing a crisis. I'm trying to fit in my own mind what the minister said with the extra \$13 million into this, whether this is in the equation or whether they're still in the same position. It's not only them. I know that the south board was facing some of the same sorts of problems. I'd like some clarification on that.

I'm not sure how much time I have left.

An Hon. Member: Five minutes, Ray.

Mr. Martin: Okay. Thank you.

The last part of the minister's portfolio is the housing. She talked a fair amount about that, but one thing that has become painfully apparent during this last session is how grossly inadequate our current shelter capacities are as many women and children are turned away each year from shelters. That becomes a serious problem.

We've had bills in here talking about stalking, and they're good bills, but the problem is that right now I know that in Edmonton – and I'm sure it's true in other parts of the province – a lot of people are turned away. They just can't take anymore. So we put in new bills, and again they were good bills that we supported. There are just not the capabilities there. I know that there's a 39 per cent increase in housing, but I guess my question would be: what does the minister see in terms of women's shelters and the desperate need there? I know that in Fort McMurray it's a problem and, I was told, in Grande Prairie and other places. I'm sure that Calgary, Lethbridge, and others might be facing the same problems. I think that there's a real need there to deal with that issue, especially in view of some of the other things that we're bringing through the Legislature.

Mr. Chairman, I would just conclude by saying to the minister that there are a lot of areas here, but if we would get some written answers. I know that a lot of things that I'm talking about are political in nature, and we may have a disagreement with the government about that. We'll debate that in the budget, but there are some specific questions that I do have about this budget, especially in the PDD funding, to see where that sits so that we can get back to some of the people that are contacting us.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'll address that last question first regarding the PDD funding, if that's all right, although I know I had discussed it earlier. In regard to persons with developmental disabilities there is a spending target of \$508.7 million. That target is comprised of funding provided by our ministry, of course, as well as revenue from other sources – for example, fees that are collected or interest, up to \$2.1 million there – and the net effect of expense items that do not require revenue; for example, amortization of capital items and vacation liability costs, and that is \$0.4 million.

3:50

I know that your question is specifically about the \$10 million for the wage increase for the contracted workers. PDD will be receiving a \$22 million increase from the ministry in 2006-07. That is a 4.6 per cent increase. That does consist of \$10 million to provide for growth in the number of individuals that are supported by PDD, which is approximately 9,200 people, so that they can live, work, learn, and contribute to community life. Also, there's \$10 million for an increase in wages for the front-line staff that provide supports to PDD. Those funds provide a salary increase to staff that is retroactive to April of 2005. So it's retroactive for the year. Also, there's \$2.34 million to fund future GOA staff salary settlements.

The program receives funding annually, and that's to address a wide range of cost pressures. PDD's first priority, Mr. Chairman, is to ensure that eligible people, as I said, receive the supports that they need to live quality lives in our community. That was another question that you had in regard to the regions and those that say that this funding allocation isn't sufficient to meet their spending pressures.

I believe that PDD will have to carefully manage their caseload, the cost per case growth, and their continued cost pressures for community agencies. While a modest increase has been provided, those three cost pressures still remain, and that may be why you're hearing back when people do overspend on their budgets and continue to look for further funding, which was back to this question: will that happen in the estimates?

I think that it's really important to recognize that it's changed. AISH had been way over here, at arm's length, and PDD over here, but now under the one umbrella, the disabilities area, PDD clients receive AISH dollars as well. Part of the 34,000 clients on AISH includes the 9,200 people with PDD. So not only is it the significant budget of over \$500 million just allocated to PDD, but if you think of a dotted line going down between the two, PDD accesses AISH, which is the thousand dollars per month here in April for the living allowance, which is the medical benefit of a medical card and optical, dental, no health care premiums, et cetera, which is – and I want to talk with you about this too – the personal income support, which may address the case that you brought forward for utilities, for example.

Someone on AISH may require support in that area. That's a new initiative that came out of the AISH review. We have legislated this personal income support benefit, and that will be approximately \$360 for each client if they apply when they have these types of needs that you identified. When the AISH budget is increased 18 per cent, the PDD budget is increased 4.6 per cent. When you see that the clients can access both, that's a significant increase in funding. So I'm hoping that that does address that question.

Just quickly, Mr. Chairman, another question that had come forward was about the school property tax assistance. Yes, that is a program that is in place that is working, and it is for senior homeowners. It's to shield them from the increase in the education

portion of their property tax. The school property tax assistance program provides an annual rebate per household to cover those increases, but it's not based on income. It provides long-term protection against increases in the school portion of the property tax. Approximately 60,000 senior households, or 35 per cent, received rebates in 2005-06, and that was approximately \$39 per household. The payments ranged though. You know, that's an average. The payments did reach up to \$1,700 for some households. As the property taxes rise, it allows our seniors to remain in their homes for a longer period of time, and that's a benefit to the seniors overall.

What you wanted to see was that we take that a step further and that we offer savings to seniors with taxes in other ways as well. We're certainly always reviewing and seeing how we can assist seniors in that regard, and I'll take that under advisement here from you today.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

Ms Pastoor: Yes. Thank you. I'd just like to quickly follow up on what we were talking about in terms of the school tax. Because this department deals with people, this is a story, a people story. When I was in Fort McMurray last week, I visited the seniors' centre, and one of the suggestions that they made was about the school tax. What they're saying is that if they took the seniors that pay into the school tax and actually took that tax and put it into seniors' centres, they felt that that was a better use of the seniors' portion of the education tax.

Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Cardston-Taber-Warner.

Mr. Hinman: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I wasn't ready quite that fast. I thought I had one more speaker, but that was a short one.

I appreciate the minister for the excellent presentation that she gave at the start. I realize that some of my comments will be repetitive, but I think perhaps that will compound the desire to get it done and fix some of those things. I'm pleased overall with the increase in the budget, and we'll just go and address some of the various issues as we go through there.

I probably want to start by just going through the expenses with the school property tax assistance. Seniors trying to live in their homes definitely struggle. The property tax and the reassessment of houses is a real struggle for them. Many seniors that bought their homes at \$35,000, \$40,000 are now being assessed at \$100,000, \$150,000, in the big centres maybe \$200,000 or more. Their income and the Canada pension plan and the other pension plans certainly have not kept pace. I would continue to urge the government to remove property taxes completely from senior citizens on the education portion of it. That would definitely be a benefit.

Running a surplus, we're definitely overtaking our people, and that would be one area where I feel that we could easily move forward that would be of great benefit to all of the seniors and to our communities as a whole because they could stay where they've been for years. They're an important hub of their community. To have to move out because of economic reasons, to me it is very disappointing when they have to do that.

To go to the next step, it's been mentioned many times, but I guess I'd like to talk about AISH and the income for the severely handicapped in that we've raised it. I think anybody in the province realizes that it's a real struggle for them to get by. They come and get together in the same apartments and other areas to try and make ends meet. What I would really like to see is a government that's helping people to help themselves.

We've raised the AISH earnings from \$200 to \$400 before there are any clawbacks. I really see that there are some individuals that can move into and be part of the workforce, but there's such a huge gap. They have a job that may be only paying \$200 or \$300 a month, and they don't dare take on anything more because if they do, they lose their AISH. I mean, if someone's bringing in an income of \$2,500 in this province today, that is not an excessive amount of income. I've asked many times in the House that we should just be raising the tax – well, we shouldn't be taxing anybody under \$20,000, \$25,000. More importantly for people on AISH or with PDD, we should be encouraging them, with our shortfall of employment in the province, to get out and get a job, and if they could earn \$1,200 a month, they should enjoy the fruits of those labours. By working full-time and still having their assistance, they'd be able to dig themselves out. They'd start to have something that's of consequence, and they'd all of a sudden start to feel a part of and have that reward of full employment.

Right now across the board for anybody who gets a little bit of income, immediately that extra help they get from the government is taken away, and they say: well, why should I go and work for \$1,200 or \$1,500 a month when I get a thousand dollars a month for being on AISH or PDD or whatever it is? So I'd really encourage the government once again that with our huge surplus this is an ideal time to allow those people to go out and work and to still have that support. So if something happens in three months, they've still got it, and they don't have to go through all the bureaucracy, if something fails, to try and get back into the system. They feel safe, secure there, and there's no encouragement to get out.

4:00

I'd like to go a step further to help those people with low income and all those in the fact that if they were to set up a savings plan, much like we encourage parents right now to invest money into an RESP, with their social worker for when times get tough – if their car breaks down or their water tank goes in their house, whatever it is, if they had a savings plan and they weren't in dire straits as soon as they hit something, it would be a benefit. If we were to work with their social worker and start a savings plan that they would have cosigning on and encourage them by matching a percentage, that if, in fact, they got out there, were working, and then when all of a sudden things get tough and they need \$2,000 to rebuild their car, there's a savings plan there that helps them to keep going . . . [interjection]. Well, we're working up to that.

You know, you've got to be visionary, looking to the future, not just to the fact that they don't have it. We want them to earn some money. They have to have a vehicle, quite often, to get to a job. Why do we take all those what I call necessities in this life and say that you're not allowed to have them? It's shameful. We shouldn't be doing that to them. Anyway, I would encourage a savings plan where the government would perhaps match, like we do with RESPs, and encourage them to start saving so that they have that and they're disciplined in that area.

Another area that I'd like to talk about is with the PDD and the inequities in the funding across the province. For the areas in the south it very much seems like there's higher funding per capita going into different regions. They don't understand it, and it's something that I feel needs to be addressed and at least allow the regions to understand.

I've talked to you before about the provincial board and definitely have a problem. In the past, before things were restructured, the different boards from the regions were there, and they were accountable to the different facilities that were helping those people through PDD, but now those boards are very much like our hospital boards,

that are under the thumb of the minister. These regional boards are very much under the thumb of the provincial board, and it seems like they're more accountable and have to worry and be dictated to on what they're doing. It would be great to see the regions given back their authority and their due diligence in serving the people in their area and not having to justify to a provincial board. It seems very frustrating to them.

Another area. Perhaps I'm missing the news; I get a lot that I'm trying to follow. There are a lot of individuals that are coming from child care and moving into PDD as they hit 18, and these facilities have already been told that there's no more funding to come to them, and they're in a real dilemma. They can't accept new clients because there's no new funding. I don't know if you've announced anything on that. I haven't heard it. No one has commented to me on that, but we need to have a program in place so that they know that when a child turns 18 and going forward, those programs are extended and coming forward. Right now the biggest fear, I guess, is for those parents not knowing what happens to their kids. The unknown is always the worst. It might not even be that bad, and the ministry might say, "Oh, no, we're going to look after them," but the fact of the matter is that the parents and the PDD facilities that I've gone to all have a great fear of where these individuals are going to go and how they're going to be there.

Another area with the PDD that I've had a few people bring to my mind is that in so many of the budgets that we have, whether it's the hospital, education, seniors, child care, we really don't know – and the good Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview brought it up yesterday – what the real cost is of looking after these children with PDD. What are the parents paying, and is there some way that we can facilitate and help the families more directly? It seems very much like we're organized and set up: if you bring them to us, we will help. But if you stay at home, there are lots of questions on what their motives are and whether they're trying to take advantage of the system. That runs not only to those with developmental disabilities. It also runs to seniors that are having to move out. If there's, you know, home care or an enhanced lodge, how much are we spending when we move a senior out of home care and say, "Well, you need to come to enhanced living," and they move in there?

What are we really subsidizing in those areas, and would we not be better off to allow a family member to move in that might be paid or to bring in a live-in caregiver? What are the real dollar values there, and are we taking people out of their community, out of their families by saying: well, we won't give you the money, but we will give it to these facilities? I would like to see an actual assessment to show how much we're really paying and family are paying total cost as opposed to: well, could we do more to help in-house, in-family care to look after these?

I have great faith in the assessors that assess these individuals. They know that this much money is needed and that the care is being given there. I don't think that we should say that it shouldn't go to the family or to one of these other facilities. Again, that assessor is being held accountable to see that there is no abuse in the system, but if the assessor can't do that, well, then, why have them? Let's get rid of them. But I say that they can, and I have great faith in the assessors and those people that are doing those that they can and will do a great job on that.

I guess that one of the other things, the implication of funding reduction, that one of the facilities has brought to me, is: are there funding cuts in PDD? We've questioned this back and forth. From down in the south the staff had a proposed 8 per cent cut because of the size of their facility. It's another one of those questions that I don't know has been addressed yet, and I look forward to the

minister answering on that. In the budget that they received, they were saying that they're going to get an 8 per cent cutback. It's very difficult for them to know where they really are in those areas, so hopefully that could be clarified, and they'd understand that.

Skipping down now to rural affordable supportive living, \$24,000,000. I'm not sure – and I'm not fully up to speed on what all of the program is – but I think that's a good initiative. Definitely we need more facilities in rural Alberta. There's already a shortage in the big cities. I've talked to people that are living in some of our small communities: Cardston, Magrath, Taber, Milk River. They're having to move into Lethbridge, but they would dearly love to have seniors' facilities and be part of their community and stay there. So I would encourage the government to continue looking in that area to see what they could do to help those facilities because I know there are many people that are coming forward that want to do those areas and provide that for them.

I'd also like to talk a little bit about private care. There's one facility – and I haven't talked to them, so I'd hate to bring up their name specifically – and they've set up a seniors' home. It's a private centre. People have paid to go in there, and the seniors that I've talked to that have gone in there absolutely love it. It's small, just 10 people in there. One registered nurse is the one who set up the facility, and she lives there. It's her home. They retired and built this what I'd call a retirement home, but they treat those people like royalty. If they don't wake up till 8 o'clock, they can come and get breakfast then. They can have the kitchen.

When I talked to the owners of the facility, the requirements were onerous on what they had to meet for government regulations. Safety is always an issue. We definitely want to keep them safe, but sometimes our regulations are ridiculous when we take two steps back and look at them and ask: why have we put all these things in? The example with this one is that they were half a mile away from a six-inch main line. In order to put in a firefighting facility, because they had over eight people, I believe it was, they had to spend I think \$70,000 or \$120,000 in order to put in a six-inch trunk line to have the overhead sprinklers meet the so-called engineering specs. They were way, way overdone, in my opinion. There are many areas like that where facilities struggle in wanting to provide an excellent service, yet with our safety rules and regulations sometimes we need to take a second look and realize that this is a small facility, that it's not a facility with 120 people in it.

The other thing I'd like to encourage on that aspect is that one of the great fears we have in our society today is the pandemic or spread. When these seniors come together and they live in a facility, the bigger it is, the more they'd get affected if, in fact, something comes into their facility. That's where rural Alberta and those small areas have an excellent opportunity to have small, functioning facilities that keep their community alive. There are tax dollars that are going back to those communities and jobs that keep them there, but the most exciting thing is that you don't have a huge group being brought together. They're much healthier, and their standard of living and the personal touch that is received in those facilities are very impressive in the ones that I've visited. I'd encourage the minister to continue looking at and finding some of those different facilities.

4:10

I'm just checking through the list here to see what else we had. [interjection] Checking it twice too.

Anyway, overall we need to realize that the most important thing as government here is that we have to look after those that are most vulnerable. I know that it's in your heart, and you're reaching out and doing that. I hope that you'll continue to have your ear open to

the ideas that come forward, that we can and will look after our seniors better. To me the key there is that we don't want centralization. We want to meet them, if possible, in their homes, in their communities, in a small family setting, not in huge facilities, though they may be necessary in some of the areas. Smaller, more dispersed is what I've received.

It's the same with the PDD in that they, too, love their little, small groups where they can get together in the different towns. It's a great benefit to those people that they don't have to travel long distances or actually get up and move their family to the city because they have children with disabilities and problems. I'll encourage the government to continue looking down those roads.

Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I think I'll just attempt to answer a couple of those questions, and if you don't mind, I'll put the others in writing and give that to you, hon. member.

You began with vote 2, about the education portion of the property tax for seniors and the importance of seniors staying in their own homes. I couldn't agree with you more because it's true, and we are attempting to do that. We have a number of programs – some I addressed in my opening remarks – that assist seniors. Especially as people age, their oral health is extremely important, and one is, of course, the dental and optical assistance program. That program is for low- to moderate-income seniors so that people with moderate incomes living in their own homes accessing this program realize a cost saving where they don't need to pay for their oral health care. As I said earlier, we have about 14,000 seniors that access that program right now per month, which is an incredible number of people – and we're pleased about that – that are realizing that that is there in place for them.

The maximum coverage is available to seniors with incomes that are less than \$20,000 and to couples with incomes less than \$40,000, and that's at maximum coverage. The partial coverage is available to seniors with incomes between \$20,311 and \$30,310 and to couples with incomes between \$40,620 and \$60,620. That's up to \$5,000 of basic dental coverage every five years. So you can see that that is significant.

Another program that we have in place as well – I know that you mentioned, as I said, the tax program – that assists seniors with staying in their own homes is the premium-free Alberta health care insurance. All seniors are exempt from paying health care premiums, and that is a saving of \$520 per year for a single senior and \$1,056 for a senior couple. That, too, is another significant saving, that thousand dollars.

Then we have our premium-free Blue Cross coverage. That means that premiums are paid for all seniors, their spouses, and eligible dependants at a maximum of \$25,000 in benefits per year and per person. It covers 70 per cent of prescription drug costs so that seniors pay 30 per cent and up to a maximum of \$25 per prescription or refill. It also covers the ambulance services, clinical psychological services, home nursing care. What I'm just trying to show you is that there are other programs, meaning that it's comprehensive, holistic, and benefits the seniors overall so that they can stay in their homes.

We have approximately 360,000 seniors in the province. Eighty per cent of the seniors in long-term care and in our supportive-living facilities receive significant support through this department, which is why we had that \$10 million increase in the third quarter for long-term care. That assists our seniors as well. I hear what you're saying about regulations not being too onerous, especially in our

rural communities. That, of course, is something that we can always evaluate.

Your comment about fire and needing sprinklers: I think that that is an important regulation, and I know that you agree with that. It's important because seniors that are in homes, when they've left their own homes, have more chronic needs. They're very frail, for example. In our lodges the average age of a senior is 86. Their frailty includes mobility problems, meaning they're using walkers or wheelchairs. Those are significant things in our lodges, not just mobility but vision and oral health. That age is 86.

As you move up the line, which you were talking about, I think, maybe with the unique home that you were discussing, we do pay people to have seniors in unique homes in the province and in the rural communities. We fund every bed that's available, whether they have a senior in that bed or a person that may have a disability. We fund that whether they're there or not. We try to keep the home fully funded so that as they go through the transitioning of their patients or their clients, they can receive funding.

In the area of PDD, though, I hear your comments about the provincial board, that people in the community have commented on that to you. We did have that conversation, and I would just ask that you stay tuned because you will be seeing changes in that regard soon.

Also, when you indicated about the south region shortfall of 8 per cent and that they said there is a funding cut, I've tried to explain today: there is definitely no funding cut. There is a significant amount of funding in this program. Out of the total \$1.8 billion that we have in this budget, \$1.1 billion is for people with disabilities, and it's significant funding. The south region, though, overspent their budget, and now they would like more funding once again for the overspending that did occur. I know that 21 per cent of their budget goes toward administrative costs, and I can send you more details in that regard later as well.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Whitecourt-St. Anne, followed by the hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning.

Mr. VanderBurg: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I have a few comments that I'd like to make, but first of all I'd like to congratulate the minister on a job well done, not only for Albertans but for my constituents in Whitecourt-St. Anne. You have made a difference. You know, I'm so proud that I was able to get support for capital projects in Whitecourt and in Onoway. Also the concerns that came from seniors throughout Whitecourt-St. Anne that I needed help with, you and your ministry were there to help me.

I want to talk a bit about the PDD increase and how that relates to wage increases. You know, if the lion's share of that increase will go to wages, how much will be left for those that really need the care? I have a constituent that is very concerned about this, and I have a family member, too, that has previously lived in the Michener Centre and is now in a group home that gets funding through your ministry, so I'd like to know a little bit about that.

I have a facility in Mayerthorpe that's about 40 years old, you know. The staff offer great services – they're dedicated; they're loving – but the seniors that live in there live, I guess I'd say, in cubicles. I look forward to an opportunity for the Lac Ste. Anne Foundation, that takes care of the Mayerthorpe facility, to be able to access funds that may be available through your capital projects.

4:20

I'd like to know if there are opportunities for funding in your capital funds for retrofits and for those renovations that need to be

made. With these new facilities in Whitecourt, which is in the west end, and Onoway, in the east end of my constituency, and Mayerthorpe, in the centre along highway 43, I do see an opportunity for seniors from those communities to move back home. Then I do see some opportunity in Mayerthorpe, where we may have some opportunity to go in there and do some retrofits, maybe make two units out of three, but they're going to need some help, and they're going to need some funding. So I'd like to know about that.

I will end this off, again, thanking you for all the help that you've given my constituents and the caring and loving way that you have treated them whenever they've approached you. Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: Hon. minister, did you want to respond?

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Thank you for those kind comments, hon. member.

The lodges renovation and repair funding was part of the \$140 million that was allocated in this area, and \$15 million was allocated last year for this as one-time grant funding. It was provided to lodge operators to assist with the renovations, as you mentioned, for the smaller cubicles, knowing the mobility problems and so that people could access the bathrooms and whatnot, and repairs to the facilities. This funding priority was for life-safety items, repairs to major building components, including the windows, the heating, the plumbing, and the electrical equipment.

The number of lodges that we were able to assist: we had 86 lodge operators that requested funding, and they are being assisted with their first priority items. That is, 77 of the 86 lodge operators are being assisted, and all lodge operators were asked to submit their renovations and repair funding needs. The lodges with the life-safety items and repairs to major building components were given first priority.

Do we have that funding in this budget now? The answer is no. It was one-time grant funding, and it was provided last year. Those decisions on a priority basis have been made. I'll send you the information about PDD.

Thank you.

The Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for Edmonton-Manning.

Mr. Backs: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'm very, very pleased to rise today to speak to the estimates on this department. I must commend and congratulate the minister on a professional and comprehensive presentation. I'm sure the minister would like to see more money go to our seniors, our persons on AISH and PDD, and to see some ways that we can deal with the poor in our society that cannot deal for themselves quite often. I mean, I heard from the Member for Cardston-Taber-Warner who said that we should have savings plans for people on AISH. Gosh, that would be wonderful if there was that sort of level of income there for people on AISH.

I managed to procure some movie theatre tickets for a couple that are in my constituency of Edmonton-Manning who are on AISH. They continually are budgeting, they told me, you know, for things like bus passes and trading off a bus pass for one month from one of them to the other so that they can have some transportation and some entertainment and some variety in their lives. I managed to get them these movie theatre ticket passes, these \$20 sort of things, and they went for a family celebration to see a movie. They said that to them the definition of luxury was what they had, was to see this movie and to actually have buttered popcorn. For them that was the definition of luxury.

It would be very difficult to see a savings plan with these levels that we have right now in our society where they can save any more than just a few dollars or pennies a month.

On PDD: I was at a town hall meeting last Thursday at an historic church in our capital city of Edmonton. There was not a representative from the fourth party, the Alliance opposition. There was not a representative from the third party, the New Democrat opposition. There was not a representative from the government, either in the public service or an elected official, yet here was a full, full church of people, many of them on PDD, many parents. They were very, very concerned, so they asked me, "Are you the government?" I said, "No, I'm not the government. I'm in the opposition." "Well can you speak for the government?" I said, "No, I can't speak for the government. I'm here to listen." "Well what can you do for us?" "Well, I can say what I would like to see."

I heard from these individuals, who were shocked. I'll ask a question about PDD, and I'll bring it forward from these people to the minister. They said that Edmonton would see a 3.8 per cent reduction in their PDD funding, which would cause great hardship for many of the contractors and for many of the people that they are dealing with and for.

They spoke of the great concerns over the maintenance and retention of employees. The Member for Whitecourt-Ste. Anne mentioned that just before me. I think it's a huge concern as the conventional oil industry and other employers provide tremendous opportunities in work and much better paying opportunities and work that draws people from all areas of our economy and, certainly, from the lower paying areas. Historically, it has always been in areas such as PDD and the provision of support for seniors as well.

They said that the \$10 million increase amounted to 30 cents per hour, which for them was significant; it was substantial. Thirty cents an hour really meant something to them, and they were happy to see it. But 30 cents an hour really was not going to do them any good because the way the budgeting is working and the way their employers are having to deal with the budgets and the restrictions that are happening now, they would have reduced hours. So the reality is that there would actually be much less income for many of the individuals working in that. They were saying that they would be forced to leave their employment and leave the assistance of these people. Many were almost at a loss as to what they could do to try and deal with these problems.

Many of these outfits, many of these companies are so tightly budgeted and just have so very little to deal with that they become very, very stressed on a few minor areas. In reality, to hold many of their people they would need \$2 or \$3 or \$4 an hour, which if they were in the oil sector, would be nothing to give. I've heard of welders being asked to go on standby when it was warm in the wintertime, and they were just being held on the company payroll and staying at home in north Edmonton for \$350 a day. For some of the people who work in these areas, that would be just a wonderful windfall that would be beyond their comprehension.

The problems with Alberta Seniors and Community Supports, I think, were documented by the Auditor General, and the need to look at these was looked at very clearly by the committee, the MLA task force. I think the members of that task force desired to come up with some solutions. I attended some of those meetings, and I've had the opportunity to speak with many people who have been affected. Some members of my family have been affected by difficulties and severe problems with the system. That is why I think Bill 205, that was put forward by the Member for Lethbridge-East to institute a continuing care commissioner, should have gone forward. I had put forward at an earlier stage that such a position could even be called an inspector general.

4:30

I think there would be a great deal of feeling on the part of many, many seniors that they would not have that fear of retribution that so many of them have when they are bringing up any problems that

they might have with their facilities. This is a very, very real fear. They're old. They're elderly. They're frail. They don't have a feeling that they can fight back anymore. Many of them don't even have anybody that can speak for them. It is such a problem for so many that they lose hope.

We had many things that were brought up: the inadequate facilities in some areas, sometimes poor maintenance, understaffing – the staffing problem is becoming unworkable for many of these facilities – the lack of staff training, the standards problem, the lack of accountability directly due to conscious decisions made by this government in the past. I would ask the minister to look at something like a continuing care commissioner in the future because I think an independent office with the power to inspect facilities and to ensure compliance with standards would do a great deal to give a sense of stability, a sense of ability to deal with their problems for many seniors and would, in reality, enhance the lives of our seniors.

There's often confusion among seniors and families when it comes to identifying and understanding the basket of services and levels of care provided in homes. I'd ask if the minister could look in the future – because I don't see it here – to provide a consistent province-wide classification system in order to eliminate this confusion. Terms such as “assisted living,” “lodges,” and “supportive living” must be clearly defined. The government must also require that all homes outline in unambiguous terms who is responsible for the cost and delivery of these services, that they be really defined in clear ways.

Systems must be in place so that residents and families know what level of care to expect and can decide which type of facility would best meet their needs. In the Alberta Liberal opposition we've also called for a website, a simple thing to be created, where all facilities are required to fully disclose their staffing, their levels of service, their programs, and all related costs and fees.

Some specific financial questions from the estimates on page 372. For line item 2.1.2 I'll be a little bit more specific than the Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview. There seems to be on line item 2.1.2 a discrepancy in the '05-06 budget. There's a difference between \$8,652,000 and the '05-06 forecast of \$5,652,000. The question is: how does the minister account for the dramatic reduction in spending for the Alberta seniors' benefit and school property tax assistance program delivery?

Another question is: what steps has the ministry taken to more accurately forecast its spending? It's difficult, but it's such huge numbers and such broad projections in the population that it would be appreciated if we could see some sense of an answer to that question.

The minister mentioned it in her earlier answer, but I think it should be underlined and be made clear that the Alberta Social Housing Corporation debt repayment – and I believe that was to the heritage trust fund – is something that is to pay an old loan. Really, it's nothing new, and it's not providing new monies that could be seen to be dealing with providing more assistance to seniors.

It continues to come up again and again that much of the confusion among Albertans about programs and services – and I think all MLAs here get that, people coming to their office. They get this confusion, and it's related to continuing care and the result of housing and health care and human resources and others being split between various ministries. As well, last fall the Premier indicated that consolidating seniors' programs and services is “under active consideration.” To build a little bit more past the previous answer, can the minister explain why this plan was abandoned?

I've mentioned the Auditor General. What steps is the minister taking to ensure that the Auditor General is able to determine how much money is going into long-term facilities, what it's being used

for, and how effectively it can be spent? To echo the Member for Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview in the problems with the 2003 increases in accommodation: I hear this time and time and time again, that there is some need to take care of that because this is still a huge hardship for many seniors. What will the ministry do to at least ameliorate some of the accommodation rates which were increased so dramatically a few years ago?

The importance of this ministry is huge. It is one that in many ways determines how we're seen outside of Alberta in terms of how we deal with those who are disadvantaged, and I just hoped that we could get some more for many of these people. More isn't always better, but for many of these people there is a clear need.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Before I answer the questions any further, could we revert to Introduction of Guests?

[Unanimous consent granted]

head: **Introduction of Guests**
(reversion)

The Deputy Chair: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'd like to introduce the staff that I have here with me this afternoon. I'm pleased they were here and have heard all the questions that we've had so far, and there'll be more to come. I'd ask that they rise as I introduce them to you: my new deputy minister, Tim Wiles; Dave Arsenault, our assistant deputy minister of strategic planning and supportive living division; Mahmud Dhala of our financial services area; and Jason Chance, our communications director. Of course, many of you know my executive assistant, Wendy Rodgers.

Thank you.

head: 4:40 **Main Estimates 2006-07**

Seniors and Community Supports (continued)

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake.

Mr. Ducharme: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. It gives me great pleasure to stand this afternoon and give a little bit of a testament first to the minister that wears her heart on her sleeve. Last fall during the caucus retreat in Bonnyville-Cold Lake the minister so graciously met with the PDD community in my constituency, and they raised the different issues and concerns that they had. The culmination of that meeting led to a presentation last week of a \$600,000 cheque for low-income housing for PDD clients in our constituency.

At that presentation, Mr. Chairman, the parents of these unfortunate individuals spoke of the minister who came and listened and did not interrupt but continued to listen, and they felt that that was a rare quality in politicians. So I guess that maybe I learned something from that personally myself. At the end of the discussion the minister made a firm commitment to assist them, and the culmination of the hard work over many, many years by these individuals will soon be realized before the end of this year.

To the minister all I can say is: continue the good work. The good work that you've done without the assistance of a deputy minister leads me to believe that now that you have a deputy, we can see a lot more great things to come from your department to assist the seniors

and other individuals in need in our province. So I look forward to that.

I had some questions to ask the minister, but they have been asked by previous members, so I won't take up any more of their time. I just want to say thank you very much to the minister, who wears her heart on her sleeve.

Mr. Chairman, is it all right to give the minister a hug before I sit down?

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

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

Ms Blakeman: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I'm pleased to get a few minutes to get on the record with some of the issues around this portfolio. I was the previous opposition critic for seniors. This department is slightly reconstituted, but because of the constituents I represent, AISH is a big issue in my constituency, as is Aids to Daily Living, and I continue to be interested in seniors' issues because I have a fairly high percentage of seniors living in my constituency. I'm also interested in housing. So let me run through some of the issues I want to underline for the minister but also a few questions I have along the way. I'm aware that we're starting to get short on time for this debate, so if she wishes to reply in writing to allow others to question her today, that would be fine by me.

I'm wondering if we're anticipating any future increase in Aids to Daily Living. When we look at her long-term, rolling, three-year plan, can we expect that there would be any kind of indexing or a consistent inflationary increase for ADL? The flip side of that is: can we be expecting that there is going to be any kind of reduction or clawing back or delisting or any change in the level of benefits available through that?

While I'm on the subject of indexing, I would urge the minister to consider indexing PDD and AISH. We keep getting into this cycle where there's no indexing. Yes, there's been an increase this year, but there won't be next year or the year after that or the year after that. We get four, five, or six years down the road, and the rates are seriously behind inflation, and then it's a fairly large budget increase to look at, and I know that it's difficult for the minister to go before Treasury Board and argue for quite a large increase.

If the government MLAs in this House believed in the wisdom of indexing the MLAs' salaries to the Alberta weekly wage, I fail to understand why that same wisdom isn't transferred to the benefits that are available for PDD and for AISH. I hasten to add that the Alberta Liberals believe that MLAs' salaries should not be set that way. It shouldn't be set by ourselves. It should be decided by an independent committee.

I'm looking to the minister for clarification now around housing, and whether her ministry covers shelters and how much of that she covers. Perhaps she can give us a list of where, under which department, we would find funding for things like temporary shelters which include a mat program – in other words, mats on the floor that people sleep on overnight – whether she is covering the women's shelters now, if there's a portion of her budget going toward women's shelters or if that's still coming out of Children's Services. It continues to irk me that we have women's shelters under Children's Services, but this government doesn't seem to see the irony in that.

Is she responsible for the transitional housing as women, for example, move away from the short-term, three-week shelters and into what we call transitional – that's three months or even further than that – third-stage housing? Is she covering that, or is that in a different location?

We do know that she is responsible for the housing in Fort McMurray, and I was looking for more leadership from the minister

around that housing crisis in Fort McMurray. I was up there last week, and I was really shocked at the position that this government would put that city in. I expected that there would have been a better understanding and more support for that particular city. So much of the wealth that this government is able to get its hands on and exploit – I mean, the people in Fort McMurray didn't put it in the ground, but they're certainly helping to get it out. I was shocked at the position that they have been left in, to fend for themselves there.

I realize that the minister has released, I think, at this point two small amounts of land to allow for additional housing to be built, but the crisis there is far beyond two allocations. I was looking for a longer term plan with some vision to it that would give us some idea that Fort McMurray was going to be able to come out of the situation that they're in within a specified period of time, whether it's three years or five years or seven years or 10 years. At what point would we expect that there would be enough housing units there to support the workers that need to be on-site for the projects that this government is approving through its processes?

I was able to meet with groups like Canadian Mental Health, and I went to see the HIV/AIDS network. I was visiting with some of the people associated with the regional health authority. The same issues just come up over and over again. They can't get a quality of life up there because they can't get enough workers to build those recreational facilities and cultural facilities that would give them a quality of life because there's no place to house the workers.

So there really needs to be a team effort here, and I was hoping that I would have seen more of that. I'd like to draw the minister out on what she sees as the longer range solutions to this because if we don't see action that starts today for five years down the road, then five years down the road we're going to be in an even worse position. So what is the vision from the minister regarding that?

A number of people have spoken about the move of the government toward an enhanced living, or assisted living, or supportive living, situation. I note with some chagrin that this idea sprang from a very good idea that was started, I think, in Copenhagen, in which they started a supported living environment for people with dementia, and then it got picked up in the States, and God bless them, they do seem to be able to take a good thing and pervert it in the good old U.S. of A. It turned from a very positive, supportive environment into a way of having people pay for things more and more, so getting away from the medical model and calling it a housing model.

4:50

Really, what we know happened in the States is that you've got what used to be a long-term care facility, except that if you've got someone that, you know, can't really propel themselves down the hall to the cafeteria for lunch, well, the solution to that is to give people more choice, and I'll put quotations around that word "choice." So they now have the choice of paying someone \$2 to wheel them down the hall, or, gosh, they'll extend the eating hours so if it takes you an hour to get yourself down the hallway, dragging yourself in your wheelchair, by the time you get to the cafeteria, it's still open.

I'm really offended by the thought that that's the situation that we would be in in Canada, that we would be steering towards, you know, racing towards the bottom in the care that we give people. But there's no question that the model that is being followed with this supported, slash, enhanced living is exactly that model. I'm interested to see how the minister is going to roll that out over a five-year plan and how many of these units she expects to see under her ministry three years out, five years out, and 10 years out and what kind of fee structures will be associated with the services and with the accommodations there.

I appreciated my colleagues from Edmonton-Beverly-Clareview

and Cardston-Taber-Warner raising the issue of earnings thresholds for people on AISH. I think that that is an area of great fear for people. I know that the government was trying to take some tentative steps in that direction, but they've created such fear over the years for individuals in these programs that somehow they'll lose their benefits if they start to earn more money. I think that there's more that can be done there, and I encourage the minister in that direction.

One of the questions that I get from constituents is whether there is any consideration to making funding for alternative medicine available through the seniors' programs. Increasingly, people are being steered towards acupuncture or various kinds of alternative therapies that are not covered under traditional health care plans. Nonetheless, that's what's being prescribed for them, or seniors are being encouraged to try those therapies out, but they find it very restrictive because they're paying out of pocket for it. I'm wondering if the seniors' benefit program is looking to make any kind of an allocation or an allowance for payment that people could apply for, to cover additional costs that come through an alternative medicine program.

So those are some of the questions that I'm looking for the minister to discuss. Obviously, I'm most interested in the longer range policy frameworks, to hear what she has in mind there that goes beyond the exact numbers on the page now. In particular, I'm looking to see whether the government is planning on continuing to follow the path that they're on right now or if there are, sort of, larger plans in the future and what those would be.

Thank you for the opportunity.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. minister.

Mrs. Fritz: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'd like to thank the member for bringing forward the Alberta Aids to Daily Living program at the beginning of her comments because I didn't have an opportunity to address that in my opening remarks. As you know, this program provides assistance to people who have a chronic disability or an illness, so that they can access basic medical equipment and supplies, and that will allow them to be more independent in their home or in a home-like setting. This program, AADL, supports approximately 78,000 clients annually, so over a five-year period more than 400,000 Albertans may have used this program on a cyclical basis. For example, some may receive a new hearing aid or walker every five years, if needed. It's an important program for people, so that's why they do access it frequently.

Mr. Chairman, back to the question that the member had asked, the budget for AADL benefits has increased from \$79,185,000 to \$83,935,000 for '06-07. It's really important what that increase is for. It includes a million dollar increase to begin the implementation of a three-year pilot project for augmentative communication devices. The community has been asking for that for a very long time. This is an initiative that my assistant deputy minister, Dave Arseneault, who is here today, put forward and advocated for strongly on behalf of people. I'm glad that he did because we did receive funding this year. The pilot is going to assist Albertans who have difficulty communicating due to medical conditions or physical disabilities.

The budget also includes \$300,000 for an innovative program assisting Albertans with problems such as diabetes, and that's to lower their risk of foot amputation. It will be instituted at high-risk foot clinics in both Calgary and in Edmonton.

As well, a \$3.45 million increase for the AADL program supports the caseload growth, price increases, and necessary maintenance to computer systems. Current program pressures include an increasing volume of clients, the complexity of needs, and the increasing costs.

These pressures are due in part to the changing demographics, which you can understand, of an aging population and the health system's move to provide people with health services in the community rather than facility care, which goes back to many of the questions that you've brought forward here today. So from '94-95 to '04-05, over the 10-year period, we've had a 16 per cent increase in the number of clients, with significant increases this year alone in this program for important needs.

The other area, Mr. Chairman, that I'd like to address as well because the member did mention that she had been to Fort McMurray and what she saw were the needs there and asked about the Fort McMurray land sales and how they relate to this ministry – we know about the Auditor's recommendations. Because of those recommendations I have brought in an improved process to sell Crown lands in Fort McMurray. It's through the Alberta Social Housing Corporation that those Crown lands are available. The process that we developed is open, is accountable, and I believe that it will help address those concerns, but more importantly it will truly help to have housing developed quickly. There was a new request for proposal process that I did bring in. It included strict timelines for housing development, providing affordable housing for low-income Albertans. Also, there was a set price for the land. That reduces the impact of the inflated market that the member referred to in Fort McMurray.

The parcel that we just sold recently is known as parcel D. The agreement for that parcel was between our corporation, Alberta Social Housing Corporation, and Centron Residential Corporation. The sale of that parcel was finalized on February 9, 2006. Now, my understanding from my communication with the municipality, with the planning people there, and with my department is that they're actively working on planning and engineering approvals. They are anticipating completion of that parcel D land development by the end of 2007, Mr. Chairman. It is anticipated, as I mentioned earlier, that that parcel alone will bring 2,800 housing units and it may even be over 3,000 if the density increases, which I understand is a request through the proponent to the municipality.

So we have had an open review process, considered a number of factors, including new affordable housing, and I have to tell you that I am confident that this is the best overall proposal for Fort McMurray with parcel D. More importantly, every 90 days we're bringing another parcel on the market. We are bringing parcel F onto the market, which will provide 220 acres. That RFP is out there now. We're looking for approximately 1,500 housing units with that parcel. Then after that parcel, by the end of June, when we've received the proposals and made the decision, we will include a condition that the development of the lots will need to be completed by 2008.

5:00

Then immediately, too, we've been working with Sustainable Resource Development, and that's to obtain another 102 acres of land to be included with the existing 204 acres in the North Parsons Creek. That together could add up to another 1,800 housing units. As I said, I'm confident that that is going to meet very quickly the housing needs of people in Fort McMurray.

Thank you for letting me put that on the record, Mr. Chairman, and I will answer the other questions in writing.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for West Yellowhead.

Mr. Strang: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I just want to make a few remarks and also compliment our Minister of Seniors and Community Services for the simple reason that in West Yellowhead we have aging population.

Of course, I really want to mention Grande Cache. She was a

driving force to help us move forward on the aspect of a lodge in Grande Cache called the Whispering Pine. I think that's a real model to have in smaller communities. We're able to work with Peace Country health to have the units connected, so we saved a lot of money in operations, especially the aspect of laundry, and with food services and everything.

I just find that working with her is such a pleasure, to move along the common-sense things. I mean, this one project that I'm speaking about today has been going on for quite a while. Sure, we had to work through the different authorities to move ahead to get the land to build it, but I just want to reiterate the great co-operation I had from her on this project.

Furthermore, with Evergreens Foundation we did some changing in the town of Hinton. There was an expectation with Mountain View that we had some long-term care units there. We had some assisted living units. We also had a dementia area. Through the work of her and the previous minister we were able to do some changing in there. We've doubled the amount of rooms for dementia, and we went with designated assisted living in the town. We're almost full there with that aspect. The people are very pleased with the kind of service that we're getting, and we're moving along on that.

I guess that the other thing that I have a little bit of wonderment – and I would like to ask the minister on this if she could basically give me understanding of it. We have some people in our area that are sort of looking at the aspect of working on and possibly setting up some low-cost housing units for the seniors in our area. I notice in her budget that on the line item talking about Canada/Alberta affordable housing, for 2006-07 we have \$44 million, but basically there's no more for the out-years of our three years. I realize that this could be a program change or just a program system that we had prior to her becoming minister. I'm just wondering what her ministry is doing to move forward so that we can have programs like this since we have an aging population, if we can work with the municipalities and with entrepreneurs to put up facilities like this so that our seniors are able to stay in our communities because they are a great asset to our communities.

I also want to compliment her on the work she's done to try and move ahead with Jasper. As you realize with Jasper, in a national park a lot of times it's hard to get any type of development. Once again, what we're working on in Jasper is a system where we can move together with Aspen regional health authority to put a lodge in the community so we can have those people stay. What transpires, as you know, in a national park the majority of the time is if you've got residency there, you have to have a job. We don't want to lose those people because they're a great asset.

I guess my final comment I would like to make is about the remote housing. I know that some of my other colleagues, like the hon. Member for Athabasca-Redwater and the hon. Member for Lesser Slave Lake, have done a lot of work convincing previous ministers to move ahead on this remote housing. We have to look after the aspect of our people in our region, and we were able to get the Aseniwuche Winewak Nation some manufactured homes on their different co-operatives. You wouldn't believe how much that has helped the area, and they have got good residents there. They're great contributors to our society. This is going to certainly help in the long run with the elders.

Conversely, when we opened up the Whispering Pine, a lot of people felt that the elders from the Aseniwuche Winewak Nation would not move in there. Well, I'm sorry to tell you, but they did, and they enjoy it immensely. They're very well in the community. I think that with this type of program we have to look at where we came from and give some support. So if I could have the minister give me an answer on that funding, I'd greatly appreciate it.

Once again, on behalf of all the citizens in West Yellowhead I just want to compliment her for great co-operation and basic understanding of what we have to do to move forward to make a precious resource of the seniors, and therefore we'll be a lot better off in years to come.

Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: Hon. minister, would you like to respond?

Mrs. Fritz: Just briefly, Mr. Chairman. I'd like to thank the Member for West Yellowhead for those kind comments because he's a strong advocate and understands this Canada/Alberta affordable housing agreement very, very well. As he indicated, the funding for this program will be ending March 31, 2007. It's a program that we're moving into our fourth year with. We've had \$153 million dedicated to it since June 2002 in support of affordable housing units being built across the province. So \$44 million has been budgeted this year, for 2006-07, to complete phase 2 of the program, and that includes \$22 million in funding from Alberta and \$22 million from the federal government.

Having said that, when you asked about our vision or our plan for the future, with the new federal government we are hoping that this program will continue. As the member knows, Mr. Chairman, and helped to bring this change in the funding that was allocated to the various projects, phase 1 had approved a level of only \$50,000 per unit, whereas now the phase that we're in, it's \$150,000 per unit, which means that we're building 400 units with the funding up to March 31, 2007. So it's a significant contribution to the community for housing, and I am hoping that in the discussions we have with the federal government, we will have the program continue after March 31, 2007.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Deputy Chair: The hon. Member for Lethbridge-East.

Ms Pastoor: Thank you. I'll be very brief. I just wanted to address some comments that pertain to the new housing units in Fort McMurray. I, too, was up there last week. You can send me the answers in writing.

I'd really like to know what the criteria would be to get into that housing. What I'm concerned about is the people that are there trying to create community. They want to stay there. They want to live there. They've got grandchildren. What I'm so afraid of is that it will be the transient workers that are there until the project is built, the physical buildings are built, and then they're long gone. So I'd just like to know what that criteria is to get into that housing because I think it's very, very important that we address the fact that we have a community in crisis. If more transient workers can go in with their little LOA cheques in their hands, it's not going to help.

Oh, and one more thing: check the contracts with the companies. I do believe that there are some contractual obligations out there that perhaps they're not meeting, like by providing camp housing for their own workers.

5:10

The Deputy Chair: Are you ready for the question?

Hon. Members: Question.

The Deputy Chair: After considering the business plan and proposed estimates for the Department of Seniors and Community Supports for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2007, are you ready for the vote?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

Agreed to:

Expense and Equipment/Inventory Purchases \$1,911,905,000

The Deputy Chair: Shall the vote be reported? Are you agreed?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Deputy Chair: Opposed? Carried.

The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I move that the committee rise and report the estimates of the Legislative Assembly and the estimates of Seniors and Community Supports and beg leave to sit again.

[Motion carried]

[Mr. Shariff in the chair]

Mr. Webber: Mr. Speaker, the Committee of Supply has had under consideration certain resolutions, reports as follows, and requests leave to sit again.

Resolved that a sum not exceeding the following be granted to Her Majesty for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2007, for the following departments.

Support to the Legislative Assembly, expense, \$45,936,000; office of the Auditor General, expense and equipment/inventory purchases, \$19,166,000; office of the Ombudsman, expense, \$2,327,000; office of the Chief Electoral Officer, expense, \$2,515,000; office of the Ethics Commissioner, expense, \$410,000; office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner, expense, \$4,510,000.

Seniors and Community Supports: expense and equipment/inventory purchases, \$1,911,905,000.

The Acting Speaker: Does the Assembly concur in the report?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

The Acting Speaker: Opposed? So ordered.

The hon. Government House Leader.

Mr. Hancock: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I move that we now adjourn until 8 p.m., at which time we return in Committee of Supply.

[Motion carried; the Assembly adjourned at 5:13 p.m.]

