

Third Session – Forty-Second Legislature
of the
Legislative Assembly of Manitoba
DEBATES
and
PROCEEDINGS

Official Report
(Hansard)

*Published under the
authority of
The Honourable Myrna Driedger
Speaker*

MANITOBA LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
Forty-Second Legislature

Member	Constituency	Political Affiliation
ADAMS, Danielle	Thompson	NDP
ALTOMARE, Nello	Transcona	NDP
ASAGWARA, Uzoma	Union Station	NDP
BRAR, Diljeet	Burrows	NDP
BUSHIE, Ian	Keewatinook	NDP
CLARKE, Eileen	Agassiz	PC
COX, Cathy, Hon.	Kildonan-River East	PC
CULLEN, Cliff, Hon.	Spruce Woods	PC
DRIEDGER, Myrna, Hon.	Roblin	PC
EICHLER, Ralph, Hon.	Lakeside	PC
EWASKO, Wayne, Hon.	Lac du Bonnet	PC
FIELDING, Scott, Hon.	Kirkfield Park	PC
FONTAINE, Nahanni	St. Johns	NDP
FRIESEN, Cameron, Hon.	Morden-Winkler	PC
GERRARD, Jon, Hon.	River Heights	Lib.
GOERTZEN, Kelvin, Hon.	Steinbach	PC
GORDON, Audrey, Hon.	Southdale	PC
GUENTER, Josh	Borderland	PC
GUILLEMARD, Sarah, Hon.	Fort Richmond	PC
HELWER, Reg, Hon.	Brandon West	PC
ISLEIFSON, Len	Brandon East	PC
JOHNSON, Derek, Hon.	Interlake-Gimli	PC
JOHNSTON, Scott	Assiniboia	PC
KINEW, Wab	Fort Rouge	NDP
LAGASSÉ, Bob	Dawson Trail	PC
LAGIMODIERE, Alan, Hon.	Selkirk	PC
LAMONT, Dougal	St. Boniface	Lib.
LAMOUREUX, Cindy	Tyndall Park	Lib.
LATHLIN, Amanda	The Pas-Kameesak	NDP
LINDSEY, Tom	Flin Flon	NDP
MALOWAY, Jim	Elmwood	NDP
MARCELINO, Malaya	Notre Dame	NDP
MARTIN, Shannon	McPhillips	PC
MICHALESKI, Brad	Dauphin	PC
MICKLEFIELD, Andrew	Rossmere	PC
MORLEY-LECOMTE, Janice	Seine River	PC
MOSES, Jamie	St. Vital	NDP
NAYLOR, Lisa	Wolseley	NDP
NESBITT, Greg	Riding Mountain	PC
PEDERSEN, Blaine	Midland	PC
PIWNIUK, Doyle	Turtle Mountain	PC
REYES, Jon, Hon.	Waverley	PC
SALA, Adrien	St. James	NDP
SANDHU, Mintu	The Maples	NDP
SCHULER, Ron, Hon.	Springfield-Ritchot	PC
SMITH, Andrew	Lagimodière	PC
SMITH, Bernadette	Point Douglas	NDP
SMOOK, Dennis	La Vérendrye	PC
SQUIRES, Rochelle, Hon.	Riel	PC
STEFANSON, Heather	Tuxedo	PC
TEITSMA, James	Radisson	PC
WASYLIW, Mark	Fort Garry	NDP
WHARTON, Jeff, Hon.	Red River North	PC
WIEBE, Matt	Concordia	NDP
WISHART, Ian	Portage la Prairie	PC
WOWCHUK, Rick	Swan River	PC
<i>Vacant</i>	Fort Whyte	PC

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF MANITOBA

Wednesday, October 6, 2021

The House met at 1:30 p.m.

Madam Speaker: O Eternal and Almighty God, from Whom all power and wisdom come, we are assembled here before Thee to frame such laws as may tend to the welfare and prosperity of our province. Grant, O merciful God, we pray Thee, that we may desire only that which is in accordance with Thy will, that we may seek it with wisdom and know it with certainty and accomplish it perfectly for the glory and honour of Thy name and for the welfare of all our people. Amen.

Please be seated. Welcome back, everybody.

An Honourable Member: Welcome back to you.

Speaker's Statement

Madam Speaker: Thank you, and I have a statement for the House.

I must inform the House that Brian Pallister, the honourable member for Fort Whyte, has resigned his seat in the House, effective October 4th, 2021. I am therefore tabling his resignation and my letter to the Lieutenant Governor-in-Council, advising of the vacancy created in the House membership.

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS

Hon. Kelvin Goertzen (Government House Leader): Could you please canvass members for leave to allow the House to immediately consider the Sessional Order which is currently printed on today's Notice Paper?

Madam Speaker: Is there leave to allow the House to immediately consider the Sessional Order which is currently on the notice paper—is there leave? [Agreed]

GOVERNMENT MOTION

Hon. Kelvin Goertzen (Government House Leader): I move, seconded by the Minister of Justice (Mr. Friesen),

THAT the following Sessional Order applies for the Third Session of the 42nd Legislature, despite any other rule or practice of this House.

THAT in the event of a discrepancy between the orders and the Rules, Orders and Forms of Proceeding of the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba, the provisions of this Sessional Order are to apply.

Sitting dates and times

1. To conclude the fall sittings of the Third Session of the 42nd Legislature the House shall sit on the following days, with the following start and end times:
 - (a) Wednesday, October 6, 2021 from 1:30 p.m. until 6 p.m.;
 - (b) Thursday, October 7, 2021 from 10 a.m. to 12 p.m. and 1:30 p.m. to 5 p.m.;
 - (c) Friday, October 8, 2021 from 10 a.m. to 2:30 p.m., and this day will include routine proceedings followed by orders of the day, government business;
 - (d) Tuesday, October 12, 2021 from 10 a.m. to 12 p.m. and 1:30 p.m. to 6 p.m.;
 - (e) Wednesday, October 13, 2021 from 1:30 p.m. to 6 p.m., or until all estimates resolutions have been passed in the Committee of Supply, whichever is later;
 - (f) Thursday, October 14, 2021 from 10 a.m. to 12 p.m. and 1:30 p.m. until royal assent has been granted on all bills passed during the fall sittings.

Withdrawal of Designated Bills

2. The following bills shall be withdrawn from the Order Paper effective on passage of the Sessional Order and will not proceed as House business:
 - (a) Bill 16 – The Labour Relations Amendment Act;
 - (b) Bill 35 – The Public Utilities Ratepayer Protection and Regulatory Reform Act (Various Acts Amended);
 - (c) Bill 40 – The Manitoba Liquor and Lotteries Corporation Amendment and Liquor, Gaming and Cannabis Control Amendment Act;
 - (d) Bill 57 – The Protection of Critical Infrastructure Act;
 - (e) Bill 64 – The Education Modernization Act.

Rescinding the Question on a Private Member's Bill

3. Despite the fact that on June 1, 2021, the question was put on second reading of Bill 237—The Elections Amendment Act, and that—

Some Honourable Members: Oh, oh.

Madam Speaker: Order.

Mr. Goertzen: —a request for a recorded vote was—

Some Honourable Members: Oh, oh.

Madam Speaker: Order.

Mr. Goertzen: —deferred, the question on that bill motion shall be rescinded, and the bill shall remain on the Order Paper until private members' business, debate on—under private members' business, debate on second readings, with an indication that the debate is open. Accordingly, the deferred vote on this question, scheduled for 11:55 a.m. on October 7, 2021, shall be cancelled.

House Business

4. Despite appearing on the Notice Paper on October 6, 2021, the government shall be able to introduce The Budget Implementation and Tax Statutes Amendment Act during routine proceedings on that day, with the bill to be distributed to members on the same sitting day.

5. On the following days the House is to resolve into Committee of Supply during orders of the day, government business:

- (a) Wednesday, October 6, 2021;
- (b) Friday, October 8, 2021;
- (c) Tuesday, October 12, 2021;
- (d) Wednesday, October 13, 2021, and on this day at 6 p.m.,
 - (i) the Chairpersons of the Committee of Supply in this section shall interrupt debate and put the question immediately, without debate, on any remaining estimates resolutions,
 - (ii) for any requested recorded votes the division bells shall ring for no more than one minute on each question and the committee and the House shall rise following the consideration of the last resolution.

6. On Thursday, October 7, 2021:

- (a) during the first hour of orders of the day, private members' business, the House shall consider second reading of Bill 232 – The Emancipation Day Act, with the Speaker to interrupt debate and put the question at 10:55 a.m.;
- (b) during orders of the day, government business, the House shall consider second reading of Bill 72 – The Disability Support Act and Amendments to The Manitoba Assistance Act, with the Speaker to interrupt debate and put the question at 4:45 p.m.

7. On Tuesday, October 12, 2021 at 6:30 p.m. the Standing Committee on Social and Economic Development will meet to consider the following bills:

- (a) Bill 72 – The Disability Support Act and Amendments to The Manitoba Assistance Act;
- (b) Bill 232 – The Emancipation Day Act.

8. On Thursday, October 14, 2021:

- (a) during the first hour of orders of the day, private members' business, the House shall consider concurrence and third reading of Bill 232—The Emancipation Day Act, with the Speaker to interrupt debate and put the question at 10:55 a.m.;
- (b) during orders of the day, government business, the House shall consider second reading of The Budget Implementation and Tax Statutes Amendment Act;
- (c) at 4 p.m. the Speaker shall interrupt proceedings. The Speaker, or the Chairperson of Committee of the Whole and Committee of Supply, shall then put the question, without debate, on the following items, in this order:
 - (i) all remaining stages of the Main and Capital process as set out in appendix D of the Rules, Orders and Forms of Proceeding of the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba, including The Loan Act, The Appropriation Act and all remaining stages of The Budget Implementation and Tax Statutes Amendment Act,

- (ii) concurrence and third reading of Bill 72—The Disability Support Act and Amendments to The Manitoba Assistance Act;
- (d) despite item 8(c), the concurrence motion under consideration in the Committee of Supply (step 4 of the Main and Capital process) shall be debated for 90 minutes, and once that time has expired the Chairperson shall interrupt debate to put the question;
- (e) after 10 p.m. the division bells shall ring for no more than one minute on any recorded vote;
- (f) the House shall not rise until royal assent has been granted on all bills passed during the fall sittings.

* (13:40)

General Provisions

9. A recorded division on any item referred to in this Sessional Order cannot be deferred.
10. During the proceedings outlined in items 5(d)(i) and 8(c), matters of privilege and points of order will be deferred until 1:30 p.m. on the next sitting day (with the exception of the opening day of a new session, in which case the deferral will extend to the following sitting day at 1:30 p.m.).
11. After adoption by the House, this Sessional Order may be amended only by
 - (a) unanimous consent of the House;
 - (b) passage of a subsequent Sessional Order by the House; or
 - (c) written agreement of both House leaders, if the House is not sitting.
12. This Sessional Order will expire when the House rises on October 14, 2021.

And if members wish me to read this again, the answer is no.

Madam Speaker: It has been moved by the honourable Government House Leader (Mr. Goertzen) and seconded by the honourable Minister of Justice (Mr. Friesen) that the following Sessional Order be adopted—

An Honourable Member: Dispense.

Madam Speaker: Dispense? Thank you.

Is there any debate on the sessional order?

Seeing no debate, is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion? Agreed? [Agreed]

Introduction—

Some Honourable Members: Oh, oh.

Madam Speaker: Order. Order.

INTRODUCTION OF BILLS

Bill 74—The Budget Implementation and Tax Statutes Amendment Act, 2021

Hon. Scott Fielding (Minister of Finance): I move, seconded by the Minister of Families (Ms. Squires), that Bill 74, The Budget Implementation and Tax Statutes Amendment Act, 2021 be now read a first time.

Motion presented.

Mr. Fielding: I am pleased to speak to Bill 74, The Budget Implementation and Tax Statutes Amendment Act, 2021.

The bill implements tax amendments and other measures announced in the 2021 Manitoba Budget that supports our summary budgeting process. These measures lower taxes and costs for Manitobans and businesses while enhancing the government's delivery of services.

BITSA will also support economic growth and increase employment for workers as we recover from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Madam Speaker: Is it the pleasure of the House to adopt the motion? Agreed? [Agreed]

COMMITTEE REPORTS

Standing Committee on Legislative Affairs Ninth Report

Mr. Andrew Smith (Chairperson): Madam Speaker, I wish to present the ninth report on Standing Committee on Legislative Affairs.

Clerk (Ms. Patricia Chaychuk): Your Standing Committee On Legislative Affairs—

An Honourable Member: Dispense.

Madam Speaker: Dispense.

Your Standing Committee on Legislative Affairs presents the following as its Ninth Report.

Meetings

Your Committee met on July 28, 2021 at 1 p.m. in Room 255 of the Legislative Building:

Matters under Consideration

- *Reappointment of the Conflict of Interest Commissioner and Information and Privacy Adjudicator.*

Committee Membership

As per the Sessional Order passed by the House on October 7, 2020, amended on November 19, 2020, December 3, 2020 and further amended on May 18, 2021, Rule 83(2) was waived for the July 28, 2021 meeting, reducing the membership to six Members (4 Government and 2 Official Opposition).

- *Ms. FONTAINE*
- *Hon. Mr. GOERTZEN*
- *Mr. ISLEIFSON*
- *Ms. MARCELINO*
- *Mr. SMITH (Lagimodière)*
- *Mr. TEITSMA*

Your Committee elected Mr. SMITH (Lagimodière) as the Chairperson.

Your Committee elected Mr. TEITSMA as the Vice-Chairperson.

Motions

Your Committee agreed to the following motions:

- *THAT the Standing Committee on Legislative Affairs recommends to the President of Executive Council that Jeffrey Schnoor be reappointed as the Conflict of Interest Commissioner and the Information and Privacy Adjudicator for a term not to exceed three years from date of commencement.*
- *THAT the Standing Committee on Legislative Affairs authorize the Chairperson to advise the Speaker of the reappointment of the Conflict of Interest Commissioner and Information and Privacy Adjudicator once the offer has been accepted, and to ask the Speaker to inform all MLAs in writing of this appointment prior to presentation of the committee report to the Assembly.*

Mr. Smith: Madam Speaker, I move, seconded by the honourable member from Rossmere, that the report of the committee be received.

Motion agreed to.

Standing Committee on Crown Corporations First Report

Mr. Shannon Martin (Vice-Chairperson): Madam Speaker, I wish to present the first report of the Standing Committee on Crown Corporations.

Clerk: Your Standing Committee on Crown Corporations-

An Honourable Member: Dispense.

Madam Speaker: Dispense.

Your Standing Committee on CROWN CORPORATIONS presents the following as its First Report.

Meetings

Your Committee met on the following occasions in the Legislative Building:

- *June 4, 2020 (2nd Session – 42nd Legislature)*
- *June 10, 2021 (3rd Session – 42nd Legislature)*

Matters under Consideration

- *Annual Report of the Manitoba Public Insurance Corporation for the fiscal year ending February 28, 2018*
- *Annual Financial Statement of the Manitoba Public Insurance Corporation for the fiscal year ending February 28, 2018*
- *Annual Report of the Manitoba Public Insurance Corporation for the fiscal year ending February 28, 2019*
- *Annual Financial Statement of the Manitoba Public Insurance Corporation for the fiscal year ending February 28, 2019*
- *Annual Report of the Manitoba Public Insurance Corporation for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2020*
- *Annual Financial Statement of the Manitoba Public Insurance Corporation for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2020*

Committee Membership

As per the Sessional Order passed by the House on October 7, 2020, amended on November 19, 2020, December 3, 2020, and May 18, 2021, Rule 83(2) was waived for the June 4, 2020 and June 10, 2021 meetings, reducing the membership to six Members (4 Government and 2 Official Opposition).

Committee Membership for the June 4, 2020 meeting:

- Hon. Mrs. GUILLEMARD
- Mr. KINEW
- Ms. MORLEY-LECOMTE
- Mr. SANDHU
- Mr. SMOOK (*Chairperson*)
- Hon. Mr. WHARTON
- Your Committee elected Ms. MORLEY-LECOMTE as the Vice-Chairperson.

Committee Membership for the June 10, 2021 meeting:

- Mr. KINEW
- Mr. LAGIMODIERE
- Mr. MARTIN
- Mr. SANDHU
- Hon. Mr. SCHULER
- Hon. Mr. WHARTON
- Your Committee elected Mr. LAGIMODIERE as the Chairperson.
- Your Committee elected Mr. MARTIN as the Vice-Chairperson.

Officials Speaking on Record at the June 4, 2020 meeting:

- Mr. Ben Graham – President and Chief Executive Officer, Manitoba Public Insurance
- Dr. Michael Sullivan – Chair of the Board of Directors, Manitoba Public Insurance

Officials Speaking on Record at the June 10, 2021 meeting:

- Mr. Eric Herbelin, President and Chief Executive Officer, Manitoba Public Insurance
- Dr. Michael Sullivan, Chair of the Board of Directors, Manitoba Public Insurance

Non-Committee Members Speaking on Record at the June 4, 2020 meeting:

- Mr. SALA
- Mr. LAMONT

Reports Considered and Passed

Your Committee considered and passed the following reports as presented:

- Annual Report of the Manitoba Public Insurance Corporation for the fiscal year ending February 28, 2018

- Annual Financial Statement of the Manitoba Public Insurance Corporation for the fiscal year ending February 28, 2018
- Annual Report of the Manitoba Public Insurance Corporation for the fiscal year ending February 28, 2019
- Annual Financial Statement of the Manitoba Public Insurance Corporation for the fiscal year ending February 28, 2019
- Annual Report of the Manitoba Public Insurance Corporation for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2020
- Annual Financial Statement of the Manitoba Public Insurance Corporation for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2020

Mr. Martin: Madam Speaker, I move, seconded by the honourable member for Dawson Trail (Mr. Lagassé), that the report of the committee be received.

Motion agreed to.

Standing Committee on Crown Corporations Second Report

Ms. Janice Morley-Lecomte (Vice-Chairperson): Madam Speaker, I wish to present the second report of the Standing Committee on Crown Corporations.

Clerk: Your Standing Committee on Crown Corporations—

Some Honourable Members: Dispense.

Madam Speaker: Dispense.

Your Standing Committee on Crown Corporations presents the following as its Second Report.

Meetings

Your Committee met on June 21, 2021 at 1 p.m. in Room 255 of the Legislative Building.

Matters under Consideration

- Annual Report of Manitoba Liquor & Lotteries for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2020

Committee Membership

As per the Sessional Order passed by the House on October 7, 2020, and amended on November 19, 2020; December 3, 2020; and May 18, 2021, Rule 83(2) was waived for the June 21, 2021 meeting, reducing the membership to six Members (4 Government and 2 Official Opposition).

- *Mr. KINEW*
- *Mr. LAGIMODIERE (Chairperson)*
- *Ms. MORLEY-LECOMTE*
- *Hon. Mr. PEDERSEN*
- *Mr. SALA*
- *Hon. Mr. WHARTON*

Your Committee elected Ms. MORLEY-LECOMTE as the Vice-Chairperson.

Officials Speaking on Record

- *Mr. Manny Atwal, President & CEO, Manitoba Liquor & Lotteries*

Reports Considered and Passed

Your Committee considered and passed the following report as presented:

- *Annual Report of Manitoba Liquor & Lotteries for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2020*

Ms. Morley-Lecomte: Madam Speaker, I move, seconded by the honourable member for Dawson Trail (Mr. Lagassé), that the report of the committee be received.

Motion agreed to.

Standing Committee on Crown Corporations Third Report

Ms. Janice Morley-Lecomte (Vice-Chairperson): Madam Speaker, I wish to present the third report of the Standing Committee on Crown Corporations.

Clerk: Your Standing Committee on Crown Corporations—

Some Honourable Members: Dispense.

Madam Speaker: Dispense.

Your Standing Committee on Crown Corporations presents the following as its Third Report.

Meetings

Your Committee met on June 29, 2021 at 9 a.m. in Room 255 of the Legislative Building.

Matters under Consideration

- *Annual Report of the Manitoba Hydro-Electric Board for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2020*

Committee Membership

As per the Sessional Order passed by the House on October 7, 2020, and amended on November 19,

2020; December 3, 2020; and May 18, 2021, Rule 83(2) was waived for the June 29, 2021 meeting, reducing the membership to six Members (4 Government and 2 Official Opposition).

- *Mr. KINEW*
- *Mr. LAGIMODIERE (Chairperson)*
- *Ms. MORLEY-LECOMTE (Vice-Chairperson)*
- *Mr. SALA*
- *Hon. Mr. SCHULER*
- *Hon. Mr. WHARTON*

Officials Speaking on Record

- *Jay Grewal, President & Chief Executive Officer, Manitoba Hydro-Electric Board*

Reports Considered and Passed

Your Committee considered and passed the following report as presented:

- *Annual Report of the Manitoba Hydro-Electric Board for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2020*

Ms. Morley-Lecomte: Madam Speaker, I move, seconded by the honourable member for Borderland (Mr. Guenter), that the report of the committee be received.

Motion agreed to.

TABLING OF REPORTS

Madam Speaker: Tabling of reports, and I have the following reports to table:

The first one is the 'remount'-report of Amounts Claimed and Paid pursuant to Section 4 of the Members' Salaries, Allowances, and Retirement Plans Disclosure Regulation for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2021; the second one is the report on amounts paid or payable to members of the Legislative Assembly pursuant to subsections 52.27(1) and (2) of The Legislative Assembly Act for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2021; and the final tabling is the Manitoba Legislative Building Long-Term Restoration and Preservation Plan and Annual Implementation Plan for the fiscal years 2021-22 to 2029-30.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS

Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls Awareness Day

Hon. Alan Lagimodiere (Minister of Indigenous Reconciliation and Northern Relations): Madam Speaker, in 2017, the Manitoba government passed Bill 221 to proclaim October 4th of each year as

Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls Awareness Day, making Manitoba the first province to proclaim October 4th as an official day.

This past Monday, I was humbled to attend the MMIWG Awareness Day and express my sincerest respect to the families, friends and survivors who have experienced terrible tragedy. We mourn the loss of Indigenous women, girls and 2SLGBTQQIA peoples, and honour the strength and courage of survivors and those that continue to experience trauma and violence.

We also acknowledge and remember the people who have gone missing and who have been taken from us far too soon. I encourage all Manitobans to speak out against violence against Indigenous women, girls and 2SLGBTQQIA people.

More than 12,000 Indigenous women and girls in Canada have gone missing or have been murdered since the 1980s, and for decades, families and loved ones have grieved and called for greater recognition of the crisis of violence against Indigenous women and girls and 2SLGBTQQIA people.

The Legislative Building was lit on October 4th with a symbolic red dress. The red dress is a visual reminder of the tragedy of missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls and 2SLGBTQQIA people across Canada and is a powerful symbol of hope and acknowledgement.

Madam Speaker, our government is committed to advancing truth and reconciliation and to bring greater awareness and focus with respect to addressing violence against Indigenous women, girls and two-spirited individuals.

* (13:50)

On September 30th, the first National Day for Truth and Reconciliation, I was honoured to attend Orange Shirt Day events in Thompson with many leaders and community partners. One of the most important issues they raised was the tragedies of MMIWG, reaffirm our government's commitment to justice for the victims, survivors and their families.

We all have a role to play in advancing truth and reconciliation. Our government is committed to taking concrete action, in partnership with Indigenous leaders, families, survivors, communities and all levels of government towards a world free of gender-based violence.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: And I would indicate that the required 90 minutes notice prior to routine proceedings had been provided in accordance with rule 26(2).

Ms. Nahanni Fontaine (St. Johns): October 4th marks the official day to recognize and honour missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls and two-spirit here in Manitoba and across our territories in Canada. It's a day to recognize not only Manitoba's MMIWG2S and their families, but all families across Canada coast to coast to coast.

It's a day to show compassion, kindness and support to MMIWG families who often feel alone and forgotten and who appreciate the shows of solidarity and honour for their missing or murdered loved one. It's a day to commit to real action at addressing the epidemic levels of violence against Indigenous women, girls and two-spirited.

On Monday, the member for Fort Rouge (Mr. Kine) and I had the opportunity and the honour to be in Selkirk emceeing a beautiful ceremony officially unveiling a mural in Selkirk. The 'mural'—the mural is in honour of MMIWG2S families and it was visioned by Jeannie White Bird. And she's had this vision since 2008. And so it was a beautiful day on Monday for us to be able to sit and—with MMIWG family members, leadership and elders at this unveiling.

Throughout the day, across Manitoba, there were so many events and activities taking place, including a sunrise ceremony at The Forks, Soles On Fire Run/Walk at The Forks and a vigil and feast at the monument. There were events in Thompson and The Pas as well, Madam Speaker.

I want to just say miigwech to Angela Lavallee, Sandra DeLaronde, Hilda Anderson-Pyrz, Alaya McIvor and Gerri McPherson-Pangman and everybody who participated in honouring and organizing events for October 4th.

Madam Speaker, I would also be remiss if I didn't point out that support and solidarity with families of MMIWG is more than just words; it's more than just posts on social media. It requires real action. It requires financial supports to deal with the underlying issues that contribute to missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls and two-spirit.

Finally, Madam Speaker, I would dedicate my ministerial statement today to Diem Saunders, formerly known as Delilah Saunders, who is the sister of Loretta Saunders, who was murdered in 2014 in Halifax—

Madam Speaker: The member's time has expired.

An Honourable Member: Leave.

Madam Speaker: Is there leave to allow the member to complete her ministerial statement? *[Agreed]*

Ms. Fontaine: I just want to dedicate this ministerial statement to her. She did so much work in honour of her sister, Loretta Saunders, who was pregnant when she was murdered in 2014 and, tragically, she's just lost her life as well.

Miigwech.

Ms. Cindy Lamoureux (Tyndall Park): Madam Speaker, I seek leave to speak in response to the minister's statement.

Madam Speaker: Does the member have leave to respond to the statement? *[Agreed]*

Ms. Lamoureux: It's my solemn honour to speak virtually here today in response to the ministerial statement, Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls Honouring and Awareness Day.

It should be no surprise to any of us the inter-generational trauma that exists because of the role governments have had on many files, whether that be Justice, CFS, Education—are all intertwined within.

As a result, survivors and others have done incredibly hard and painful work to provide us legislators with some tangible action items. That is why we must do all within our power to honour the work of many by implementing and promoting the recommendations of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, as well as from the 2015 Truth and Reconciliation Commission's final report.

Madam Speaker, youth in our CFS system are consistently the highest rate of missing persons in Manitoba, and some of them never come home. Reuniting families and reducing the number of children in care is one of the most important issues we face to ensure that Indigenous youth are safe.

And, Madam Speaker, for vulnerable women, girls, non-binary and two-spirited individuals, there are often nowhere to go during times of crisis. Those who have nowhere to turn when they want to or have the opportunity to and those who face violence at home can feel trapped in their circumstances.

We know that a person's crisis does not work around a 9-to-5 schedule, and that is why we know the role that accessible community support, 24-hour safe

places can play for safer communities and protection of vulnerable Manitobans.

We need to keep families together. We need to reunite them and reduce the number of children in care. This is one of the most important issues we all face to ensure that Indigenous youth are safe. We must continue to promote the stories of the incredible Indigenous women, girls, non-binary and two-spirit individuals because these voices have to be heard. Madam Speaker, it's painful to hear to these stories; however, we need to in order to understand the truth.

Miigwech, thank you and merci.

Madam Speaker: The honourable First Minister, and I would indicate that the required 90 minutes notice prior to routine proceedings was provided in accordance with our rule 26(2).

Would the honourable First Minister please proceed with his statement.

Brian Pallister

Hon. Kelvin Goertzen (Premier): On September 1st, Brian Pallister resigned as the 22nd premier of Manitoba. On Monday this week, he resigned as the MLA for Fort Whyte, ending nearly three decades of elected life.

This Legislature has traditionally recognized the service of party leaders and premiers. I have witnessed and been part of tributes to Gary Filmon, Gary Doer, Greg Selinger, Stuart Murray and Hugh McFadyen. It is the best part of this place that we recognize across party lines the sacrifice that is made by elected representatives. It is the common thread that runs through each of us.

Mr. Pallister's resignation closes a public life that has gone from the Manitoba Legislature to Parliament in Ottawa and back to the Manitoba Legislature. It began in the fall of 1992 when he won a by-election in Portage la Prairie, his much beloved hometown. His wife Esther and he decided that it was important that they run in the election to help the community, which had lost a number of jobs to the closure of plants and industry.

Five years later, Mr. Pallister took a run at federal politics and, after one successful bid, he was elected to Parliament under the banner of the Canadian Alliance Party where he would serve, eventually, as a Conservative MP following the reunification of political parties until 2008.

In 2012, Brian Pallister returned to provincial politics, being elected as the leader of the Manitoba Progressive Conservative Party. He dedicated himself to being an aggressive opposition leader and committed himself to rebuilding the party financially and structurally.

After four years in opposition, in 2016, he led the Progressive Conservative Party to the largest majority government in Manitoba in a century and, in 2019, to the second largest majority government. During those electoral mandates, the PST was reduced, education taxes reduced, and the budget was balanced while maintaining record investments in health, education and investing historical amounts in infrastructure.

Like all leaders around the world, the past 18 months have been incredibly challenging and emotionally draining. The pandemic has forced elected leaders to make decisions that have divided society deeply. Those have come at a personal cost to everyone, including those in elected life, and they took their toll on Mr. Pallister and his family as well.

Members of this Assembly know the challenge of elected life. Whether in opposition or in government, we share that common experience. Every elected person who has sat in this Chamber for more than 100 years has experienced those challenges, and as much as ever during these past 18 months.

* (14:00)

In my 18 years in this Assembly, I can say without reservation that almost everyone I've encountered on both sides of this Chamber have done their best to make Manitoba a better place. The way in which that is achieved is a matter of debate between political parties, but the motivation should not be a matter of debate.

Brian Pallister served with that motivation as an MLA, a provincial minister, a Member of Parliament and as premier. His sacrifice of time, his commitment to service is to be recognized.

Politics is filled with many successes, many challenges, many setbacks, but it is worth the struggle. Theodore Roosevelt in 1910, in his famous speech called The Man in the Arena, spoke of the person who strived valiantly, although not perfectly; whose face was marred with sweat and blood, but who dared to achieve.

Brian Pallister spent almost 30 years in that arena, and today, he has exited it. I know my colleagues all

wish him well as he has greater time for the things and people that he loves.

I'm not sure, but I have heard rumours that Brian Pallister may have a place down south somewhere. If that is true, my colleagues wish him many days of sunshine, safe hiking trails that he can adventure on with his wife Esther and daughters Quinn and Shawn.

May the challenges of elected life fade into the distance, while the memories of achievements be forever vivid. We thank him for his service as Manitoba's 22nd premier and for his 30 years in elected life.

Mr. Wab Kinew (Leader of the Official Opposition): I first met Brian Pallister in 2013 or 2014. We were at the University of Winnipeg's Duff Roblin dinner. It's a large banquet, gala, dinner-type setting at the Hotel Fort Garry, and I was standing there talking with a group of people and Mr. Pallister came up behind me. He grabbed me by the arm, he leaned in close and he said: Wab, you'd make a hell of an MLA.

I'd like to think that I've proven him right over the years, though, perhaps, for a different party than the one he had in mind at the time.

We didn't agree on much, and we were at odds quite a bit this past summer and throughout the pandemic especially. But I would like to acknowledge his service in public life. He was a member of the Filmon government as an MLA and minister. He was a member of the Harper government and, of course, he was both an opposition leader and a premier here more recently.

And so in acknowledging that, I want to say to him and to Esther and to their family, all the best in what lies ahead.

And to the remaining PCs who now try and distance themselves from his legacy, good luck.

Mr. Dougald Lamont (St. Boniface): I ask for leave to speak in response to the minister's statement.

Madam Speaker: Is there leave for the member to speak in response to the ministerial statement? [Agreed]

Mr. Lamont: Choosing a life in public service and especially accepting the responsibilities of a leader is a challenge. It means you are responsible not just for your own decisions and actions, but for those of others as well. Your comments and your life may be placed under a microscope.

And I remember attending, actually, at the University of Winnipeg, Paul Thomas was receiving an honorary degree and he talked about how good leadership requires good followership.

And I had many fundamental disagreements with the premier. That's certainly no secret. When it comes to politics and policy, I think sometimes we would have not agreed on the colour of the sky. We have different world views; that's why we are in different parties.

Mr. Pallister had a vision, though. I think he deserves—it is not a vision I agreed with, but he had a vision. He had things he wanted to accomplish and he did everything in his power to make them happen. We did everything we could to oppose him. I didn't agree with them, but his competitive drive and his vision absolutely cannot be denied.

And I will say, he—I also think he did change and grow over the years. When you look at some of his positions, that he did actually change, as we all hope we can.

And my personal interactions with him were always very pleasant. I remember coming to the Legislature with two of my children. I just ran into him in the hallway. He greeted me and my family very warmly and it was one of those—one—disarming and really welcome moments in politics. And meeting his wife and hearing him talk about his children at events, it's clear he loved them very, very much.

And even during the pandemic, it's important to remember he lost a sister and, like so many Manitobans, could not attend the funeral because—could not have a proper funeral. So he had to mourn, as so many other Manitobans did, in this very tough time.

And I think that's the reality of politicians, the people you see on TV or they're—hear on the radio or on the Internet: we all have a humanity that often goes unseen, and it's not just the people we think that are on our side or that we agree with.

The discussion sometimes comes up with calling somebody in an opponent or an enemy—and words do matter because I think when you call an enemy, it means you can justify doing anything to beat them. And, I think, with an opponent, it means it's more like a hockey game that at the end of the game, we shake hands because we recognize we all have to live and work together and maybe play again.

And I think that's—the division in our politics is partly because we dehumanize our opponents when recognizing that humanity is what is required to bridge that divide or at least make greater understanding and empathy possible.

So it should go without saying, the Legislature will be very different and politics will be very different without Mr. Pallister—possibly less exciting—but there's no denying he left his mark on Manitoba, on the PC Party. And on behalf of the Manitoba Liberal caucus and Manitoba Liberals, we wish him and his family well for a long and happy retirement.

Thank you. Merci.

MEMBERS' STATEMENTS

Fire Prevention Week

Mr. Dennis Smook (La Vérendrye): This year, October 3rd to the 9th is Fire Prevention Week. There are many ways that families can prepare to make their homes fire safe.

This year, the focus of Fire Prevention Week is on knowing or learning the distinct sounds smoke and carbon monoxide alarms make. If there is a beep or a chirp coming out of your smoke or carbon monoxide alarm, knowing the difference can save you, your home and your family. Make sure everyone in the home understands the sounds of the smoke and carbon monoxide alarms and knows how to respond.

Alarms are devices that do not last forever. All smoke alarms must be replaced after 10 years and CO₂ alarms also have end-of-life sounds that vary by manufacturer. A single chirp every 30 or 60 seconds means the battery is low and must be replaced.

Having a fire plan for your home and everyone in that home knowing what to do can make the difference between safety and tragedy. Make your home fire safe today. To learn more, visit NFPA's website at www.firepreventionweek.org.

If you don't have a plan, make one today.

Thank you.

Abortion Protest Buffer Zone Act

Ms. Nahanni Fontaine (St. Johns): This past Saturday, in concert with states all across the US, Manitobans stood in front of this Legislature in solidarity with our relatives in Texas, now under the most restrictive, archaic abortion regime.

Texas is not alone in its regressive, oppressive agenda. At least 12 other US States have similar laws

or are contemplating—said. These laws are all meant to open the Roe v. Wade decision and, on December 1st of this year, the US Supreme Court will hear a case from Mississippi challenging Roe v. Wade.

Why does this matter here in Manitoba and across Canada?

Because just this past June, federal Conservative MPs put forward anti-abortion, anti-choice legislation—the 7th time since 2007—always voted down, but given the chance, these same Conservative MPs wouldn't hesitate to enact laws banning abortion in Canada.

In Manitoba, we've had Health ministers that couldn't even say the word abortion and several PC MLAs attending anti-choice rallies. It took the PC caucus three years to finally approve Mifegymiso and fully paying for it.

In fact, Manitoba has more pregnancy crisis centres than we do centres offering abortion and, as recently as 2019, this PC government gave almost \$17,000 of financial support to a pregnancy crisis centre.

* (14:10)

And every single one of these PC caucus members have stood and voted down my abortion buffer zone. Why? Because they care more about capitulating to their base than they do protecting Manitobans.

Next Thursday, we will vote on my abortion buffer zone bill again. I encourage citizens to email or tweet at their PC MLAs to demand that they pass the abortion buffer zone act.

Miigwech.

Kyle Waczko

Mr. Bob Lagassé (Dawson Trail): Madam Speaker, it is my pleasure today to present Kyle Waczko.

Kyle and his wife, Rebecca, of 13 years, along with their newborn daughter, moved from Winnipeg, Manitoba, to a five-acre hobby farm near Giroux.

He was returning to his roots as a farm boy and the thought of his infant daughter's future made him rethink his relationship with the planet.

Kyle has, over the years, worked as a commercial plumber for Randall plumbing. He has also been passionate and relentless—way relentless when it comes to his work with Ducks Unlimited. Consistently following their mission, he continually

strives to raise important funds for wildlife conservation. It comes at no surprise that most recently, Kyle was named Ducks Unlimited Volunteer of the Year here in Manitoba.

Kyle volunteers as a firefighter and is an active advocate for childhood cancer. Cancer awareness hits close to home, as the son of his wife's friend is battling for his health. Kyle recently took part in the Great Cycle Challenge of Canada to fight kids' cancer. Kyle started out donating blood, which then turned into Kyle hitting a \$500 financial fundraising mark by the beginning of June. Today, he has surpassed \$4,000 and out of 1,000 riders he is third in the province of Manitoba for fundraising.

Kyle's enthusiasm for improving the future of our planet is impressive as he extends his concerns to his family, friends and the entire community.

Please join me in recognizing and congratulating yet another remarkable Dawson Trail hero, Kyle Waczko.

Dave Rundle

Mr. Ian Bushie (Keewatinook): Madam Speaker, I rise today to pay honour to a true survivor, Mr. Dave Rundle.

Dave's grandfather, Chief David Rundle of Norway House, who he is named after, was an original signatory to Treaty 5.

In 1955, at the age of 10, Dave was taken away to the Fort Alexander residential school where he was forced to attend for the next five years of his life. While I could not begin to speak of and share Dave's residential school experiences, I would encourage everyone to read the article in the July 4, 2021 Winnipeg Free Press, to read first-hand some of Dave's sharings.

Dave did not let the experience he suffered at residential school define his life and who he would become. Dave has spent his entire life giving back to his family, his community and his people. Next week, Dave will celebrate his 76th birthday, and in his career Dave has spent over 50-plus years working to give Indigenous people a better life.

I first met Dave when I was just a young boy, and his career led him to be the executive director of Southeast Child and Family Services. Dave loved to interact with people and communities. It was one of these community trips that once again changed Dave's life.

In December 1997, Dave was aboard a plane that crashed in Little Grand Rapids. Dave was among the 13 survivors but, tragically, four people lost their lives that day. And as I share this, my thoughts once again go out to those families that lost loved ones.

Today, Dave, along with his wife Del, who has been a registered nurse for over 50 years, continues to give back to the community.

At 75 years old, Dave works with the Island Lake First Nation communities, and later this month will also take on a role of native language teacher, a true testament to Dave wanting to give back and do his part to ensure our culture and language survives.

As a professional, Dave is contributing; as an elder, Dave is teaching and sharing; and as a child, he mattered.

In closing, Madam Speaker, Dave is not telling stories, Dave is sharing his life and his life experiences. Dave Rundle is a true survivor in every sense of the word.

Miigwech, Dave, for sharing your life with us to ensure we will never forget your experience and contributions. Keep up the great work.

Miigwech.

Community Recognition During Pandemic

Ms. Eileen Clarke (Agassiz): Madam Speaker, it's good to see you.

Madam Speaker, it gives me great pleasure to recognize and acknowledge the many health-care workers, educators and business owners, not only in my constituency but right across the province. COVID has added stress on our health system, in our classrooms and brought forward many changes to businesses and organizations. There are so many people on the front lines as well as behind the scenes to ensure the proper sanitation measures were and are taken, adequate care provided, services maintained and a level of education uninterrupted.

We've been navigating uncharted waters for a very long period of time and many have had to adapt to new work environments, learn new skills, advance in technology and endure long, extended workdays. I recognize the many challenges that business and organizations have had to adhere to and appreciate all the efforts and sacrifices many Manitobans have had to make.

Health-care workers have faced the biggest and most significant burden of COVID-19 pandemic,

many of which are our family, our friends and our neighbours. We've seen the fatigue; we've heard the worry-weary voices as we listen to heart-wrenching experiences, and we see the stress taking hold of many. But in spite of it all, these workers get up and go back to work every day.

Although there is a lot of anger and frustration during this pandemic, there have been some positive changes that have come to be. Many retail businesses have had to explore other ways of marketing and doing business, even create new products that otherwise may not have happened. Many teachers have provided new delivery methods in our classrooms with added technology and found new ways to engage the students. The dedication and efforts of teachers helped many students have a successful year in unordinary times. On behalf of all members of this Assembly, I would like to say thank you to the many businesses and organizations for their continued efforts in maintaining business and to the many health-care providers for taking care of our loved ones during the COVID pandemic, and to the teachers and educated who are in the classrooms and continue to encourage and teach our young people.

This hasn't-been an unprecedented time in our history, and you have all gone above and beyond the call of duty every day.

To those in business, health care and education, a big thank you and a shout-out for your hard work and continued team efforts to ensure the health, safety and well-being of 'manaltobans' is maintained.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker's Statement

Madam Speaker: I now have an opportunity to introduce you to some people, and they are our pages for this next period of time. And it looks like I've lost the two from the front, so I'm just going to start at the north entrance. I'm going to introduce to you 10 students who have been selected to serve as pages for this session, and I would ask you all to hold your applause until I have completed the introductions.

So, at the north entrance—and we are going to do this one at a time so that we can control traffic here. So at the north entrance: we have Michaela Callender from St. John's High School; Ms. Chelsea Capellan from Springs Christian Academy; we have Mr. Ethan De Brincat from Miles Macdonell Collegiate; we have Ms. Lien Huynh from Collège Churchill; we have Mr. Ashton McIver from Murdoch Mackay Collegiate; we have Ms. Divya Sharma from

Fort Richmond Collegiate; we have Mr. Prabhnoor Singh from the University Of Winnipeg Collegiate; we have Mr. Quirin Stetefeld from Fort Richmond Collegiate; and to my right, we have Ms. Abrianna Graham from Collège Bélieau; and to my left, we have Ms. Taylor Keen from Miles MacDonell Collegiate.

So please help me to welcome and encourage these young pages.

Thank you. I would like to draw your attention now to the public gallery, where the six individuals who are serving on the Manitoba Legislative Internship Program for the 2021-2022 year are seated.

In accordance with established practice, three interns were assigned to the government caucus and three to the official opposition caucus. Their term of employment is 10 months, and they will be performing a variety of research and other tasks for private members.

These interns commence their assignment September 13th, 2021, and will complete them in June. They are working with the government caucus. We have Ms. Christina Rabet of the University of Winnipeg. *[Interjection]*

* (14:20)

Could that—hi—Mr. Carson Ransom of Brandon University and Mr. Aidan Trembath of Brandon University.

And working with the caucus of the official opposition, we have Mr. Nathan Dueck of the Canadian Mennonite University; Ms. Celina Oster of Redeemer University in Ontario and Ms. Sanjam Panag of the University of Winnipeg. Professor Kelly Saunders of Brandon University is the 'academic'—academic—pardon me. I'm going to start that one again.

Professor Kelly Saunders of Brandon University is the academic director of the program. The administration of the program on a day-to-day basis is carried out by our Clerk, Patricia Chaychuk, and the caucus representatives on the internship administration committee are the member for Brandon East (Mr. Isleifson) and the member for Point Douglas (Mrs. Smith).

I would like to take this opportunity on behalf of all members to congratulate the interns on their appointment to the program and hope that they will all have a very interesting and very successful year with the Manitoba Legislative Assembly. And welcome.

ORAL QUESTIONS

BITSA Legislation Request to Withdraw

Mr. Wab Kinew (Leader of the Official Opposition): Brian Pallister may be gone, but Brian Pallister's party is still here implementing Brian Pallister's plan. We know that there's a crisis in the health-care system right now, and this budget will make things worse. It cuts millions of dollars from emergency rooms across the province. It cuts money from long-term care during the pandemic.

This bill forces teachers to pay for school supplies out of their own pockets. That's what Brian Pallister's budget focuses on and that's what this party has returned to this Legislature to try and pass. It's wrong. It's bad. It should be thrown out.

The question for the Pallister-Goertzen government is simple: Will they reject Brian Pallister's legacy, yes or no?

Hon. Kelvin Goertzen (Premier): Well, a recycled question from the 1990s by that Official Opposition Leader, Madam Speaker.

This budget will do what our budgets have been—continued to do: to provide support to those who need it most. More than \$1 billion more for health care; more than \$300 million more for education than was ever done under the NDP; more than \$230 million more than was ever done under the NDP.

We know that the pandemic is the challenge of our lifetime. We are rising to that challenge. We are ensuring that those who need the support on the front lines are getting that support. We're ensuring that there are health orders in place to protect Manitobans. We are ensuring that we are ahead, as much as we can, of the fourth wave and that is bearing out in our success in Manitoba.

And we'll continue to do that because we're a government that cares about Manitobans, that listens to Manitobans and that acts for all Manitobans, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: The honourable Leader of the Official Opposition, on a supplementary question.

Mr. Kinew: Does anyone on that side of the House really think that Brian Pallister improved health care in this province?

Complete silence.

I encourage the members opposite to say so, to tell us, are things better for the nurses? Are things better for the patients? We know that this budget cuts millions of dollars from emergency rooms across Manitoba—[*interjection*]

Madam Speaker: Order.

Mr. Kinew: —it cuts resources from seniors care, the hardest hit health-care facilities throughout the pandemic.

And we all know the damage that Brian Pallister caused to this province; that's why he's no longer sitting in this Chamber. That's why those members chased him out of office.

And so they need to tell Manitobans: Do they support his plan or not? Will they withdraw this terrible, damaging budget that cuts health care, or do they support continuing Brian Pallister's legacy?

Mr. Goertzen: The member opposite may not want to look to the right, left or behind him about who is about to chase him out of office, Madam Speaker. But I would say to him, we continue to invest historic amounts in education, in families, in health care. We were doing that long before the pandemic started. But, of course, during the pandemic there have been systems that have been stood up in health care that could never have been imagined before in this province or any other province.

The vaccine rollout, Madam Speaker, that—among the most successful vaccine rollouts of any province in the country. It is one of the reasons why we are in a better position now compared to other provinces when it comes to the fourth wave. We know that there are challenges. We know there's more to do. We'll continue to do that work.

The member opposite can sit in his seat and throw rocks all he wants, we'll do the hard work that Manitobans elected us to do, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: The honourable Leader of the Official Opposition, on a final supplementary.

Mr. Kinew: Bragging about pandemic failures, just like Brian Pallister.

As bad as things are in Alberta right now, Manitoba's per capita outcomes were worse here during the third wave. And why was that, Madam Speaker? That's because this government, under the interim PC leader, cut health care. It's because this government, under one of the PC candidates, refused to invest in long-term care. It's because this party,

under the other PC candidate, slashed health-care funding not only in Manitoba but across the country.

We know that this budget bill amounts to cuts to schools, cuts to hospitals and it makes life more expensive for the good people in Manitoba. We know that they should have the courage to make a clean break from Mr. Pallister's legislative agenda, but they won't. They want to rebrand themselves without tabling a new budget.

Will they simply abandon this BITSA bill and commit to a better one today?

Mr. Goertzen: Well, the member opposite hasn't identified what it is that he doesn't like about the bill. Maybe it's the fact that it invests more than \$1.2 million in health care than his government ever did. Maybe that's why he doesn't like it: \$1.2 billion more.

Maybe he doesn't like it because it invests more money in training nurses, Madam Speaker, to ensure that we have more nurses, something that they never dealt with when they were in government.

Maybe he doesn't like it because it does invest more in education.

He might not like it because it lowers the PST on some personal services, Madam Speaker. He might still be fighting Greg Selinger's battle—the Greg Selinger-Wab Kinew opposition.

I would ask him to stop fighting the old battles, get on board, don't vote against more health care, more education, more family funding like you always have. Support Manitobans, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Just a reminder to the First Minister that we are not to use members' names in the House, but their constituencies or their titles as a minister. So a reminder, please.

The honourable Leader of the Official Opposition, on a new question.

Legislative Agenda Government Intention

Mr. Wab Kinew (Leader of the Official Opposition): Well, all we hear is the PC Party continuing to defend Brian Pallister's legacies, though, so they should be clear: do they support Brian Pallister's plan, yes or no?

There's not a clear answer there, is there? They refuse to say, Madam Speaker. Do they support his agenda, yes or no?

Some Honourable Members: Oh, oh.

Madam Speaker: Order.

Mr. Kinev: They cannot answer the question, Madam Speaker, because—

Some Honourable Members: Oh, oh.

Madam Speaker: Order.

Mr. Kinev: —the reality is this: they have forced themselves into an impossible position. They have chased Brian Pallister out of the Legislative Building, and then they rushed back in to pass his budget and his legislative agenda.

Since they're in such a mood to rebrand themselves, tell Manitobans: Will you repeal bill 28? Will you cancel your health-care cuts? Will you finally invest in schools? Or will you just be a continuation of Mr. Pallister's sad legacy? *[interjection]*

Madam Speaker: I didn't think we'd get here this quickly.

Hon. Kelvin Goertzen (Premier): Madam Speaker, I'd like to welcome Greg Selinger back into the House. I guess he's continuing—he's continuing that legacy.

He's fighting against the PST reductions that are held within this budget. He doesn't want to make life more affordable. He doesn't want to increase funding for health care. He wants to keep it at the levels that the NDP were at many years ago. He doesn't want to have more money for education, Madam Speaker. He doesn't want to have more money for infrastructure. He doesn't want to have more money for families.

* (14:30)

I don't know why it is that that member opposite, the member of the—the Leader of the Official Opposition doesn't want to do the things that benefit Manitobans, that help on health care, that help on education, that make life more affordable. He can continue the legacy of Greg Selinger.

We're moving forward. We're looking forward to the first woman premier in Manitoba history, ever, being elected here in 30 days, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: The honourable Leader of the Official Opposition, on a supplementary question.

Mr. Kinev: Well, it's pretty clear the members opposite are still fighting the 2016 election, because they are supporting Brian Pallister's agenda.

We've been clear on this side of the House. We're on the side of the people of Manitoba. That's why we

called out the disaster at the Maples Personal Care Home. What did they do in this budget that they're trying to pass this year, this week, this day? They cut funding for long-term-care homes.

We called out the transferring of ICU patients from Manitoba to other provinces. What do they do? They advance the same austerity agenda and program of cuts that caused such a disastrous third wave here in Manitoba.

Madam Speaker, they are repeating the same mistakes as we head into the fourth wave as Mr. Pallister did during waves one, two and three.

Have they learned nothing?

Mr. Goertzen: After all these months, and it's the same talking points from the Leader of the Opposition, Madam Speaker: \$56 million more for personal-care homes and support for personal-care homes. But the Leader of the Opposition and all the people that support him on that side are going to vote against it. More money for health care, more money for support for businesses, and all the members on that side are going to vote against it.

Some Honourable Members: Oh, oh.

Madam Speaker: Order.

Mr. Goertzen: All the different support for education, and he's going to vote against it, Madam Speaker.

Well, he has to try to shout me down, Madam Speaker—*[interjection]*

Madam Speaker: Order.

Mr. Goertzen: —because he knows it's true.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

He knows it's true, Madam Speaker, so he has to try to shout me down. That's fine; he'll have an opportunity. He can vote against investments for health care, vote against investments for education, vote against investments for personal-care homes.

We'll continue to do what is best for Manitobans. He'll continue to do what's best for his and Greg Selinger's legacy, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: The honourable Leader of the Official Opposition, on a final supplementary.

Mr. Kinev: What's the first thing the interim Leader of the PC Party does when he comes to the Chamber? He tries to pass Mr. Pallister's budget. Nothing has changed. It's the same budget that Mr. Pallister

brought in in the spring that cuts funding for long-term care.

We all stood up, shoulder to shoulder: We're going to do right by seniors. We're going to learn from the mistakes of Maples. Show me the page where operating funding for personal-care homes is increased—*[interjection]*

Madam Speaker: Order.

Mr. Kinew: —in Manitoba. You cannot point to that page because this budget cuts funding. *[interjection]*

Madam Speaker: Order.

Mr. Kinew: You are talking about the budget that they are tripping over themselves to pass because nothing has changed. This is still Brian Pallister's party; this is still Brian Pallister's austerity agenda.

Will any of them at least have the courage to stand up and take ownership of that?

Mr. Goertzen: What's the first thing that the Leader of the Official Opposition comes back and tries to do? He tries to stop increased funding for health care. He tries to stop increased funding for education. He wants to stop increased funding for families.

He, of course, wants to stop the reduction of the PST for personal services. Now that's on brand. We know that he doesn't want life to be more affordable, so maybe that's not surprising, Madam Speaker, but he's also trying to stop funding for very important COVID programs, for also ensuring that public servants get paid to ensure that programs continue on.

That's what he is: he's a roadblock, Madam Speaker. He's trying to stop all the good things that have to happen for Manitobans in a very difficult time. We won't let him stop all those positive things.

I hope that members opposite in his 'cauca' don't listen to him and vote against that mean-spirited cut-and-stop-things-from-happening from the Leader of the Opposition.

Vaccine Policy at the Legislature Requirement for MLAs

Ms. Nahanni Fontaine (St. Johns): This PC government is demanding every nurse, teacher and child-care worker be vaccinated, but it won't demand that its own MLAs be vaccinated. The minister responsible for emergency measures refuses to tell Manitobans if he's vaccinated.

You have to prove—you have to show proof of vaccination to go to a restaurant or a sports game,

but you don't have to show it to get into the Manitoba Legislature. That is a double standard, Madam Speaker.

Will the Premier kick out the minister of emergency measures from his Cabinet today?

Hon. Kelvin Goertzen (Premier): Madam Speaker, this Assembly has been a leader when it comes to COVID response. We are one of the first assemblies in Manitoba—a credit to you and your staff—for being able to set up the virtual Legislature, and that is a credit to the many people who worked on that.

We have been a leader when it comes to different issues within the building: masking within the public places, rooms that have limited capacity, Madam Speaker. In this Assembly, you have to have had a negative test or a proof of vaccination. That is why we are keeping all of those in this Assembly and beyond safe.

We've continued to be a leader when it comes to the Manitoba Legislature, thanks to you and others, Madam Speaker, and we will continue to lead the way.

Madam Speaker: The honourable member for St. Johns, on a supplementary question.

Ms. Fontaine: Nurses are stepping up, teachers are stepping up, child-care workers are vaccinated, but it's a different set of rules for the PC MLAs.

It's hypocritical to demand proof of vaccination for a restaurant, but not the Legislature. The minister responsible for emergency measures should be helping to lead the fight against the pandemic, not undermine it as he is. He should be kicked out of Cabinet today.

It's a simple test.

Will this government demand that all of its MLAs be vaccinated? Yes or no?

Mr. Goertzen: This government was one of the first governments in Canada that had a required testing regime for those who were not vaccinated, when it came to education, when it came to health care, and others who were dealing with vulnerable people. Madam Speaker, that is something that we collectively did as a government before most other jurisdictions did, but now many jurisdictions have followed.

In this Assembly, those within our caucus who are entering the Assembly either have to have a negative test or a proof of vaccination, Madam Speaker. We know beyond this Assembly there are rules in the individual committee rooms—*[interjection]*

Madam Speaker: Order.

Mr. Goertzen: –and the individual offices in terms of limitations so there can be spacing. There's masking within the hallways. So, many initiatives been taken to keep this as a safe workplace.

Madam Speaker: The honourable member for St. Johns, on a final supplementary.

Ms. Fontaine: This is the hypocrisy of the PC caucus. You have to show vaccination status to eat at a restaurant but not to come to work in the Manitoba Legislature, and demand that workers also get vaccinated. It is absolute hypocrisy.

Every person who leads or wants to lead the PCs—*[interjection]*

Madam Speaker: Order.

Ms. Fontaine: –needs to be clear: is it a requirement for all MLAs to be vaccinated, yes or no? Anything less is just a double standard that the public simply do not like, Madam Speaker.

The question to the Government House Leader (Mr. Goertzen) and any person who wants to lead this people here, this—whatever—will require every—will they require every PC MLA to get vaccinated?

Mr. Goertzen: Madam Speaker, when it comes to health-care workers, there is a proof of a negative test if you are not vaccinated and working with vulnerable people. When it comes to education—*[interjection]*

Madam Speaker: Order.

Mr. Goertzen: –there is a proof-negative test if you are not vaccinated. When it comes to this Assembly, there is a proof of negative test or vaccination.

It is the same rule that's being applied. *[interjection]*

Madam Speaker: Order.

Mr. Goertzen: I know that the Leader of the Official Opposition (Mr. Kinew), if he doesn't like the answers, he tries to shout people down, Madam Speaker. I don't think that that's appropriate at any time, but particularly this time.

Beyond that, which is already consistent with the education—*[interjection]*

Madam Speaker: Order.

Mr. Goertzen: –and health care—*[interjection]*

* (14:40)

Madam Speaker: Order.

I'll ask the table to stop the clock.

Order.

I don't think we're off to a very good start here with all of the heckling and overheated rhetoric that is already starting. I'm going to ask for everybody's co-operation. We've got a lot of things to get through over these next few days. We have agreed to a Sessional Order, and I'm going to ask for everybody's co-operation so that we can, indeed, move that agenda forward. And the idea of yelling across to the point I can't hear is not something that is very conducive to demonstrating a system of democracy that is in action and effective.

So, please, if everybody can just bring down the loudness in here. If you want to have conversations with somebody, go outside or go to the loge, but if we can just get through the rest of this day it would be, I think, to the benefit of the public.

So, I'm going to allow the Premier to conclude his comments.

Mr. Goertzen: As the Leader of the Official Opposition works to control himself, I would conclude by saying that, in addition to the consistency that we have with the rules in this Assembly, there are additional rules within the building itself when it comes to masking, capacity limits, and we'll continue to have rules to protect all those who work in this building or come to this building to visit, Madam Speaker.

Education Modernization Act Education Minister's Position

Mr. Nello Altomare (Transcona): Well, thank you, Madam Speaker, and welcome back.

As you know, Bill 64 was engineered by the current interim Conservative leader, promoted by Brian Pallister and then seconded by the member for Tuxedo (Mrs. Stefanson). In short, their whole caucus team was part of Bill 64.

The Minister of Education called my community members a vocal, misinformed minority, defended his bill relentlessly. In fact, to everyone watching it looked like the first time he heard the bill was dead was when he stood behind a leadership contestant.

So I want to ask the minister: When did he realize, like all of Manitoba, that he opposed Bill 64? *[interjection]*

Madam Speaker: Order. I think everybody would want to hear the answer. Order, please.

Hon. Cliff Cullen (Minister of Education): I'll stand with all my fellow caucus members who listened to Manitobans.

Madam Speaker, before I respond to the question, I do want to thank all of our educators, all of the staff across Manitoba who are working day in and day out to protect Manitoba students and themselves in our K-to-12 education system.

We've got over 30,000 people dedicated to keeping it—educating children and keeping our children safe, and I just want to acknowledge them and thank all the administrative staff as well for the good work they're doing and the work that we're doing with them through public health as well.

Madam Speaker: The honourable member for Transcona, on a supplementary question.

Mr. Altomare: Let's be clear: it was the NDP, families and teachers that stood in the way of Bill 64, and if it wasn't blocked, it would be the law right now, today, and all of this stuff would be happening, even that transformation board work.

And the minister still called these people the vocal minority, right? Published himself these misleading fact versus fiction things. And, in fact, you can still find that very document on that website. All the pieces are there, as Brian Pallister heads off into the sunset, for this Conservative government, everyone of them, to reintroduce legislation that hurts and harms our schools.

I'll ask the minister again: When did he realize that he opposed Bill 64, or does he still secretly intend to revive it?

Mr. Cullen: Well, Madam Speaker, here we go again. Conspiracy theories abound by the NDP.

Madam Speaker, Bill 64 is dead. Bill 64 is dead. I don't know if they've got the message or not. Bill 64 is dead. We've taken the recommendations—*[interjection]*

Madam Speaker: Order.

Mr. Cullen: —from the K-to-12 report. We've put together a Better Education Starts Today strategy. I'm not even sure the members opposite have read the strategy that talks about the pillars and that's providing better outcomes for Manitoba students.

The NDP want the status quo. They want dead last in the country and spend the most. 'Manintoba'—Manitoba students deserve better, Manitobans have told us they want better, and this government is going to deliver on better outcomes for students.

Madam Speaker: The honourable member for Transcona, on a final supplementary.

Mr. Altomare: I want to remind the members opposite that Bill 64 wasn't a random event, something they just dreamed up like that. It was the culmination of years of underfunding and cuts. And what they did to health care, this Conservative government is doing to education right this very minute.

Bill 64 will let them go further. It will want to decentralize control and squeeze schools even more. The results are already apparent: right now larger class sizes, right now less classroom supports.

So I'll ask the minister again: When did he realize he opposed Bill 64 and, once the smoke clears from this leadership thing, are they actually going to do things that are going to improve the education system?

Mr. Cullen: Well, Madam Speaker, Bill 64 is dead. I want the member opposite to move on. I want him to go and read the strategy. There's other pillars in there that provide better outcomes for Manitoba students. Clearly, they decided not to report our report, not look at the recommendations in the K-to-12 report. They don't care about outcomes for Manitoba students.

We and our government care about better outcomes for Manitoba students, and we are going to deliver on that. *[interjection]*

Madam Speaker: Order.

Manitoba Hydro Rate Setting

Mr. Adrien Sala (St. James): In 2017, the Conservative government tried to push through an 8 per cent hydro rate increase. When that was blocked, they used every trick in the book to try to increase rates at the Cabinet table. They introduced three rate-setting bills and they increased rates through BITSA just last year.

Brian Pallister may have exited stage right, but these were the plans of the Minister of Finance (Mr. Fielding), the Minister of Crown Services (Mr. Wharton) and every single member of that PC Cabinet.

Will the minister now commit that no rate increase will ever be approved at the Cabinet table ever again?

Hon. Jeff Wharton (Minister of Crown Services): Well, thank you, Madam Speaker, and, again, welcome back to yourself and everybody in the Chamber.

I was pleased to issue a directive to Manitoba Hydro on September 22nd of this year, Madam Speaker, to submit an interim rate application to the Public Utilities Board, and that's exactly what we did.

Madam Speaker: The honourable member for St. James, on a supplementary question.

Mr. Sala: Manitobans opposed bill 44 last year and Bill 35 this year. If Manitobans hadn't raised their voice and blocked those bills, this debate would be over. Rates would be set at at the Cabinet table each and every year for the next five years.

Now the minister says he's seen the light and his government's seen the light. Well, forgive my skepticism, Madam Speaker. For the last two years, this minister has tried to keep Manitobans in the dark. He's concealed the profitability of Hydro. He hid a \$5-billion agreement reached with Saskatchewan.

So will the minister now commit that no rate increase will ever be approved at the Cabinet table now or ever?

Mr. Wharton: Certainly, we on this side of the House see the light and we want to continue to ensure that Manitobans will continue to see the light, Madam Speaker. We know what happened under the NDP: billion dollars and billion dollars of boondoggle investments.

We know, also as part, Madam Speaker—*[interjection]*

Madam Speaker: Order.

Mr. Wharton: —of the directive—*[interjection]* Maybe the members opposite would like to listen to this and actually hear some facts, Madam Speaker. Apparently, the member from St. Johns does not.

Also, as part of the directive, Manitoba Hydro will work with the Public Utilities Board on submitting a multi-year general rate application on a go-forward basis.

Madam Speaker: The honourable member for St. James, on a final supplementary.

Mr. Sala: Bill 35 has come to an end, but there's no thanks to the minister in that.

* (14:50)

His government has tried over and over to run down Hydro's reputation. They undermined Hydro; they interfered in Hydro. They ran the outrageous Wall commission that failed to mention the \$5-billion sales of energy to Saskatchewan. And all of this was aimed at putting rate setting in their own hands.

Today's events are just a setback for the government's agenda.

Will the minister now commit that no rate increase will ever be approved at the Cabinet table, or are they just waiting for the smoke to clear from their leadership race to try again?

Mr. Wharton: The member speaks of interference at Manitoba Hydro. Well, he certainly has a record of that, Madam Speaker, under the NDP.

We know that bipole-Keeyask project, Madam Speaker, went around the PUB—not through the PUB, but around the PUB—to ensure that they spent \$10 billion over budget. Not only that, they tripled the debt of Manitoba Hydro in less than six years.

The director will enshrine government's intention to proceed with a full general rate application. We know that the PUB will certainly—*[interjection]*—Madam Speaker, the PUB will certainly be able to work with Manitoba Hydro and Manitoba Public Insurance to ensure Manitoba ratepayers are protected going forward.

Labour Rights Legislation Government Intention

MLA Uzoma Asagwara (Union Station): Madam Speaker, in the midst of a pandemic, this government introduced Bill 16, a blatant attack on the rights of workers. Bill 16 would have further eroded workers' rights by allowing employers to withhold salaries from employees or fire employees who are participating in strikes and would have made it much more difficult for employees to unionize in the first place.

This government's disdain for Manitoba workers is clear. They used bill 28 to impose unconstitutional ways—wage freezes on front-line and public sector workers and they tried to push through Bill 16 in the last session. The only reason why Bill 16 didn't pass and is now dead is because our NDP caucus delayed it.

Can the minister stand up and tell us why that side of the House tried to strip hard-working Manitobans of their labour rights, forcing them—

Madam Speaker: The member's time has expired.

Hon. Scott Fielding (Minister of Finance): It was my thought that the—you know, the member that's a critic for Health would ask a Health question during a pandemic, but I guess I'm wrong in respect to that.

What our government wants to make sure is there's a balance between labour and business. And that's exactly what we do through legislation, through other means. Collective agreements get decided at the table between two parties. We want to continue that to make sure there's a proper process and there's a balance between labour and employers.

Madam Speaker: The honourable member for Union Station, on a supplementary question.

MLA Asagwara: Speaking of health-care workers, this government mandated wage freezes and other freezes for Hydro workers, education support staff and nurses—and front-line workers who put their own mental and physical health at risk on the job every day to make sure we can stay safe and healthy during this pandemic.

Manitoba nurses have gone without a contract since 2017, forcing 98 per cent of MNU members to vote in favour of a strike earlier this year. Even now that Brian Pallister is gone, Manitobans still can't trust this government to uphold the rights of workers, and for good reason. It's not just Brian Pallister that has worked to erode the rights of Manitoba workers, it's the entire PC caucus.

When will this government stop trying to cut the wages of front-line workers and finally realize that protecting and upholding labour rights is the right thing to do?

Mr. Fielding: I know discussions are ongoing with both parties. We're going to let those—both parties have discussions, ongoing discussions. What we do know is we won't take a position like the Leader of the Opposition, that actually walked a picket line in the middle of a strike.

We're not going to take—pick sides one way or the other. We want to make sure that there's agreements that are in place that make sense for people, whether you're nurses, whether you're other employees, plus also—*[interjection]*

Madam Speaker: Order.

Mr. Fielding: —the employee is the taxpayers of Manitobans. That process is ongoing. We're going to let that happen.

MLA Asagwara: Madam Speaker, members opposite are hoping that these bills will just quietly disappear so that they can blame all of their problems on Brian Pallister, but we know that every single member of that side of the House enthusiastically supported that legislation along with all the other regressive, austerity-focused legislation that their Cabinet introduced last spring.

Now, we stopped this government from rolling back workers' rights for now, but we've seen this government's record and we know the disdain for Manitoba workers runs deep in that PC caucus. And we're hearing from Manitobans who are afraid that this government will just reintroduce the same legislation under a different name.

Will the minister commit to backing down from this archaic piece of legislation in any form, yes or no?

Mr. Fielding: My thoughts, again, would be that the person that's in charge of making sure the health-care system is right, in the opposition, would ask pandemic-related questions.

We think this process is extremely important. We want to make sure the parties are—*[interjection]*

Madam Speaker: Order.

Mr. Fielding: —together. What I can say is our government is looking for balance between labour as well as businesses. We want to make sure that—not we're taking one side or the other, like the Leader of the Opposition, that clearly places himself, where he walks the picket line, Madam Speaker, during a strike, in the last number of months.

We're not going to make that mistake. We're going to have a balance between business and labour.

COVID-19 Fourth Wave Government Preparation

Mr. Dougald Lamont (St. Boniface): Dr. Roussin says we are headed for a severe fourth wave after our health-care system collapsed in the third wave on this government's watch. There is no other way of saying it: we could not care for our own.

Our warnings to prepare for the second and third waves were often ignored, with terrible consequences.

We have just under 400,000 unvaccinated Manitobans, and staff for only about 130 ICU beds,

which is quite a 'bottleneck'—bottleneck in a fourth wave.

Throughout this pandemic, Dr. Roussin has said Manitoba followed the least restrictive approach, which is another way of saying the bare minimum. Despite tough talk, only a tiny fraction of fines are being collected.

Is doing the bare minimum still this government's policy going into the fourth wave? Because it completely failed Manitobans in the second and third. *[interjection]*

Madam Speaker: Order.

Hon. Kelvin Goertzen (Premier): Thank the member for the question.

Dr. Roussin indicated weeks ago that Manitoba's being proactive. We were proactive when it came to ensuring that there was a regime for testing for those who weren't vaccinated in education and health care. We've been proactive with the indoor mask mandate much sooner than any other province has in this particular wave. Madam Speaker, we continue to be proactive when it comes to public health orders.

That is one of the reasons Manitoba is in a better place than almost every province in Canada, Madam Speaker, but that doesn't mean that we're not continuing to look at things that we need to do to ensure that we blunt that fourth wave. We know that a fourth wave is here in Manitoba. We're doing everything we can to blunt it, not by doing the minimum but by being proactive, and that is bearing fruit at this point.

Madam Speaker: The honourable member for St. Boniface, on a supplementary question.

COVID-19 and Schools Availability of Rapid Tests

Mr. Dougald Lamont (St. Boniface): A major factor in controlling the pandemic is tracking cases, which requires intensive testing and contact tracing. We've also heard and seen that the government insists on keeping schools open as long as possible, despite the fact that the Delta variant is more contagious and deadly, that children under 12 can't yet be vaccinated. If this is the case, the government needs to be doing everything it can to keep children safe from contracting COVID.

Last year, we heard from school officials that principals were spending all their time on contact tracing. That's a job for public health, not the school

system. We also know this government has hundreds of thousands of rapid tests.

Why is Manitoba one of the only provinces that is not making these tests freely available, especially to parents and schools?

Hon. Kelvin Goertzen (Premier): Madam Speaker, this government has been a leader when it comes to ensuring that we are being proactive on measures when it comes to public health. Many other provinces have been following that lead. That doesn't mean that there aren't other things that need to be done or that we're not looking at and, together with Public Health, we are always looking at those things that can help to blunt that fourth wave.

Madam Speaker, I did have a discussion with a gentleman just a few weeks ago on the phone who told me that—and credited Manitoba for the work that they were doing getting ahead of the fourth wave. Oh, and that gentleman's name was Justin Trudeau.

* (15:00)

Surgery Backlogs Request to Address

Hon. Jon Gerrard (River Heights): Madam Speaker, under this government, tens of thousands of Manitobans are waiting and suffering in pain or with poor eyesight because of massive surgical backlogs. For more than a year the government has known that there would be backlogs and yet we still have not been shown the plan to address them.

Instead, the government is ensnarled in a leadership race and is missing in action when it comes to critical issues which are needed for Manitobans.

Why has the government abandoned tens of thousands of suffering Manitobans?

Hon. Audrey Gordon (Minister of Health and Seniors Care): Madam Speaker, today I rise in the Chamber for the first time as the Minister of Health and Seniors Care, in addition to my existing role as the Minister of Mental Health, Wellness and Recovery. I want to thank the Premier (Mr. Goertzen) for this opportunity to serve Manitoba as we enter the fourth wave.

I also want to say thank you to our doctors, nurses, health-care aides, paramedics, EMS workers and countless other health-care professionals. 'Manitobas' are grateful for your heroic efforts.

Today, Madam Speaker, is a significant milestone in our vaccination campaign. Manitoba's administered

2 million doses. Thank you for your historic efforts. Please continue to roll up your sleeves and get vaccinated.

Early Learning and Child Care Canada-Manitoba Agreement

Mr. Len Isleifson (Brandon East): On August the 9th, Manitoba signed a historic five-year agreement with Canada to offer affordable, high-quality, flexible and inclusive early-learning child care to all families in Manitoba.

Can the Minister of Families update the House on this recent agreement and how this investment will positively impact Manitoba families as we move towards a post-pandemic economy?

Hon. Rochelle Squires (Minister of Families): I'd like to thank my friend from Brandon East for that question.

Our government was very pleased to work with our colleagues in Ottawa, as well as the child-care sector in the province of Manitoba, to sign this historic agreement and work towards creating 23,000 new child-care spaces over the next five years.

We also believe that child care should be affordable and accessible to all families and that is why we are committing to an average of \$10-a-day child care for all families, regardless of where you live in the province of Manitoba.

We also believe in a strong, sustainable child-care sector and that is why we are committed to working with the association and increasing those wages and making that sector stable.

I'd like to thank everyone who works in child care for all their dedicated efforts at keeping our children safe and keeping their child-care centre doors open.

Thank you.

Madam Speaker: The time for oral questions has expired.

PETITIONS

Madam Speaker: Are there any petitions? If there are no petitions—oh, the honourable member for Elmwood.

Louise Bridge

Mr. Jim Maloway (Elmwood): I wish to present the following petition to the Legislative Assembly.

The background to this petition is as follows:

(1) Over 25,000 vehicles per day cross the Louise Bridge, which has served as the vital link for vehicular traffic between northeast Winnipeg and the downtown for the last 110 years.

(2) The current structure will undoubtedly be declared unsafe in a few years. It has deteriorated extensively, becoming functionally obsolete, subject to more frequent unplanned repairs and cannot be widened to accommodate future traffic capacity.

(3) As far back as 2008, the City of Winnipeg has studied where the new replacement bridge should be situated.

(4) After including the bridge replacement in the City's five-year capital budget forecast in 2009, the new bridge became a short-term construction priority in the City's transportation master plan of 2010-11. *[interjection]*

Madam Speaker: Order.

Mr. Maloway: (5) City capital and budget plans identified replacement of the Louise Bridge on a site just east of the bridge. They expropriated homes there on the south side of Nairn street in anticipation of a 2015 start.

(6) In 2014, the new City administration—*[interjection]*

Madam Speaker: Order.

Mr. Maloway: (6) In 2014, the new City administration did not make use of available federal infrastructure funds, and instead decided to fund an off-the-list, low-priority Waverley Underpass.

(7) The new Louise Bridge Committee began its campaign to demand a new bridge and its surveys confirmed the residents wanted a new bridge beside the current bridge, with the old bridge kept open for local traffic.

(8) The NDP provincial government signalled its firm commitment to partner with the City on replacing the Louise Bridge in its 2015 Throne Speech. Unfortunately, provincial infrastructure initiatives, such as the new Louise Bridge, came to a halt with the election of the Progressive Conservative government in 2016.

(9) More recently, the City tethered the Louise Bridge replacement issue to its new transportation master plan and eastern corridor project. Its recommendations have now identified the location of the new bridge to be placed just to the west of the current bridge, not to the east as originally proposed.

We petition the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba as follows:

(1) To urge the provincial government to financially assist the City of Winnipeg on building this three-lane bridge in each direction to maintain this vital link between northeast Winnipeg and the downtown.

(2) To urge the provincial government to recommend the City of Winnipeg keep the old bridge fully open to traffic while a new bridge is under construction and consider the feasibility of keeping it open for active transportation in the future.

And this petition has been signed by many Manitobans.

Madam Speaker: In accordance with our rule 133(6), when petitions are read, they are deemed to be received by the House.

Are there any further petitions?

If not, grievances?

ORDERS OF THE DAY

GOVERNMENT BUSINESS

House Business

Hon. Kelvin Goertzen (Government House Leader): I have a leave request.

Could you please canvass the House for leave to allow the transfer of sponsorship for the following items: Bill 233, The Filipino Heritage Month Act, currently sponsored by the honourable Minister of Economic Development and Jobs (Mr. Reyes), transferred to the honourable member for Lagimodière (Mr. Smith); and the private member's resolution No. 4, Inclusion of Sergeant Tommy Prince on the \$5 Bill, currently sponsored by the honourable Minister of Indigenous Reconciliation and Northern Relations (Mr. Lagimodiere), transferred to the honourable member for McPhillips (Mr. Martin).

Madam Speaker: Is there leave to allow for the transfer of sponsorship for the following items: Bill 233, The Filipino Heritage Month Act, currently sponsored by the honourable Minister of Economic Development and Jobs (Mr. Reyes), transferred to the honourable member for Lagimodière (Mr. Smith); and the private member's resolution No. 4, Inclusion

of Sergeant Tommy Prince on the \$5 Bill, currently sponsored by the honourable Minister of Indigenous Reconciliation and Northern Relations (Mr. Lagimodiere), transferred to the honourable member for McPhillips (Mr. Martin).

Is there leave? *[Agreed]*

Mr. Goertzen: Thank the House for the granting of leave.

Madam Speaker, I have a second leave request. Could you please canvass the House for leave to make the following permanent changes to the Estimates sequence:

(1) move Executive Council from room 254 to the—it would be the next department considered in the Chamber;

(2) move Sport, Culture and Heritage from the Chamber to be the last department considered in room 255;

(3) move Health and Seniors Care from the Chamber to be the next department considered in room 254; and

(4) move Mental Health, Wellness and Recovery from room 255 to be considered in room 254 following Health and Seniors Care.

Madam Speaker: Is there leave to make the following permanent changes to the Estimates sequence:

(1) move Executive Council from room 254 to be the next department considered in the Chamber;

(2) move Sport, Culture and Heritage from the Chamber to be the last department considered in room 255;

(3) move Health and Seniors Care from the Chamber to be the next department considered in room 254; and

(4) move Mental Health, Wellness and Recovery from room 255 to be considered in room 254 following Health and Seniors Care.

Is there leave? *[Agreed]*

* * *

* (15:10)

Mr. Goertzen: Could you please resolve the House into Committee of Supply.

Madam Speaker: It has been announced that the House will now consider Estimates this afternoon.

The House will now resolve into Committee of Supply.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, please take the Chair.

**COMMITTEE OF SUPPLY
(Concurrent Sections)**

ROOM 254

HEALTH AND SENIORS CARE

* (15:30)

Mr. Chairperson (Dennis Smook): Good afternoon, everyone.

Will the Committee of Supply please come to order. This section of the Committee of Supply will now resume consideration of the Estimates for the Department of Health and Seniors Care which last met on May the 25th, 2021 in another section of the Committee of Supply.

As previously agreed, questions for this department will proceed in a global manner. When the speaker has one minute left, I will raise this little note just to give them a heads-up that they have one minute left. The floor is now open for questions.

MLA Uzoma Asagwara (Union Station): I'd like to take this opportunity to welcome the minister to her new role as Minister for Health and I'd like to start by asking some questions about, you know, COVID-19, this pandemic and the fourth wave.

I understand, and we all understand, that staffing has been very challenging in the southern region of the province. We're hearing, you know, a lot of reports. We've been hearing for some time that staffing there has been under, you know, quite a bit of strain.

Can the minister advise as to whether or not admissions to Salem and to Tabor PCH—personal-care homes—will remain open and what exactly are the plans there?

Mr. Chairperson: Could the minister please give me a signal when she is ready to start?

The honourable Minister of Health and Seniors Care.

Hon. Audrey Gordon (Minister of Health and Seniors Care): Before I respond, I want to take a few minutes to make some opening comments.

This will be my first Estimates process as a minister of the Crown in my portfolios of Health and

Seniors Care and Minister of Mental Health, Wellness and Recovery.

I want to express my sincere gratitude to Dr. Brent Roussin, Dr. Joss Reimer, Dr. Jazz Atwal, Lanette Siragusa, Johanu Botha and the many leaders and members of Manitoba's COVID-19 response team, Manitoba's vaccination implementation task force as well and the First Nations Pandemic Response Co-ordination Team. Thank you for the leadership, guidance, dedication, commitment and compassion you've shown your fellow Manitobans during the pandemic.

To our doctors, nurses, paramedics, EMS workers, health-care aides, pharmacists and countless other health-care professionals: we know these have been the most difficult years of your career. Manitobans are grateful for the heroic efforts you have displayed and the remarkable courage and perseverance you have shown in the face of incredible challenges.

A special thank you to Deputy Minister Karen Herd, her assistant deputies and the departmental staff of Manitoba Health and Seniors Care. Manitobans recognize and appreciate the hard work and long hours you've all put into keep Manitobans safe.

Today is a significant milestone in Manitoba's vaccination campaign with 2 million COVID doses administered. Thank you to those who have participated in our historic vaccination efforts thus far. And I encourage those who have not yet to roll up their sleeves and get vaccinated.

I would also like to take some time to put on the record some of the work being done by this government to help fight COVID-19 and to help protect Manitobans in the largest vaccination campaign ever seen in Manitoba's history.

Over 2 million, three—over 2 million vaccinations were administered. This led to 85.3 per cent of eligible Manitobans receiving at least one dose, and 81.3 per cent are now fully vaccinated.

We have worked collaboratively with 63 First Nations and 50 Northern Affairs communities in partnership with the Manitoba First Nations COVID-19 pandemic response co-ordination team.

We've brought in over \$1.2 billion of COVID-19 funding in Budget 2021. We've frozen the Pharmacare deductible to help provide COVID relief to Manitobans. We've given \$60 million to regional health authorities to offset COVID-related costs to

protect Manitobans, another \$205.3 million to personal-care homes, community health agencies, service delivery organizations to offset COVID costs.

We've expanded vaccine third doses to immunocompromised individuals, PCH residents and employees, health-care personnel and for use during travel.

We've implemented hundreds of pop-up clinics to vaccinate Manitobans closer to home, as well as FIT teams, ensuring that every personal-care home in Manitoba had the ability to vaccinate their residents.

We've expanded vaccine distribution to nearly 500 doctors' offices and pharmacies; raised eight vaccination supersites, two in Winnipeg and sites in Morden, Brandon, Selkirk, Steinbach, Thompson and Dauphin; partnered with five urban Indigenous community organizations in Manitoba to create Indigenous-led immunization clinics to help vaccinate at-risk urban populations as well as our homeless populations.

We're a part of the team that introduced Manitoba's paid sick leave program, providing direct financial assistance to Manitobans having to take time off work due to COVID-19.

We've partnered with North Dakota to ensure that 2,500 essential truck drivers were vaccinated, allowing Manitoba's economy to keep moving; partnered with Manitoba businesses; implemented the Fast Pass pilot program; commissioned an independent review of the Maples Long Term Care Home; launched a new partnership with doctors and pharmacists to help provide resources for those who are vaccine hesitant.

And this is only a brief snapshot of the vaccine work.

I would now be happy to answer any questions you may have. And I also want to introduce my officials: Karen Herd, deputy minister; Sandra Henault, acting deputy minister, executive financial officer, Manitoba Health and Seniors Care.

MLA Asagwara: I can certainly appreciate the minister's recap, although I think we're all well aware, actually, of the details that she shared.

I'm going to repeat my question in the hopes that the minister, for the sake of time, will provide a direct response.

As I stated, we understand and we know, or we're all well aware, that there's staffing challenges in the

southern region. Can the minister tell me if admissions to Salem and to Tabor personal-care homes will remain open, and what is her plan there?

Mr. Chairperson: The honourable Minister of Health and Seniors Care (Ms. Gordon).

If the minister is not ready, we will hold off until she is ready, 'til I get the signal. And if the minister could please keep her video on.

The honourable Minister of Health and Seniors Care.

* (15:40)

Ms. Gordon: I had the opportunity and the privilege of meeting with the CEOs for Salem Home and Tabor Home to discuss some of the challenges that they are currently facing, and I am advised that Tabor Home in Morden and Salem Home in Winkler—they have made the difficult decision to temporarily suspend admissions to both personal-care homes as a result of anticipated challenges post-by the public health order issued because of COVID-19 pandemic.

So, this is a temporary 'suspen't-suspension of admissions. The decision was not made lightly. We continue to support both organizations in terms of supports around making their staff aware of testing options and the testing procedures, talking with their staff who are vaccine hesitant. There's a lot of misinformation out there. What we want to do is work closely with each and every individual that works at these sites to ensure they have accurate information and they move forward with vaccination, which is our best defence against the COVID-19 pandemic.

MLA Asagwara: I thank the minister for that response.

Can the minister update us on COVID-19 vaccinations for children ages five to 11, and can she let us know exactly what her department is doing to prepare?

Ms. Gordon: I thank the member for the question—gives me an opportunity to update the member on doses for those ages five to 11.

It is my understanding that Pfizer has gone to the Food and Drug Administration with a reduced concentration dose for those ages five to 11. We're continuing to monitor the developments alongside with public health and the Vaccine Implementation Task Force.

I want to be clear that this not the same dose that adults are receiving. It's a less concentrated dose, so

we will have to procure supply from—through our federal colleagues, and the federal government is keeping us updated on developments as they unfold. And again, we may need a new supply, and we are waiting—hearing from the federal government on next steps.

MLA Asagwara: Thank you, Minister, for that response. That's information that's pretty readily available for all folks who are following this really important development at this stage in this pandemic. I guess I'll be more specific: my question is in regard to whether or not your department is taking steps to be proactive in anticipation of these vaccinations being available sooner than later, we're all hoping, for ages five to 11 years old.

It is certainly incumbent on your department and your leadership in order to make sure that we're not being reactive at this stage in the pandemic. We're seeing what, you know, the transmission of these variants are doing in other jurisdictions, certainly within younger populations, in jurisdictions just on either side of us.

And so if the minister can provide some clear detail in regard to whether or not her department has a plan or is actively working on a plan and what the details of that looks like so that they are prepared and ready to go to make sure that those vaccines are distributed widely as soon as they're available to the public. Can she provide some details there in regard to this? Many parents, caregivers, communities, are depending on that information, and I think that would alleviate a lot of the concerns of Manitobans and anxieties as they await that information.

Ms. Gordon: I want to assure the member that our government is indeed being proactive in terms of preparing for the vaccination of the five-to-11-year-olds.

So one of the things that we have been paying very close attention to is the vaccination program for the age group 12 to 19 that is currently under way. So that is the vaccination program that's being rolled out by the education system and is school-based. So under that program, vaccinations are being offered at school as well as after school hours in the form of community pop-up clinics. So there's a lot of lessons learned, and we're gathering the information so that the rollout of the vaccination for the children aged five to 11 will be seamless and without glitches, so to speak.

So we continue to look to the vaccination implementation task force to lead the way and to give us a

framework for the rollout of those vaccines as they become available. So public health is keeping us very much updated, but I also want to put on the record that the school-based vaccination program has been indeed a success with 97,128 people aged 12 to 19 are now fully vaccinated with two doses.

So we will take the lessons learned from the successful rollout of the older children in the school system and apply them very much to the ages five to 11.

Of course, we always want to hear from parents what worked well, what didn't work well and to take that information and improve on or make any changes that need to be made before the rollout for five-to-11-year-olds begin.

MLA Asagwara: I thank the minister for that response.

I understand that Shared Health has established a patient flow group; that's a direct quote.

Now, I'm wondering if the minister can share whether or not this is a new group that's been formed? Or is this just a reactivation of the access block group that was developed earlier in this pandemic? Can the minister provide some details around that?

* (15:50)

Ms. Gordon: I thank the member for Union Station (MLA Asagwara) for the question. So to respond: it is not a reactivation of the access block project, although access block was identified in the 2017 wait times task force report.

This group has come together to focus in on the health system command structure, and they want to focus and ensure that the maximum capacity for Manitobans needing care is available. So this group, while they are functioning during the COVID pandemic, will continue their work after COVID has passed—and we hope that will happen very, very soon—and build on their work and continue, because patient flow is not just an important issue during the pandemic. It's an important issue at any time, at all times for Manitobans to receive care in the right place at the right time—and, I want to stress, the right amount as well.

We want to ensure that once an individual's acute needs that required them to go to hospital has been resolved, that they are received in the appropriate level of care, whether that is at home with home-care

supports, whether that's personal-care home, supportive housing or at another service delivery organization within the health-care system.

So the work of the patient flow group will continue to be very much needed after the—post-COVID pandemic.

MLA Asagwara: Thank you, Minister, for that response.

I apologize—I didn't quite hear part of your answer, so I just want to clarify: Did the minister say that the structure was part of the incident command structure, or that it was the health system command structure?

I didn't quite hear that correctly, and if the minister can clarify when this group, this patient flow group, was established, that would be great.

Ms. Gordon: I'm pleased to clarify my earlier answer.

So the group is part of the health incident command system right now. It was created in the spring of 2021, but going forward it will stand—it will be a stand-alone group that continues to look at flow within the entire system, again, to ensure individuals are in the right place at the right time and receiving the right amount of care within our hospital systems.

MLA Asagwara: Thank you, Minister, for providing that clarification.

I'm wondering if the minister can provide some clarification around blood testing, serological testing, the survey rates of COVID-19 infection in the population. Can the minister tell us what has been found through doing that serological testing and how that corresponds to levels of infection found through PCR testing?

* (16:00)

Ms. Gordon: I thank the member for Union Station for the question. Her question relates to 'seriological' testing and PCR testing.

So, what I understand from Dr. Roussin, our chief public health officer, is that with 'seriological' testing, we're seeing—this is just an estimate of—one in four individuals with COVID but there are individuals that are presenting to hospital that are going right into hospital and, at times, ICU that have not been tested. The first time they received the test is when they present at emerge or at another entrance to the health—the hospital system.

So, fewer people are seeking PCR tests, although they may have symptoms. So that is what has been reported through public health in terms of the 'seriological' and the PCR tests.

MLA Asagwara: I thank the minister for that response. I would remind—I, unfortunately, am disappointed to have to remind the minister that I do use gender-neutral pronouns. I know the minister is well aware of this and typically does respect that. Maybe it was just an unintentional slip. So just a gentle reminder to the minister about that.

I'm wondering if the minister can provide some clarity now around ICU capacity. So, we know—we all know that Manitoba ran out of ICU capacity in the spring, right after, actually, the former minister of Health said that there was an abundance of capacity, in terms of ICU beds, and unfortunately had to send 56 patients to other provinces, including the costs of care, transportation and accommodations for loved ones, which this government said would be provided for.

So with that in mind, the fact that the government had to send 56 patients out of province to receive life-saving intervention, ICU care, if the minister can tell us, including again the costs of care, transportation and accommodation for the loved ones of those patients, what was the final cost of having to do so, of having to send those 56 patients out of province?

Ms. Gordon: ICU care and physician care provided through interprovincial billings for the 56 patients is something that takes months to sort out between the two jurisdictions and may not be available until the end of the fiscal year '21-22.

What we do have access to is the companion cost. So, companion costs accrue when we send an individual to accompany the patient to their transfer destination. The department is seeking that information now. We can have it available before the end of today's session.

MLA Asagwara: I thank the minister for agreeing to that undertaking to provide that information before the end of today.

I would ask if the minister can endeavour to provide the other details, if she would be willing to take that as a matter of—under advisement as well.

Ms. Gordon: I also want to apologize to the member for Union Station for using the wrong pronoun when my—I answered the earlier question. My sincerest apologies for that error.

And, yes, we will take it under advisement and make that information available to the member.

MLA Asagwara: Thank you, Minister, for all of those responses. Very appreciated.

I'd like to go back to my previous question regarding serological testing and what that indicates for us in relation to PCR testing. I just want to make sure that I'm perfectly clear on what the minister provided in terms of that information—folks presenting to hospital and being admitted.

Can the minister clarify that what she meant by her response was that 75 per cent of people who are presenting to hospital and who are admitted with COVID—that in fact, they have—that 75 per cent, so three out of four folks presenting, have never had a PCR test done previously? That they've had no PCR test; therefore, they haven't had any contact tracing before presenting to hospital and being admitted for COVID?

And can the minister verify the data around whether or not those folks were in community while symptomatic or asymptomatic?

* (16:10)

Ms. Gordon: To respond to the member's question about the individuals that are presenting to hospital and whether they have been tested, and also the question of whether they are in community asymptomatic or symptomatic, we can say that, yes, there are individuals that are in the community that are asymptomatic or symptomatic but are indeed infected with COVID.

Some may think, as we've heard, that it's a cold, it's flu symptoms and weak—and may not be willing to undergo testing. So we recognize there's reticence to testing, and that's why we continue to reinforce in our messaging that if you do have symptoms, please go and get tested to ensure or to rule out if you don't have COVID, that you have indeed been infected with COVID.

And we continue to reinforce in our messaging the need to follow the fundamentals: If you're sick, stay home, practice physical distancing, wear your mask, wash your hands and, yes, go and get tested if you do have symptoms.

MLA Asagwara: Thank you, Minister, for that response.

I'm not sure if you didn't hear part of my question. I'll try it for the third time just so that I'm perfectly

clear, but I did ask if you could—if the minister could clarify, rather, the information she brought forward in her additional response.

Can the minister please clarify as to whether or not three-quarters of the people who are presenting to hospital and admitted for COVID, if those folks are—have not ever accessed a PCR test prior to being admitted? I just want to make sure that I have that information perfectly clear; just the minister provided a response earlier that wasn't entirely clear.

So if the minister can please clarify her earlier statement: Are, in fact, three-quarters of folks who are accessing the hospital and admitted for COVID not actually having been tested for—via PCR test ahead of that admission?

Ms. Gordon: So the number of individuals that present to hospital that have been tested or not tested varies on a daily basis and varies according to region. So it does fluctuate and it does change on a daily basis. So I wouldn't go as far as to say 75 per cent in terms of talking about the entire province, but certainly region-by-region that may be the case from one day to the next.

MLA Asagwara: So, I'll—maybe I'll go back to that question. But for now I am going to move on.

And I am wondering if the minister can provide some information around the STARS contract that we know is up. It expires at the end of this fiscal year, March 31st, 2022.

In a prior response to a matter under advisement, the acting minister at the time stated, and this is a direct quote: Shared Health will reintegrate these clinical services within emergency response services upon contract expiry, which is nearing.

So my question to the minister is: Given the fact that the STARS contract for Lifeflight is ending on March 31st, does the minister intend to bring this contract to tender this fiscal year? And if the minister can explain, what exactly does reintegrate this program actually mean? Does the government intend to keep this contract with a third party?

* (16:20)

Ms. Gordon: The planning process is indeed very complicated and the RFP process is under way. I can report that, right now, the RFP process is exploring how to actually go to market for the range of services that we need. So looking at rotary wing, like the helicopter services; fixed wing, like the plane and

basic air. So, that process is under way and we look forward to the results of the RFP process.

MLA Asagwara: So under that same matter of advisement, it provided some clarity around agency nursing costs for the Northern Health Region by fiscal year for 2017-18, 2018-19, 2019-2020 and 2020-2021.

Could the minister undertake to provide the cost of agency nurses for all health regions for the—for these same fiscal years?

Ms. Gordon: I'm pleased to respond by first stating that we value the incredible work that is being done by our nurses in our health-care system, and I had the opportunity in an earlier response to—or in my opening statement and introduction to thank them for their heroic efforts during this pandemic.

Our goal is certainly to only use agency nurses when absolutely necessary and when there are specific shifts that our own nurses are not able to complete.

So I want to share with the member some of things we are doing as a government to address our nursing recruitment and retention efforts. So we've recently announced plans to add close to 400 new nursing education seats, and I'm very pleased to be working very closely with my colleague in the Ministry of Education—Economic Development and Jobs, where they have launched a new initiative that will help internationally educated nurses, and we have seen 1,200 initial applications.

In addition to that, we have created an internationally educated nurses navigator to help those individuals to navigate the system of getting their licensure so that they can practice right here in our province. And, of note, the Manitoba Nurses Union president, Darlene Jackson, in September, stated that these internationally educated nurses are Manitoba's best chance at helping our system in the short term, and we are taking action.

In addition to those initiatives, we've added 16 full-time nursing positions to ICUs in Brandon, Grace Hospital, St. Boniface and Health Sciences Centre. And we continue to train nurses to work in ICUs. Since April 2020, 137 nurses have completed the critical care orientation program, and I'm pleased to receive an invitation from the Rady Faculty of Health Sciences College of Nursing to participate in their graduation ceremony in—this month, later this month, where we will welcome 115 nurses to our health system, who will be graduating.

So we are adding, Mr. Chair, to the system many new nurses so that, of course, we, as I said before, we will not have to rely on agency nurses to help us fill shifts in our health system.

MLA Asagwara: So, unfortunately, I won't thank the minister for that response because there wasn't an answer to my question in there, so I'm going to try one more time.

Could the minister—would the minister agree to undertake to provide the cost of agency nurses for all health regions, for all fiscal years 2017-2018, 2018-2019, 2019-2020 and 2020-2021?

Ms. Gordon: I want to, for the record, state that the member has asked for the agency nursing costs for 2017-2018 fiscal year, 2018-2019 fiscal year, 2019-2020 fiscal year and, lastly, 2020-2021 fiscal year. We will take this under advisement and make this information available to the member.

MLA Asagwara: I thank the minister for that undertaking.

As I indicated just a few moments ago, I'd like to go back to the question around PCR testing and serological testing. I do think that's a really important area of focus, and it's important for us to have a clear understanding of what information the public health, your department, has been able to garner from those channels.

So could the minister please clarify if the serological testing that's being done is only being done—or specifically, rather, being done on admission on presenting patients only, or if the serological testing is being done more broadly, if there's more broad surveillance serological testing being performed? Thank you.

* (16:30)

Ms. Gordon: I want to clarify, so that it's on the record, that 'serological' tests are not used to diagnose COVID-19. So this is just one more tool in the toolkit for public health experts to assess how pervasive COVID is in the population and how to fight COVID.

And I want to point out—I have the stats from yesterday's daily COVID-19 update for October 6—and these are for—and so the member talked about whether individuals that are presented to hospital have not been—there are testing—there is testing occurring every day. And so, for example, yesterday the total lab tests completed—and these are PCR tests—was over 1 million tests. And tests completed as of—that was total—and tests completed as of yesterday: 3,029 tests.

So PCR-tested individuals are presenting for testing. So this is not to say that no one is being tested and that they're only being tested when they present to hospital—and to clearly explain that 'seriological' tests are not used to diagnose COVID-19.

MLA Asagwara: Thank you, Minister, for that response.

I'm not quite sure why the minister doesn't want to provide clarity around how serological tests are being utilized in Manitoba. Certainly, I recognize what their purpose is, but I think it's important for us to have a good understanding of how serological testing is being utilized in Manitoba and what the implications and indications of that testing are. It's a completely relevant question, especially given what we're seeing with case numbers and with folks presenting to hospital quite sick—many of which, as informed today by the minister, are folks who have never received the PCR test.

So, you know, the understandings of why one test is used versus the other doesn't provide any clarity around the use of serological testing by the Department of Health, and that is information that is fundamentally really important for us to know. And so I'm not quite sure what the minister's resistance is to providing clarity around that question. I would hope that, at some point, she would see the value in sharing that information and chooses to do so.

For the sake of time, I'll move on.

Can the minister please inform us as to what the vacancy rate in critical care Manitoba health-care facilities is right now?

Ms. Gordon: I want to share some information with the member from the Public Health Agency of Canada about antibody 'seriological' tests.

So this is a test that uses a sample of your blood to check for antibodies. So an individual's body makes these after it's been exposed to a virus. A positive 'seriological' test means that at some point an individual was infected by a virus, but it can't tell how long ago this infection occurred.

So, just to put on the record again, that 'seriological' tests aren't used to diagnose COVID-19 in early states of infection since they don't detect the virus itself.

So the test can help but, again, it's one of the tools in the tool kit for public health to estimate how many people have had COVID-19 and to better understand

how much the virus has been spreading in the community and determine which public health measures need to be in place.

And, you know, back in April of 2020, Canada launched the COVID-19 Immunity Task Force to lead a Canada-wide unified effort to perform 'seriological' tests. And again, it was to determine the groups of Canadians who will receive serological testing as a first priority, and the task force is co-ordinating with provinces and territories, institutions and research groups.

So I'm certainly not shying away from talking about 'seriological' tests. I'm just not sure what the connection is between tests that—this testing and PCR testing or the individuals that are presented to hospital.

So, again these tests aren't used to diagnose COVID-19. It's one of the tools in the tool kit that public health is using to determine, again, measures that need to be put in place and to better understand how much the virus has been spreading in the community.

MLA Asagwara: Thank you, Minister. You still haven't answered that question, but that's okay. I'd like to move on because it's clear we're not going to get a response in regards to what I'm asking specifically.

* (16:40)

So the minister did fail to answer my question previously and it was very direct. So I'll ask it again, very directly, in the hopes that the minister can provide a quick response. It's a pretty clear question.

What is the vacancy rate in critical care in Manitoba health-care facilities right now?

Ms. Gordon: I do want to note that the vacancy in nurses is not unique to our province. This is something that's seen—being seen globally. So at the national level, at the international level, this is a long-standing issue that goes back even to the previous government.

But I am pleased to say that our government is taking action, and I also want to point out that one of the actions we are taking is to launch the new initiative, the internationally educated nurses program, where we've seen 1,200 initial applicants and provided each of those applicants with \$26,000 to help them to integrate into the health system and get their licensure.

These are individuals that are already in our province and we are going to help them to move through the licensing system using our navigator to

get them working on the front lines, particularly during this difficult time of the COVID pandemic.

And I also want to note that the Manitoba Nurses Union president, Darlene Jackson, was recently on CBC—I think it was as early as just last month, and stated that the—this internationally educated nurses program is one of the key drivers to best—and best chance of helping our system in the short term.

I also want to share that we are training and recruiting and staffing our nursing positions. We have a two-week general ICU nurse training session. We established this back in April 2021. A total of 137 nurses have completed the training between April and July. The Critical Care Nursing Orientation Program is also showing some really great success. It was shortened from 16 to 12 weeks and it is estimated that 120 to 150 nurses are required to enroll in the program to support 28 overcapacity ICU beds.

And so, the 12-week course began being offered in June of 2021, and so 12 nurses enrolled and completed training August 30th. August 2021, we saw 15 nurses enrolled and will—and completed training for October 11th. So, that's just around the corner.

And then September of 2021, 40 nurses enrolled and will complete their planned training for November 22nd. We have another intake planned for November '21 and we estimate that there will be 67 nurses enrolled and even more nurses will be coming forward as this program progresses.

So, again, this is an issue that is being seen across our country and globally. We're talking to our members of the federation—Alberta, Saskatchewan, Nova Scotia, all across Canada—and we're hearing that this is an issue.

I myself have heard this from as far as Jamaica, that they have a nursing shortage. And so, globally, we are seeing this to be an issue. And we are sharing best practices in terms of recruitment and retention. And some of these initiatives that I have mentioned today are certainly showing good success.

MLA Asagwara: So it's not lost on me—the minister just made a statement that I think is—it really resonates: that we are, in fact, in a very difficult stage in this pandemic. We are experiencing now a fourth wave, we see that. We see what's happening in other jurisdictions.

I have to wonder—as the Minister of Health recognizes that significance of where we're at in the pandemic, as the Minister of Health goes out in front

of the media and to the public and asks people, pleads with Manitobans to get vaccinated, impresses the importance of getting vaccinated upon all eligible citizens, talks about making plans and getting ready for five-to-11-year-olds to get vaccinated—I have to wonder, what does the minister think when members of her very own caucus seem to be resistant—and almost downright refuse—to be held to the same standards that the minister goes out in front of the media and expects Manitobans to adhere to and to be held to?

I wonder what the minister thinks when she reflects upon the fact that members of her own caucus refused to wear a mask in the Chamber for quite some time, throwing a scarf around their face, like, making a mockery of mask mandates that help save lives.

* (16:50)

And so I'm wondering if the minister could share her thoughts on the fact that members of her own caucus are asking citizens—the same health-care workers and heroes and front-line service providers that the minister calls heroes, we all call heroes, and we thank for their service—what does she think of her own members of caucus? We don't know if they're anti-maskers or anti-vaxxers. I don't know.

Actions do speak louder than words. So I'm wondering if the minister can share her thoughts on some of her own colleagues' positions on not getting vaccinated, not adhering to mask mandates and actually being in this building as legislators, as ministers currently?

Ms. Gordon: I believe the Premier (Mr. Goertzen), who's also House leader, addressed this during the House session today. My views are very much aligned with his comments, and I would prefer at this time to focus on the Estimates for the Ministry of Health and Seniors Care.

MLA Asagwara: I think it would be—you know, as the Minister for Health, I know that there are many people who are eager to hear the minister's position on that. Many folks who are working in public sector with vulnerable people and who have risen to the occasion time and time again during this pandemic. I'm sure they'd love to hear from their Minister of Health, what she thinks about her own MLAs not rising to the occasion, as these public sector front-line workers have done throughout this pandemic.

But in the spirit of what the minister has just said about focusing on Estimates, I would go back to the question she failed to answer a couple of questions

ago when I asked it directly: What is the vacancy rate in critical care in Manitoba health-care facilities right now?

Ms. Gordon: I'm pleased to just highlight some of the incredible work that's been done by leadership within the system. Lanette Siragusa, as most of us are very familiar with that name, she is the chief nursing officer for Shared Health and she is working closely with all the chief nursing officers across the entire province.

So all the RHAs, they're in constant dialogue with the Manitoba Nurses Union and there is definitely a shared goal to help nurses within the province. They are regularly talking about recruitment and retention, how to be innovative in terms of filling vacancies within the system.

And so our focus is on moving forward to support our nurses here, and now and the initiatives that I highlighted previously are showing very good success and our government continues to focus on partnerships with stakeholders such as the Manitoba Nurses Union and others to meet the needs of our nurses here in Manitoba.

* (17:00)

So, our focus is laser-focused and it is results-oriented and we're seeing a lot of good success with the initiatives that I could put on the record.

MLA Asagwara: I have to say I'm a little perplexed here. This question is something that former ministers were eager to provide some clarity around.

And it's unusual, I've asked this question directly now several times, and the minister seems to have no interest whatsoever in providing a clear response on an issue that is incredibly important given the fact that we know we have less capacity in critical care in this province than we did in previous waves. Our health-care system overall is really struggling.

And so I'm not quite sure why the minister is unwilling to provide this information. Again, this was taken under advisement by the former minister of Health who provided quite a lot of detail that was very helpful. And so I'm going to move on from that specific question.

But I am going to clarify, again, the former minister of Health provided information about nurses in critical-care units including the number of positions, number of positions that were filled, the number of vacancies and the vacancy rate. The former

minister actually broke out that information, broke it right down by the type of nurse and by facility.

So, for some reason, this minister is refusing to answer my previous question.

Can the minister at least agree to undertake providing this information that the former minister of Health, like I said, was happy to provide under an undertaking? Can this minister agree to take this as an undertaking to provide the information as it stands right now?

Mr. Greg Nesbitt, Acting Chairperson, in the Chair

Ms. Gordon: I will take that under advisement and take that request back to my department and will take some time to compile that information. But we will endeavour to make that available.

MLA Asagwara: Thank you, Minister, I do appreciate that.

I'm wondering, while you take that under advisement, can the minister also provide similar information that I've just requested for respiratory therapists?

Ms. Gordon: The request for the vacancy rate for respiratory therapists in the system will also be taken under advisement and we'll take that back to the department and we will endeavour to compile that information for the member.

MLA Asagwara: Thank you, Minister. I thank the minister, rather, for that response and for agreeing to that undertaking.

I'd just like to ask a question now in regards to the licences of three personal-care homes in Manitoba that are still under special review, including Maples, Parkview and personal-care home in Thompson, Nisichawayasihk.

Can the minister please update us on the current status of these reviews?

Mr. Chairperson in the Chair

* (17:10)

Ms. Gordon: I want to correct the record that the Niwichikana [phonetic] personal-care home is not located in Thompson. It's located in Nelson House, which is 80 kilometres west of Thompson. So I do want to correct the record in regards to that.

We do have a branch in the Department of Health and Seniors Care, the licence and compliance branch, which constantly monitors when a licence is under review. And where there are conditions applied to the

licence for the personal-care homes, they work very closely with the leadership of the personal-care home and the site to address the issues. A very comprehensive plan is developed in terms of resolving the issues that are in the review and what ongoing work will be done to help the—to ensure the organization moves from a licence with conditions to full licensure.

So we certainly—I certainly, from my office, monitor through the licence and compliance branch what is happening in terms of these three PCHs and ensuring that there is movement and progress on the recommendations that come forward from reviews that are undertaken from time to time.

MLA Asagwara: So, we're hearing a lot of concerns regarding staffing, service levels and response times for EMS services right now—so emergency medical services. And unfortunately, a lot of the public reporting on this has been removed. And we're hearing a lot—I just met with many paramedics just the other day—we're hearing a lot about overtime and detachments running very, very thin with very little resource—human resource.

The department previously did provide quarterly reporting called response compliance reports. Now, I'm wondering if the minister can provide some clarity around this. We know that that's no longer updated as it was previously—or provided, rather, the same way it was previously—but can the minister provide to me—actually, you know what, what I would ask is if the minister can actually take as an undertaking to provide the most recent response compliance report.

Ms. Gordon: I have been monitoring very closely the EMS system in our province, and today I had the opportunity to rise in the House and thank all our health-care workers for their heroic efforts during this pandemic. And I also specifically identified our paramedics and EMS personnel, and I truly thank them for the incredible work and the way they stepped up during this pandemic to ensure services, health-care services, to Manitobans are continued and maintained.

I also had the opportunity to meet with the leadership of the MAHCP just yesterday, and we talked very candidly and very openly about the issues that they are seeing in the rural and northern areas of our province. I've relayed their concerns and they shared some very innovative solutions as well. And I had the lead for emergency response services from Shared Health on that meeting with MAHCP, and following the meeting we discussed at length the

importance of the matter in terms of supporting our EMS and paramedic personnel.

I can agree to provide the data on the—related to response times. I don't—I cannot say for sure with certainty that it will be in the same format as the response compliance report. I think that dates back to 2018 or maybe possibly earlier than that date, but certainly I will take that under advisement and have a discussion with Shared Health about providing information related to response times.

MLA Asagwara: I'm going to allow my colleague, the member for Flin Flon (Mr. Lindsey), to ask some questions.

Mr. Tom Lindsey (Flin Flon): I thank my colleague from Union Station for allowing me to ask a few questions. Most of my questions, Minister, will be more specific to health care in the North.

Can the minister just confirm that she believes that everyone in the province should have access to suitable health care?

* (17:20)

Ms. Gordon: I thank the member for Flin Flon (Mr. Lindsey) for the question.

I want to talk a little bit about the clinical and preventative services plan. This is a significant focus of Manitoba's health system transformation, has been the development of the province's first clinical and preventative service plan, which is a road map to improved access, shorter waits and better health outcomes.

So for all Manitobans—so it's definitely focused on provision of health services in a provincial way, so not necessarily carving out sections of the province, but ensuring that equity of services across the province and across the system.

I am pleased to say that in March of 2021 our Manitoba provincial budget announced the largest health investment in Manitoba's history, an approximately \$812-million commitment for improvements that will support the plan's goals of better care sooner, and this is the largest investment in Manitoba history for rural and northern Manitoba.

I've begun to—and that—make announcements related to some of these investments and I look forward to more in the days and months ahead.

Mr. Lindsey: Thank you for the answer, Minister. It really didn't answer the question.

Let's talk very briefly about care closer to home, particularly for people in the North. I'm sure the minister is aware of the Northern Patient Transportation Program. Is the minister aware of some of the more recent difficulties with people, particularly from Flin Flon and The Pas, being able to access health care when they have to go to Winnipeg with the present flight schedule from Calm Air that is only three days a week—Sunday, Wednesday and Friday—which means that for some folks to get to their appointment they have to leave on a Sunday, and if their appointment happens to be on a Wednesday, means they don't get home until Friday. And I'm sure the minister's aware of the costs of hotel rooms and meals and cabs and all the rest of that stuff.

Has the minister heard any complaints about people not being able to access health care, cancelling appointments, missing appointments and having to bear exorbitant costs to get health care?

Ms. Gordon: I do want to note that air carrier services have been very unpredictable throughout the pandemic and many air carriers have had to change their schedules depending on traveller loads. And I do want to note that our government is very committed to ensuring individuals can receive the care and the health-care services when they need to travel to receive those services.

And, of note, in the fiscal year 2019-2020, we paid out, as a government, \$18 million in travel expenses and that was for 20,000 patients or clients to travel for care, and when we compare that to 2004-2005, that was \$709 million, and so the dollar amount certainly has grown.

And if the member for Flin Flon (Mr. Lindsey) has specific scenarios or clients that he would like us to—yes, so, 2004-2005, \$7.9 million—so if the member would like us to investigate a specific situation or scenario, I'd be pleased to hear from the member and look into any specific issues through the department.

Mr. Lindsey: I thank the minister for that response. So then I would assume from that response that the minister and her department have some plan to reply to the multiple letters that I've sent to this minister and her predecessor on issues involving northern patient transportation and, particularly during COVID times, with the altered flight schedule of Calm Air and people's inability to access health care that they should be entitled to.

Now, I get that the minister quotes some numbers and they've gone up since 2004, but—and really, hasn't everything?

So, does the minister believe that her government should increase the budget for northern patient transportation, particularly in light of the fact that services in the North have been dramatically reduced since 2016?

* (17:30)

Ms. Gordon: One of the changes that I would like to note is that our government made changes to the virtual tariffs for physicians to allow individuals to access care at home and to have those virtual appointments because of the disruptions due to COVID pandemic in their carrier services and flights.

And we, as a government, can demonstrate that even though there was this disruption for our carriers, we pay more under the northern patient transport program than any other previous government has done. So we saw disruptions in terms of travel for appointments throughout the province, not just in the North but in the rural areas, and that's why we made this virtual tariff available to physicians, because there were some individuals that just did not want to leave home and to be travelling from one region to another. But we continued to support our northern patients when they do decide to travel for care by paying for those expenses.

MLA Asagwara: Can the minister—I'm going to ask the minister a question now about the funding letter for the WRHA.

So, the funding letter for the regional health authorities should have gone out by now, and I'm wondering if the minister can provide clear information around how much was budgeted for the WRHA last year and how much was committed for this year. And that would be a global allocation.

Ms. Gordon: I can confirm that for last year, as the member has requested, for the WRHA, it was \$1.61 billion and committed for this year \$1.62 billion.

MLA Asagwara: I thank the minister for her response.

Can the minister tell us if she is intending—if the department is intending on developing a triage protocol, and if so, when can that be expected?

Ms. Gordon: I do now have a cost for interprovincial transfer for companions for ICU travel, and that

amount is \$15,610.45. So when we send a patient out of province and a companion is required to travel with them, this has been the companion costs that we have paid to date.

MLA Asagwara: If the minister can just—she didn't actually provide a response in regard to triage protocol. Is the minister intending on developing a triage protocol? If yes, when?

Ms. Gordon: I recall from my days working in the system with the Winnipeg Regional Health Authority that our health-care professionals, our physicians, our surgeons, our nurse practitioners and—are always on the front lines caring for patients that enter the system and spend time in our system. And as with any medical protocol, triage protocols are developed by those professionals in the health-care system and not by elected officials. So we continue to work with and take the advice of our health system leaders and Shared Health on this very important matter.

MLA Asagwara: Can the minister clarify the cost for companions who accommodate the loved ones who are transferred out of province for ICU care?

The total that she—that the minister just provided, can the minister clarify if that total cost, is that the cost per companion or is that the total, the sum total, of all expenses for all of those folks. So if she can provide that clarification, that'd be great.

Ms. Gordon: I'm pleased to clarify that it's the total costs for all individuals that travelled with a patient as a companion. So \$15,610.45, and it was on a voluntary basis if the patient requested for a family member or a loved one to travel with them as they received care.

Mr. Lindsey: I just want to go back a little bit to the northern patient transportation issue. You've talked a little bit about virtual care, and certainly a lot of folks in the North appreciate the fact that they don't have to go back to Winnipeg all the time for follow-ups, that a lot of it can be done virtually.

* (17:40)

Can the minister tell us how many people from northern Manitoba have to go to Winnipeg once a month to get a needle in their eye for glaucoma and macular degeneration-type things?

Ms. Gordon: Now, we would certainly move back or take this up with the northern regional health authority to determine what information, how granular the information is that is tracked for individuals that are travelling for care. I don't know if, within the financial

system, personal health information would be linked to financial information, so we'll have to—I'll move back throughout the department with the northern health-regional health authority.

I do want to place on the record again that for 2019-2020, we paid out \$18 million in travel costs. That was for a little under 20,000 patients. And, again, I'm not sure how granular the information is that's being tracked, but I will look back through the department and connect with the northern regional health authority on that.

Mr. Lindsey: I appreciate that and I look forward to the minister providing that information as soon as possible. It ties into the whole question around people's accessibility to health care.

As the minister's probably no doubt aware, surgical services in Flin Flon have been shut down. Birthing services in Flin Flon have been shut down. Birthing services in The Pas are under stress due to nurse shortages, which is requiring more travel, which, of course, would increase the cost.

But what the minister is not really grasping here is that a senior, for example, that has to travel to Winnipeg once a month to get a needle in their eye and now has to spend anywhere from three days to five days in a hotel and associated meals, can't afford that.

So, does the minister agree that there needs to be some changes made to the northern patient transportation policy that was written in 1995 to update it to current standards for medical care and cost recovery for people from the North?

Ms. Gordon: I want to talk a little bit about the northern patient transport policy and put on the record that Manitoba's opted to have this program and to develop this program, recognizing that individuals needed to travel to receive care. It is not a requirement of the Canada Health Act. It's Manitoba responding to a need right here at home.

And what we hope to do through the clinical preventative services plan is to not increase but to reduce travel requirements and to make it possible for individuals to receive care closer to home, care that is safely delivered.

So as we continue to roll out different components of the Canada—of the clinical preventative services plan, we hope to see a rate reduction in individuals having to travel from the North to come into Winnipeg for services.

And individuals are not just travelling from the North. They're travelling from rural areas as well and this is why we've undertaken this type of transformation because we recognize that travel has certainly is difficult for individuals—elderly individuals, individuals that are having to leave their supportive network at home to come to the city.

So I look forward to many announcements in the weeks and months to come that will demonstrate our commitment as a government to reducing these travel burdens on individuals, not just in the North but also in the rural areas of our province.

Mr. Lindsey: I thank the minister for that non-answer.

We haven't seen what this government's plan for the North is. We've seen bits and pieces of it unfold in front of us with services shutting down in various centres. And the minister talks about providing care closer to home.

So far her government is failing miserably in that endeavour, particularly for people in the North. We've seen services in Lynn Lake, Leaf Rapids, Flin Flon all disappear, cut—positions disappear and cut. We see nurse vacancies, health-care-aide vacancies and all the rest of it, disappearing.

* (17:50)

So we're left to depend on the Northern Patient Transportation Program. But if the program never gets updated from what it was in 1995, then how will it accurately reflect the needs of northern Manitobans, particularly right now with COVID impacting the number of flights coming from the North, impacting the amount of money that northerners have to pay for the same health care that you take for granted as being free here in the city? We don't have that.

What is your plan to address that problem?

Ms. Gordon: I'm pleased to have the opportunity to elaborate a little bit on the clinical preventative services plan. So, again, our government has invested \$812 million in capital investments for northern Manitoba and rural Manitoba, and this is a historic investment to address the needs of communities in the North and in the rural regions of our province. So those investments will, as they continue to roll out, will certainly shape, going forward, care for individuals living in those areas.

We also offer the virtual care tariffs so that physicians can provide services virtually, and the feedback from clients that have taken advantage of

virtual care is that they like the service, they want it to continue and it has served them well in terms of reducing their travel burden, having to come to the city where, again, their support networks are not with them, and that can sometimes be very disturbing for some individuals.

We've also announced that there will be a northern intermediate hub. The location and timing of that is to be determined. But we are very committed as a government to ensuring that, as I said before, that care is provided to individuals closer to home, and this is a long-standing issue and our government has taken action to address the needs of our rural and northern communities.

Hon. Jon Gerrard (River Heights): Thank you, Madam Minister. There often seems to be discrepancies between what patients are reporting and what, in the case—indeed, physicians are reporting and what the government reports in terms of wait times.

So what is it that starts the clock in terms of the government-reported wait times? Does this start when the schedule—the surgery is actually scheduled or when the diagnosis happens, or when the individual first sees a specialist and the specialist says that I'm going to do the surgery?

Ms. Gordon: I thank the member for River Heights for the question, and we do have this information available on our public-facing website for the department, and I'm pleased to share what is available in terms of the question when does a wait time start and end.

And so, historically, the starting point for wait times does vary but all provinces and territories have agreed that the measurement of wait time should start when the physician determines that the patient is medically ready and the patient consents to treatment as indicated by the booking of the service. And the wait time ends when the patient receives the service.

And that information is transparent and available, as I said before, on our public-facing website.

Mr. Gerrard: With the Rapid Access to Addictions Medicine clinic, I've heard from individuals that they've been told that a person must not have taken alcohol or drugs for 24 hours before they can be seen at the rapid access and addiction medicine.

Is this the way that things are proceeded? It seems that normally you would expect that somebody with an addiction could be treated immediately rather than

having to go through, essentially, withdrawal for 24 hours.

Mr. Chairperson: The hour being 6 p.m., committee rise.

ROOM 255

* (15:10)

Mr. Chairperson (Len Isleifson): Good afternoon. Would the committee—pardon me, would this section of the Committee of Supply come to order.

We have one small item of business before we begin today with the Department of Agriculture and Resource Development.

FAMILIES

(Continued)

Mr. Chairperson (Len Isleifson): At this session's previous meeting, where we considered the Estimates of the Department of Families, an error was made and an incorrect number was read out in a resolution that was passed. Therefore, I ask that this committee briefly revisit resolution 9.3 of the Department of Families so that we may read the correct number into the record and pass the resolution as written in Estimates.

* (15:20)

I will now re-read the resolution.

So resolution 9.3: Be it RESOLVED that there be granted to Her Majesty a sum not exceeding \$13,616,000 for Families, Corporate Services, for the fiscal year ending March 31st, 2022.

Resolution agreed to.

Thank you. So we will now continue with the business before this committee.

AGRICULTURE AND RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT

Mr. Chairperson (Len Isleifson): The next set of Estimates to be considered by this committee of the supply is for the Department of Agriculture and Resource Development.

Does the honourable Minister have an opening statement?

Hon. Ralph Eichler (Minister of Agriculture and Resource Development): Mr. Chair, yes, I do have an opening statement.

Mr. Chairperson: Minister Eichler, go ahead.

Mr. Eichler: Well, good afternoon, everyone, and welcome to Agriculture and Resource Development.

Our government is committed to supporting ongoing innovation, growth, improvement and resiliency to reach the full potential of our provincial resources on behalf of all Manitobans.

The department's core budget is \$257.5 million for 2021-22, which represents an increase of 1 per cent over the previous year. The—Budget 2021—budget continues to advance the needs and opportunities for Agriculture and Resource Development with funding that focuses on economic growth, competitiveness and sustainability, while ensuring the protection of Manitoba's natural resources.

The agriculture and natural resource sectors directly contribute 11.5 per cent of provincial gross domestic product and 7.4 per cent of provincial jobs in 2020. The department continues to invest in business risk management programming such as AgriInsurance, AgriStability to ensure a strong and healthy agriculture sector.

In addition, the department invested \$62 million into ag recovery drought assistance to support livestock producers challenged by Manitoba's extreme dry conditions. This drought assistance program for the livestock and forage industry is the largest in Manitoba's history.

Despite the challenging weather conditions, Manitoba Agri-Food and processing sectors continues to grow. It is one of the key economic drivers of the province with a \$2 billion invested in-by Manitoba processors since 2016.

The Budget 2021 continues investments that'll average Manitoba's protein advantage with support focused on the protein advantage strategy implementation to position Manitoba as North America's leader in sustainable plant and animal protein.

As part of these efforts the Manitoba government and the protein consortium—pardon me—protein consortium has released the sustainable protein challenge dialogue final action to impact map and guide sector action, plans and outcomes.

Through the 2021 budget, Agriculture and Resource Development is investing an additional \$100,000 to implement the protein advantage strategy with support for sustainable protein development initiatives and investment attraction to build business development opportunities for plant and animal protein.

The budget offers continued support for engineering research, training and innovations related to sustainable livestock production and processing jobs, protect environment and focus on work related to the land use requirements for livestock production, greenhouse gas emissions and efficient use of water and energy.

Through our participation on the 2 Billion Trees Program, Manitoba will access to \$63 million over the next 10 years towards increments, projects focusing on natural infrastructure, supporting sustainable forest management and incremental reforestation projects.

The Food Development Centre will 'naw'—now operate as a section within the department, focused on building Manitoba's competitive advantage in the agri-food sector.

The budget also contains additional funding to support the animal welfare program and sound animal welfare practices. Manitoba's allocating almost \$1 million in additional funding to help implement key recommendations from the animal 'welfare' program review, bringing in a total investment in animal welfare in the province to \$2.7 million.

A new one-welfare program will provide \$150,000 towards the education and 'charege' management for animal welfare in remote communities. The budget also includes additional funding of \$400,000 for a total of \$2 million allocated to our geoscience programming to support informed decisions on mineral aggregate oil and gas resource opportunities and attract investments.

The increase in funding will support collaborative initiatives focused on mineral studies in the North and investment attraction from mineral development companies. In addition, the mining strategy is—development to encourage investment in Manitoba with an emphasis on marketing Manitoba as a preferred jurisdiction for exploration and development.

We have created a dedicated capacity within the department, provided a single-window approach to permitting and licensing. A project has been initiated to establish a single-window permitting system for mineral exploration to help mining development.

We also have created a dedicated capacity for engagement and consultation with 'indigewous' communities, public and industry to ensure they are participating in shaping government programs and policies, strengthening Indigenous relationships and boosting their participation in economic activities has been embedded in many of the departments' strategic

initiatives, including our protein strategy and mining strategy as part of the department's efforts toward truth and reconciliation.

With the introduction of the education property tax rebate, combined with the farm school tax rebate, we are putting more money back in the hands of farmland owners. The department also continues to make investments that protect the environment, natural resources for Manitobans while addressing climate change issues.

To enhance climate change adaptation and mitigation, the department has developed a number of green initiatives, including the GROW program; environmental farm planning; watershed ecological goods and services; beneficial management practice, otherwise known as the BMP; the water management strategy. Many of those initiatives are well underway.

That concludes my comments, minister chair. I'll turn it back to you.

Mr. Chairperson: We thank you very much for your comments.

Does the critic from the official opposition have an opening statement? *[interjection]* Mr. Brar, go ahead.

Mr. Diljeet Brar (Burrows): I do not have an opening statement.

Mr. Chairperson: Okay, we thank you for that, then.

So, under Manitoba practice, debate on the minister's salary is the last item considered for a department in the Committee of Supply. Accordingly, we shall now defer consideration of line item 3.1(a) contained in resolution 3.1.

Does the committee wish to proceed through the Estimates of this department chronologically or have a global discussion?

An Honourable Member: Global discussion.

Mr. Chairperson: Global discussion? Thank you. That—it is agreed, then, that questioning from this department will proceed in a global manner, with all resolutions to be passed once questioning has concluded.

The floor is now open for questions.

Mr. Brar: Thanks, everybody. Welcome back to the session again, and welcome back, old-new minister. It's always a pleasure to work together for Manitoba producers.

I would start with a request to the minister to undertake to provide us with a current organizational chart for the department, including names and vacancies.

* (15:30)

Mr. Eichler: Yes, Mr. Chair, just a question to help my critic understand—we're giving the right information.

So, we do have a staff organizational chart that we had developed just recently once the restructuring was done on August the 3rd, or are you wanting a organizational chart going back prior to the re-org, once the department was reorganized?

Mr. Brar: The latest one, Mr. Chair, that's what I am requesting for after the reorganization, and what's the current situation, with all the details of names and the vacancies at present.

Mr. Eichler: So, Agriculture and Resource Development, we have—our department has 824 FTEs as of August the 31st, 795 which are regular, 16.8 are term. There's zero technical. There's 11.35 'departmentals' that's hired under delegated authorities. We have 224.25 vacancies, which is a 24 per cent vacancy rate. And we have 65 staffing which authorized requests have been approved to fill those positions, so I hope that helps my critic in his numbers that's he's asking for.

Mr. Brar: Would the minister be able to provide the names and vacancies for all the parts of the department?

Mr. Eichler: Yes, we can endeavour to get that to my critic as soon as possible. As you know, COVID has certainly made an impact on those that are working in office and those that are working from afar.

Coming from your background, understanding—having worked for our department at one point in time in your career, certainly understand that, you know, we do have a turnover from time to time. And of course, what we will be sharing with the critic will be based on whatever date that's at, with the understanding that those positions do change on a 'regular'-regular basis.

But for all intents and purposes, it'll give you an outline about what—who's in place now or at the time which we have the information provided available. And we can provide that to you either in writing or by email, whichever the member prefers.

Mr. Brar: I thank the minister for this information.

As we all know that extension services are extremely important for addressing information needs of our farmers. Can the minister kindly share how many farm production extension specialists the department has lost since 2016, and how many have been hired since then?

Mr. Eichler: I—I'll start back in 2016 to give my critic a bit of the background information.

So I was sworn in on May the 3rd of 2016 as a minister of Agriculture as it was known at that time. It's entirely a different ministry now. Agriculture makes up about 20 per cent of our department. I've don't have the exact numbers of the staff members we had when I was minister before, but as I put on the record early on, we have now over 800 staff. That is very diverse when you consider conservation officers, you know, mining, forestry, but we can provide numbers on the—on our production officers in order to try and help the member understand how it has changed so much, and also now with the focus on trying to offer better services faster, we'll—also reallocated some of those to different offices now so we have a mass perspective, an agriculture perspective for it—so the rules representing work together and work in tandem.

As the member knows, a number of those vacancies and positions have changed since even from last spring. But we can endeavour to get the member a list of those persons, what they were in 2016 and what they are now. But they'll be totally different than what it was in 2016 as opposed now to 2021, and I hope that might help the member understand how the plan has changed in five long years.

Mr. Brar: Thank the minister for the response, which I don't think is one that satisfies my demand for that information.

It's clear that we have 824 FTEs in the department, but my focus here is public extension services. As we all know that public extension services are the unbiased neutral extension services that are very much required for the farming community to make decisions on their part.

So my question is that—I can make it simple: Did we lose a significant number of farm production extension specialists—the people? In simple language, the people who go to the farm and recommend technologies and answer face-to-face questions with the farmers.

So, I'm talking about that particular group of people which could be livestock environment

agronomy, soil sciences. So, these farm production extension specialists used to be in a good number back then. How much of that workforce did we lose over the years?

* (15:40)

The reorganization of departments doesn't impact how this question has to be answered because we're talking about a particular thing that was there. It's still there, but I think it has been shrunk a lot.

How much did it shrink and how many specialists in this category we lost over these years? It could be from 2019, from 2018, 2017—not necessarily since 2016. So, the minister can try again.

Mr. Eichler: I'll try and share this information with my critic.

So we have our director, which is—underneath that particular individual, we have an administrative assistant. Then we have an extensive-extension coordinator. I can provide the names—I'm not going to put them on the record—to my critic. And then we have a—under the manager of crop production, and then we have a crop specialist pathologist. We have an 'etomologeologist', a pest manager for potatoes, a bee specialist for a crop specialist, another potato position—that one is vacant. Then we have a crop specialist, emerging industry as well; a crop specialist under nutrients; a crop specialist under pesticides; another one under diagnostics. We have one for oil seeds, grains, weeds, vegetables, hemp, pulses, adaptation. We have livestock specialists—several of them. There's one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, 10 livestock specialists, and we have a livestock adaptation. And then also, under Ag adaptation, we have one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight—and now those also 'inlude'—also eggs and poultry, turkeys as well.

We also have soil folks; we have one, two, three, four, five soil survey, environmental—two are environmental. So—but we'll give the—my critic a full list of those on our org chart so he can be able to see, you know, where we're at now as compared to where we were. It will look entirely different, as the member knows, from being within our department. These change pretty well annually.

And, of course, with our reorg with our Ag offices everybody has access to a production specialist under our new system, so whenever someone calls in, they can ask for whatever service they want and that service will be provided to them. It may not be right at that moment, but in all—most cases, it will be that

somebody will get back that's certainly trained in that field of expertise that they needed information on.

So that helps my member.

Mr. Brar: And thanks to the minister for the response.

Most of the information that I just had from the minister—I appreciate the information, but most of the specialists that he mentioned are actually the provincial specialists. I would like to share this with the committee for information that, for example, there's one entomologist in the whole province, so that's a separate story.

What I was pointing to was, for example, the minister represents a good part of the Interlake region in Manitoba and I don't think that there is any farm production extension specialist crops in Interlake. There used to be two offices—Teulon and Arborg. Now there's only one; Teulon has been closed.

* (15:50)

So I don't think there is even a single farm production extension specialist in crops. So that was my concern that how the people of that region would seek information that's available with the department. What's the use of having our information in the libraries and in the books if there's nobody to disseminate that on the farm at the ground level. So that was my concern.

My next question is, did the department hire any farm production extension specialists during these years? If so, how many were hired?

Mr. Eichler: Just for clarity, I'd like to ask my critic, you want the number of extension specialists we hired for the last year or the last five years? *[interjection]*

Mr. Chairperson: Mr. Brar.

Mr. Brar: Sorry about that, Mr. Chair, thank you.

I appreciate if you can share the information since 2016. If not, I would take the information that you have for two years, three years, whatever you have. Thank you.

Mr. Eichler: Yes, rather than try and, you know, wait this out until department finds the information, what we'll endeavour to do for the member is provide him with org charts from, say, the last two years, and that would probably give him the information that he would need, or we can sit and wait and we can wait for the department to gather the information. It'll take

us a few minutes, maybe five minutes, but entirely up to what the member would like to do.

Mr. Brar: I can continue with the next question. In the meantime, the staff can find the information.

Mr. Chairperson: Go ahead, Mr. Brar.

Mr. Brar: So this is a simpler one; we don't need much research on it. It could be answered off the top of head from the people surrounding the minister, I think.

Do we have a director in place for this extension division, or it's vacant? If it's vacant, since how long the department didn't hire a director for extension services?

Mr. Eichler: I'm very pleased to share with the critic that the primary agriculture person is Patti Rothenburger. Now, she was with me when I was previous minister. She took a leave of absence; she's back; very honoured to be able to have her. She's wonderful, and we're very lucky in Department of Agriculture to have her expertise and advice that she provides not only to me, but to the farm families across Manitoba.

Mr. Brar: Thanks, Minister, for the information.

I would just like to know what the minister thinks about the extension services in Manitoba. Do we need to strengthen and recruit more extension personnel for our farming community, or the minister plans to shrink the department and leave our farming community for information purposes at the mercy of the private information providers?

What's the plan?

Mr. Eichler: That's a real easy one. I was looking for something a little more difficult, but actually, I can be very clear with the member. Agriculture is one of our economic driver engines, and when I first took this role on in 2016, I can tell you that we didn't really have a collaboration and a connection with a lot of commodity groups.

So what I've done is—No. 1 thing I did is I made a partnership with the Keystone ag producers to provide advice to me. We also had an advisory group put forward some names for us to find innovation, provide new programs and we started a collaborative approach right across Canada, mainly through our FPT. But we have a—probably a stronger relationship now, and part of our New West Partnership was also very collaborative.

I can give the member, you know, some background and understanding that how this is so important that Manitoba don't get left behind. So we established not only a relationship with the federal government but with our colleagues right across Canada.

Our agricultural groups here in Manitoba are a bit different than what they are down east or in Quebec or in Ontario. We in western Canada have a diverse need; we provide a lot of cereals, a lot of livestock. So what we talk about is what's best for our producers here and what other programs are being used and developed in other provinces. So we've been able to have that relationship and those ongoing discussions. Even when I just came back to this portfolio, you know, in July, first thing I did was reach out to the federal Minister Bibeau and said, look, we've got a problem here in Manitoba, I need you to come to Manitoba. She was here on Wednesday after I called her on Friday.

And that's the type of approach that I feel we need for agriculture in Manitoba. Yes, we have to pay attention, but agriculture is ever-changing. We never thought about talking about protein like we did, you know, 10 years ago. It's a different story. So agriculture has to stay in that ever-changing mode.

We see more efficiencies and feed conversions now than ever before. When we talk about livestock specialists and cereal and pulses, I mean, we're growing more canola and—than we ever did. We're seeing more peas grown than we ever did. Seeing more hemp grown than we ever did.

So, it's ever-changing and we have to be able to adapt. And our staff has to be able to adapt as well. And that's one of the reasons that we looked at how we might be able to adapt and change.

So, I know that the member opposite will be able to identify really how quickly we have to pivot. Let's just use our drought for an example this past summer. We had to have those folks that are providing advice, in particular not only just to the meat producers but other livestock sectors to make sure we had enough water in place.

So it's a diverse—but one that has to be responded to in a very quick way in order to us to be able to pivot to make sure we have—you know, people, you know, in the front lines, giving advice to our producers so they can have the tools to be able to make their important decisions on what management strategy they may have to have.

So, that's why we went to this phone system, and, of course, they can call on producers as well. There's a few of them that are barely in the office at all; they're usually out talking to producers so—and I know the member knows that.

So these are critically important for us to be able to make sure that we have the advice and the programs in place and those programs developed in a way that's going to meet the needs of today and tomorrow.

Mr. Brar: May I ask how many conservation officers are currently employed by the department? What is the vacancy rate in this team?

* (16:00)

Mr. Eichler: Yes, so currently we have 76 of 91 positions that are filled.

The current complement of 76 includes five officers; they're recently posted from the 2020 class of recruits and it does not include the six new recruits in the class of 2021 who are completing initial training and will be posted in the field roles for on-the-job training in the next coming weeks. *[interjection]*

Mr. Chairperson: Mr. Brar—

Mr. Eichler: There's eight—I wasn't quite finished, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Chairperson: Go ahead, continue.

Mr. Eichler: So we're 83 per cent filled with a 17 per cent vacancy to follow up the last part of my critic's question. Those are my concluding comments, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Brar: Thank the minister.

How many conservation officers are anticipated to retire in the next five years?

Mr. Eichler: Well, I don't want to date myself here to the whole world, but I don't know when I'm going to retire either. So when asked how many people are going to retire in conservation, we really don't know. Every individual's a bit difference, but I know in my conversations with the department, and with those employees in particular, they're dedicated to their jobs and they love their jobs. Most of them that have stayed with us through and through, they might be like me and never want to retire. I don't know. I love what I do; they love what they do.

So to give the member a direct number, we can provide the average age—I mean, but age doesn't really mean a lot anymore. I mean, we live longer than we

ever have. We work longer than we ever have and retiring younger than we ever have.

So to be perfectly open and transparent with my critic, I really don't know how to answer the question based on, you know, the generation we live in. But if it's about age—which it shouldn't be, in my mind—a lot of older folks do a lot better job than some of the younger guys do. But, again, some younger guys do better than the older guys do too. So I'm not going to try and, you know, say how many's going to retire, but I can provide an average age if that would help my critic.

Mr. Chairperson: Mr. Brar, I believe you're muted. We cannot hear you.

Mr. Brar: How about now? Is it okay?

Mr. Chairperson: That's better, thank you. Go ahead, Mr. Brar.

Mr. Brar: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you so much, the minister, for the information.

I think you got my point. My point was to know the expected people who would be retiring based upon their age of superannuation. Otherwise, nobody can comment when 70 of the 76 could decide to go home and retire. That was not my question.

My question is: Is the department aware about the upcoming vacancies due to retirement in normal circumstances, and what's the plan to fill in for those people? Because we are already understaffed; as you said, 17 per cent vacancy rate right now. And if we know that people are aging—everybody is aging and they would be likely be retiring—and then we must have a plan to fill in those positions. That's what I wanted to emphasize.

Mr. Eichler: I do want to share with my critic that I retired once and I didn't like it very much, so I—that's why I had to get back to work and do something to keep my sanity. I think a lot of my conservation officers might be a lot like me. They like being out on the land and out in the fresh air. It's an opportunity to be able to protect the environment and serve the general public and protection of wildlife, you know, as well.

But we always strived to make sure that we have a good management strategy. We talk about their careers, what they're short. I mean, we've made significant changes to the way the wildlife officers work now than what they were doing even five years ago.

But that's as a result of consultation and working tight with them. I can't take any credit for that because that wasn't under my department.

But coming back to my comments earlier on. So, we hired five officers from 2020, six from 2021. So we see a trend of people wanting to be involved in this. In fact, I have a very good friend that's a conservation officer—been since he was 18 years old. To be honest, I don't think he's ever going to retire. It's his lifelong dream. But there'll be others that come along that inherit some money, that are just worn out; they're not ready, and they're probably going to retire before my best friend does. So, really, I really don't have much more to offer my critic other than that.

But we see an ongoing trend, but we have a very open dialogue with our staff and right now I think we're very strong, and we'll continue to build and reinforce our staff to make sure they have some helpers as they go by.

And the communication system has changed so much as well. When we came into power in 2016, we had antiquated, poor communication system, and morale was at the lowest it could have ever been. We've changed that. They have the ability to be able to communicate better now than they ever did. They need backup: we have helicopters; we've got planes; we have communications; we have—they're living their life dream right now under the current situation.

* (16:10)

Mr. Brar: I want to say thank you to all those hard-working conservation officers who are serving Manitobans, some of them has been said most of their lives that's appreciable and that's good and I look forward for the youth to come into this department and serve as well.

But unfortunately, these conservation officers are being paid way less than their counterparts in our neighbouring provinces, right and left.

So, is there any retention strategy that this department is working on for these conservation officers? There has been examples—published examples of conservation officers working at a higher level in seniority and moving to another province at entry level and still getting paid more.

So what are the minister's thoughts and plans for retention of this staff, which is very dear, very good human resource for our lands in Manitoba?

Mr. Eichler: I'd offer my colleague a bit of advice on this one: wages are not set by my department, they're

negotiated through Central Services. But I do think it's really critically important that we do—or, I put on the record—is about working conditions, about the environment, about the tone that's set.

So, my ADMs and my staff continually meet with these wildlife officers, in order to ensure that they have the tools that they need. They asked for a helicopter; we got them a helicopter. They asked for lots of things. But when it comes to the wages, we let Central Services worry about that. They do a come and—a pull approach, I believe, and probably the—my critic knows. But I believe they're in arbitration now.

But again, that's not my job as a minister. My job's to provide them safety, make sure they got the right tools, the right working conditions, the 'wight' environment. And to be able to see these young people come through—five last year, six this year—that to me is really exciting. And I have to make sure I have protections for my officers, as well.

So those are things that as minister of the apartment I take great pride in: to ensure that my officers have the safety that they need, as well as the tools they need in their toolbox, to make sure they're safe and be able to do the good work that they do because, quite frankly, they not only protect people, they protect wildlife too. And they can't do it alone. They have to be in tandem with us and government.

And should they be compensated? Darn right they should be. But that's not my job. That's the job of Central Services.

Mr. Brar: Thank you, Minister, for what you're doing for these wonderful conservation officers.

But we do co-ordinate with our fellow ministers and departments to make things better for our workers and our teams. And I think safety does involve financial safety, as well, and I would appreciate if you can attract attention of the fellow minister about working around their salaries and their financial betterment in this department, because we all appreciate what they're doing for all of us.

Let's move on to the next set of questions. One thing that's common between the minister and myself is that we both love Teulon due to our ties to Teulon, and Teulon is an example where there used to be MASC and Manitoba Agriculture and Resource Development Department, which is dead now. It's not there anymore. And with the closure of that office there are impacts in the community. Thousands of dollars that used to go to the local community is lost, and there are—personnel working in the department

have been moved to different—other locations—for example, Arborg or other locations. We lost those personnel from that community, from that neighbourhood. That also means that the local corner stores and gas stations and whatnot—car mechanics—they lost something with losing this department from Teulon.

I am taking this as an example because both of us are connected to that town, but there are 20–20ish, I would say—other examples that say the same thing that happened to so many other towns, as well, with this PC government's decision to close these Ag offices and MASC offices.

So I would like to know, how many people quit, retired or were laid off or terminated or relocated after this decision taken by the PC government recently?

* (16:20)

Mr. Eichler: Just want to try and lay this out for my critic. It's a bit difficult, but what I will do is kind of lay out what the new service delivery model looks like.

Our whole intent through the department was a single point of access for rural Manitobans to all services provided by Manitoba Agriculture Services, Agriculture and Resource Development. ARD and MASC are working continually to improve service, you know, with clients, whether by phone, by email, face to face. We're even talking about a chat line—haven't got that in line—online yet—so they can hit a chat button and do that a more modern way.

Also what we're trying to is—part of our new model, MASC introduced a new position called client service representative to help manage and direct client inquiries. And all 10 client service representatives will now be in place, having received regular training to improve ability to assist clients. Also first-time callers can choose to receive either in French or English. We've been working with the Francophone Affairs Secretariat. So the phones have been modernized to be able to either have languages in both our official languages, English or French.

Also I think it's really important to know that we've added additional staff to resource the ARD extension with the introduction of our AgriRecovery program. As the member knows, we need to move staff around to meet the needs of today. The member wasn't here, but if you go back to 2011, MASC was endeavoured or directed to take on the flood mitigation, something that we're trained in, but certainly under the previous government at that time,

they were in embarked on flood recovery, mainly around Lake Manitoba and other parts of the province where they were asked to make settlements.

So staff gets moved around. I can say this, though: that not one person lost their job. They were offered positions within the government of Manitoba. Our department right now is sitting with 65 vacancies that we've had request to fill, right at this very moment.

But for the last six months, either through retirements or moving out of the department or starting a different job, there's been 53 that have left my department. I cannot tell the member how many of them are actually Agriculture because the makeup of the department has changed. They either work in climate change, they work in water, they work in the wildlife manage or forestry. There's so many positions that are available for these folks to go to now. Because it's within the department they can transfer, they can—they see other opportunities. They make new friends, and they'll say, well, jeez, I didn't know Bob would have so much fun in the fishery side. So they make the switch and they go over to fisheries now. But they were in Ag over there with mining. So the department's changed so much, the way it was to what it is now.

So I hope that helps the member with some background on how those positions have changed. But yet they haven't changed, but overall. So, right now, if you do the math, we're up 12 positions from what we were six months ago.

Mr. Brar: Thank the minister for the detailed answer, but I was looking for something else. No worries.

Can the minister share the total amount of project savings—sales associated with these office closures? How much did the department save?

Mr. Eichler: We didn't save a penny, and I'll tell you why: because it's not under my department.

Accommodation Services come under Central Services, so when we look at efficiencies and re-orgs, we don't take into account—now, government, as a whole, probably saved some money but Department of Agriculture, resource development didn't save a penny because that's not under my budget; that falls under social services.

So, in reality it is, if you look at the cost savings, that was not what this move was about. The move was about how we're going to offer more services, more benefit to our farm families in regards to ag in particular, and that's what this particular issue's about.

But really, that's what the whole focus was: How do we deliver a better model to meet the needs of our farmers today as opposed to tomorrow or what it was last year from that?

Mr. Brar: It's understandable that there is an impact, but it's hard to measure. I know I have met people. I have been informed that there are so many people in the department who are deciding to retire just because of these changes because somebody who was serving in an office, which is at five minutes drive from their home, are forced to serve at an office which is 65 minutes away from their home. That makes them decide to retire early.

A producer—again, Teulon—a producer five minutes—at five minutes drive from Teulon has to drive 45 minutes to Arborg to get the same services or meet with the same MASC rep or farm extension specialist or whosoever he or she is in the department.

That means if the department—doesn't matter if it's agriculture department or any other department—but the government saves money. The government saves money at the cost of the people filling in their gas tanks more often than they used to to get the same services. So that's where the pain is.

* (16:30)

Another impact that I'm hearing from the producers is that people have made claims with MASC, had them approved but are still awaiting to receive their payout. Could the minister explain why there are delays in distributing funds at the same time when the minister is claiming that we are making the system efficient? Can the minister provide what the current average processing time is for MASC claims from the time it's made to when payouts occur?

Mr. Eichler: Again, I don't want to date myself here, but when I was farming, things have changed a lot. I see my colleague from Portage la Prairie on the screen here. I know he's a farmer, part of a farm organization from way back. Things have changed so much on his farm that he took over from his father, and things changed so much for—from what his father was doing as well.

The member brings up an interesting point about staffing and so on. Staffing has been a real challenge with COVID. I don't believe the fact that they had to drive 65 minutes as a reason for staff to leave. I know one of my friends that lives in Teulon—you talk about Teulon—he said by closing the office in Teulon, maybe use the Internet. And he said, I never used Internet before. He said, what I used to take all day to do, I did

in 15 minutes with a service person actually in Arborg. And then he referred him to another individual that was in Portage la Prairie. He ended up actually making a claim on some products that he didn't realize what he was able to get.

So I don't want to just throw technology under the bus and staff under the bus by saying that we don't—we had to make you move. They have choices. You can work from home now more than you ever did before. In fact, we backed off on having staff come in because we wanted to make sure they felt safe and they were safe to others. The last thing we wanted to do was have our staff be a part of spreading COVID. So we took those safety precautions.

But also I want to put on the record for the member to understand, so let me ask—answer the first question in regards to the claim. So, as of April the 1st, we processed 3,231 claims and returned \$70 million that's been paid out already on agri insurance. But here's another part of the kicker that we need to understand. So—and I know the member understands this—so we have a lot of disaster in the Interlake area in particular, but other parts of the province as well. So we look back at the crops. So when I became the minister we said, look, how can we help producers get feed for the livestock to be able to try to retain as many as they can?

So we started on the wheat and the oats, and then we went to the corn, saying, look, the corn's not going to make it. Let's turn that into some feed. My staff, through MASC and all the offices, went to the farms to assess those crops so they could be able to make a decision whether or not to turn that into feed, what their return would be with insurance, or whether to have no insurance. We also allowed producers to come into the program and not have to pay the 20 percent penalty rate as well.

On top of that, we made sure they were able to get advance payments for their crops. So then we go into—move into ag recovery so we as a government on August the 10th, I believe—my staff can correct me if I'm wrong—but our government decided to put \$62 million into an ag recovery program.

So we actually developed a program in partnership with the federal government on August the 31st. We were sending cheques out two weeks later. Two weeks later we were able to start sending money out to our producers that were hard strapped. We continue the updates. I'm happy to try and share those with my critic when I get them. But it's all about timing and making sure that we have those services and, quite

frankly, I don't think producers care where they're at either. They want information.

And things have changed. I use Internet more now than I ever did. Let's be honest about it. I'm sure that my critic does, too. All of us do. We're doing it right now: technology changes; staffing needs change. So how do we adapt? How do we give the best service? How do we get the best results? How do we get money in the hands of producers as fast as we can? Even that has changed. We used to—when I was—I was a banker back in the early days, and I can tell you everybody come into the bank to cash their cheque. The women did their things. Now we take a picture with our phone and it's in our account literally in seconds—seconds later.

So, are we adapting? We're trying to. We're trying to find those tools in the tool box to provide our farm families with those tools.

And not everybody has Internet; I know that's probably going to be the next question. We're working on that, too, with the federal government in partnership to ensure we have the right services at the right times.

Mr. Chairperson: The minister's time has expired.

Mr. Brar: Who knows we would be sitting with the drones tomorrow. That's possible. But, again, the same thing. Rural connectivity, everybody knows where we are at in Manitoba and what the government is doing to improve that.

So my question came from one of the producers who is still waiting for their payout for re-seeding their crops, and it's been months. So that's not happening to just a single producer; it's happening to so many producers after these staffing cuts and office closures.

So as the minister mentioned about agri stability, we all just witnessed this summer the devastating impacts of drought and we know how painful it was.

Will the minister now sign on to the 80 percent compensation rate of agri stability with the federal government to provide Manitobans with great protection? Why are—why is the department delaying to sign up on that?

* (16:40)

Mr. Eichler: Just—I want to address a question—and I don't know what to do with that question, but I don't like to talk about individuals—but if my critic would like to give me some information through an email to

my office, I'd be happy to check out that individual claim that said he hadn't been paid. I find it interesting, but I'll endeavour to try and get some answers for him so he can get back to that producer.

We never want to hold anybody up when it comes to payment. So, usually, as the member well knows, there's always two sides to a story, so let's make sure we get the story so we can get the right answers.

But I'm happy to take that offline if the member wants to share that with me. If he don't, that's okay too. But I sure don't mind getting involved but I don't like getting involved on individual cases. Just like people saying, can you give my son a job? I don't hire people. That—I got staff to hire people, so I don't get involved in it, but I will endeavour to help the member out and get some information if he needs on an individual case.

But I really don't want to set a precedent and start dealing with every individual farmer across Manitoba. We would not be able to get those done. But if, say, if it's a serious problem, we need to address it, then I will make sure—but we'll look at it as a government-all-of approach, not just one-off. But I'm certainly happy to do that.

So, I do want to just come back to the question in regards to AgriStability and AgriInvest. Of course, AgriStability is the first line of defence that's used to support producers financing—facing financial losses, mainly because of poor yields, rising input costs, low commodity prices. AgriInvest balances are accessible at any time without restriction of the use of those.

And I want to say that there's 350—almost \$351 million sitting in AgriStability right now that's available for producers. And I know the member knows this, but farmers are always reluctant to pull it out. Most of them use that as a savings account, some don't, some do use the programs pretty 'regularly'. But again, that's their management style. It's their money and they can access it whenever they want, so we don't want that to be part of that.

The member asked about the 80 per cent. So, what we did to address the doubt—drought-related challenge facing 'Manitobers' producers in '21 AgriStability interim payment was it increased from seventy-five—50 to 75 per cent to assist producers with short-term cash flow issues. Payments are normally made within 30 days.

The government of Manitoba and Government of Canada agreed to invoke late participation in regards to AgriStability, as I said earlier on. So we moved the

20 per cent more payment rebate, those that were proactively enrolled in that. And, of course, when we sit down and we talk, we need two-thirds of the provinces to agree to change the reference margin to 80 per cent, to the member's question.

Now, Alberta's been very clear on this, Saskatchewan's been very clear on it. As I put on the record earlier on, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta are entirely different than what producers in Ontario, Quebec, PEI, Nova Scotia, and the programs—we almost need a separate program for western Canada as opposed to the rest of Canada. And I tried explaining that and educating my federal minister as well.

So there's not one size that fits all. So we try to adapt and develop programs that will assist our farmers and make sure that they have the tools in their toolbox to be able to get the best value for their investment.

I know that we've had conversations, not only with Keystone ag producers but other lobby groups that come and talk to us. The AgriStability is a great program for the pork producers. We know that that has a very high intake with them; others, not so much. But again, it comes back to each individual's risk management they want to be able to take advantage of. So, there's programs out there but we've got to make sure we get it right, to the member's point.

And, of course, climate change, how do we adapt with those? Things change on a regular basis and droughts can be part of those; excessive rains can be part of it. Climate change is here and we want to make sure we have a program that's going to meet the needs of our farmers for today and tomorrow.

Mr. Brar: Mr. Chair, can I ask how we are doing on time? Are—is the committee rising at 5 o'clock, or two hours from the time we started?

Mr. Chairperson: Yes, the committee will rise at 6 o'clock today. We have lots of time.

An Honourable Member: For Ag?

Mr. Chairperson: Yes, I just—I was just informed that we will be switching over at 5 p.m.

Mr. Brar: At 5 p.m. Okay, thank you.

So, may I ask the minister about lowest increase in money collected as a result of increases to Crown land leases?

Mr. Eichler: Yes, I'm very respectful. I know I was in opposition way too long, but rather than hold up the clock—I know—I didn't realize we were going to be

gone at 5 o'clock. So rather than—I'll endeavour to get the—I will get the information to my critic on this rather than hold up questions because I want to be able to help him understand as much as I can about our department.

* (16:50)

If that's okay with my critic. Otherwise, we can go ahead and wait until we get the answer.

Mr. Brar: That's okay; we can jump on to the next question.

Mr. Chairperson: Go ahead, Mr. Brar.

Mr. Brar: What was the average increase to Crown land leases this past year and how many Crown land leases lapsed this year? Or, in other words, how many agreements has the government terminated, if that's easy to find?

Mr. Eichler: So, cancellations for all reasons: 2016, there was 61; 2017, there was 50; 2018, there was 55; 2019, there was 81 with 18 expired because of drain leases; 2020, there was 73, 10 of those were drain leases but some of those are still open. In 2021, we have 35 year-to-date; seven of those were expired drain leases and some of those files are still open.

Mr. Brar: I've been approached by a few producers sharing with me the problem of the ranchers who leased Crown lands. One of the ranchers has approached the minister through email and he also shared that email with me that a number of producers around his farm have been selling their cattle. They've been forced out by Crown land modernization.

So I'm not sharing this as an individual case but the impact of—the example of the impact of Crown land changes on our ranchers' lives.

So did the minister get a chance to take a look on that email and is the minister aware what's happening and what's the the impact of this Crown land modernization on our ranchers, especially in the North, and what steps the minister is taking to address this situation?

Mr. Eichler: I'd like to share with my critic—so the fall auction of November of 2020—I think it's working out quite well.

As the member knows, the auction process allows the individual to buy according to his or her own needs based on their evaluation of that particular piece of property. A lot of these are in the North. There's a few in the southern area. But I think it's interesting to note that the auction value is oppose—auction value that

was allocated for all those properties was a 102,000—twenty-two thousand, eight hundred.

Under the auction value allocated that we got was \$72,414, of which there were 35 out of the seventy-62 bidders, 35 of those were under the age of 40. So that speaks volumes to me as a minister. We're seeing young folks have an opportunity to be able to take advantage of these Crown lands.

Also want to share with the member: for our February '21 sales—I don't have the dollar amounts, but I can tell you that there was 74 young bidders. That made up 60 per cent of the total registered bidders. There was 124 bidders. Corporations, that was 30 per cent, which was 15 corporations. And there was one out-of-province bidder, so I think that the message is speaking loud and clear. Young farmers are having an opportunity to be able to take advantage of the new system.

And the whole idea behind the modernization of The Crown Lands Act was this: that we get in tune with the modern-day age. I had many, many complaints about young farmers not having access to it. So I think we're meeting our goal. And as a result of that, the numbers I just put on the record, I think, speaks volume to the opportunity for those young farmers going forward, which will be our next generation of farmers.

Mr. Brar: Talking about the commercial fishers: they're upset with the minister and the way his department treats them. They strongly feel the department favours anglers over them due to personal connections between department employees and Manitoba Wildlife Federation. This situation is also supported by a published media story that the minister is aware of.

Could the minister share with the committee the steps taken to address these concerns and get back to the commercial fishers to satisfy them the department is working unbiased?

Mr. Eichler: You know, I can't talk about a particular case. That the member's very much aware of. But I have endeavoured. There's been an investigation that's ongoing—an allegation made against my staff, so I will not discuss that here, just to protect those that are being investigated.

But I can tell you that the member's wrong when it talks about our relationship with me as a minister. I just recently got back from Cedar Lake and Grand Rapids. I can tell you we were so happy to be able to have the certification process for Cedar Lake.

Chief Beaster [*phonetic*] was over the moon. Also, the chief from Grand Rapids, also, was over the moon with our organization. I can tell you that our relationship with our fishers has never been, probably, stronger.

Yes, there's some hiccups in the system that we need to work out, but I will not accept the fact that they're not happy with me. They probably want some answers what we want to get. Once we have that behind us, we're happy to sit down with those fishers and have those conversations. I have no problem sitting down with our fishers at all. But I have to be careful to protect my staff at the same time.

Mr. Brar: I appreciate the minister being open to—

* (17:00)

Mr. Chairperson: Mr. Brar, sorry to interrupt you, but we lost your transmission there. If you wouldn't mind starting over.

Mr. Brar: Are you getting me now?

Mr. Chairperson: Yes, sounds better.

Mr. Brar: Okay, thank you.

Could the minister kindly share about significant provincial financial help offered to commercial fishers to help them sustain during the pandemic.

Mr. Eichler: Well, what we did do for the fishers and for the fishing season of 2019-2020, we waived the fees for our commercial fishermen, so that would take some of that responsibility off of them.

But I can tell you, in my role as Economic Development and Jobs, we did lobby the federal government and our department here now that—under my new portfolio, we did lobby the federal government, and the federal government did provide \$10 million to buy the fish back from the fishermen, which was a great move. I know there was lots of people that were involved in that. I know CEDF worked on this as well. Chief Arlen Dumas worked on this as well. We had lots of conversations about it and I want to say a big thank you to federal government for stepping forward and those that sided with us in regards to ensuring that the fishermen got some compensation and they got the fish, too, by the way, to share with their families and others that are on those First Nations. Critically important to the sustainability of our fishers. Without those markets—and I'm concerned about those markets. I want to address this.

I know we're probably going to get cut off, but I want to put this on the record that the fish-fresh fish

marketing board is really having trouble with their marketing. Unless we get more eco-certified lakes, we're not going to be able to market our fish on the world market. This is a critical issue for us and we need all parties to be focused on what that should look like.

Yes, we've moved forward with Cedar Lake. Yes, Winnipegos, Lake Manitoba, they're having discussions. The fishers on-north of Lake Winnipeg are very much in favour of eco-certification. We have not gotten an agreement with the southern fishers on this, but it's an issue that we're going to have to come together on and find a balance to have that certification.

I'll tell—I'll be very honest, I'll be surprised if fresh fritter-fresh fish marketing board will be around in five years because we're not going to have sustainable markets for them to be able to fish for.

Critically important that we understand that—the necessity of keeping our fishing sector alive in Manitoba. That and net sizes and what to do with that. I know Chief Easter was so excited about working with us in partnership and, in fact, Chief Heidi Cook also for up around Grand Rapids talked about this as well.

This is all so important for us to be able to have these conversations with our fishers and make sure we have an agreement. This is not about government; this is about protecting our fishers together as an organization and as government in partnership with our fishers.

Mr. Brar: Last two questions. Second last. Last year, Lazy Bear Expeditions was given two permits allowing it to use Churchill Wildlife Management Area's off-road trail network. New permits for this area have not been issued since 1984. The permits were given with no local consultation or input. Additionally, an independent review previously concluded that the current number of vehicles be maintained as is due to environmental impact on bear habitat.

What oversight was done prior to issuing these permits? Why was there no consultation prior to issuing these permits?

Mr. Eichler: Thank you, minister.

You know, our department 'susports' sustainable tourism in Churchill. As all members know, Churchill—and with the COVID had really put them in

a very bad position financially this year. A lot of them are in that risk of losing their business.

With the—after the third wave, we did have an opportunity to open up the US border and a lot of those operators were able to have access to a new marketplace.

But within our polar bear conservation recovery plan along with stakeholders, of course, the town of Churchill, the Indigenous communities, basically, we want to continue to have those dialogues as we go forward.

So, you know, what we want to do is make sure we have—find a balance and also provide economic growth for the Town of Churchill—critically important and, of course, making sure that we protect our polar bears as well. Think it's really critically important to make sure that we work together on this in partnership with not only the tour operators, but the community as well to make sure it's successful.

Mr. Brar: Could I quickly ask the last question which is about the drought—with producers being forced to sell their cattle early—in some cases, the entire herds—how many fewer cattle producers are there anticipated to be in Manitoba now as a result of drought as compared to last year, and how many cattle were sold off this year and how does that compare to previous years?

Thank you, that was my last question.

* (17:10)

Mr. Eichler: Yes, I can give the member some numbers that have been made public. We don't have a direct line with the auction marts to be able to give him exact numbers but I'm sure he can get them from the auction marts, but the numbers that the department had for—that was sold in July was quite high compared to normal years.

So my memory is telling me it was around 1,800 head that was sold as a result of the drought because they ran short of feed, but to have a direct number—I wouldn't be able to do that. But I can share with members that part of our recovery program—our ag recovery program, which I have not got sign-off from the federal minister, but we want to have a herd-rebuilding program so that those that did sell their cows off—and that's not only for them, it's for the bison and we also asked for the elk to be included in this, as well. But it's really important that we get our numbers back. Manitoba is known for its great beef and we

want to ensure that they come back in just as strong as they were when they left.

So I can't give him the details of that program because it hasn't been approved yet, but certainly—and quite frankly, I don't know if we'll have to use that money for this coming year either, to be totally honest. I mean, I wished I had a weather ball I could look in and say, what's next year going to look like but the rain has helped us a lot. A lot of cattlemen have been able to hold onto their herds this fall, mainly because of the rain we got since early August.

I imagine a lot of them wished they would have planted some fall rye to extend that season probably into this month even yet or in the middle of February. But I know we have had applications for a second crop cut on some of our crops that have been popped back up through voluntary growth and we have said yes to that.

So we're doing our best to maintain the herd numbers but to give the member exact number on those were sold off because of the drought, I just don't have those numbers available but I would suggest probably reaching out to the auction marts and seeing what he can find there or we can assist him in that if—something he feels we should be doing.

Mr. Chairperson: Are there any further questions?

Mr. Dougald Lamont (St. Boniface): Yes, I was going to ask Minister Eichler, you knew—we all know that this has been an extremely tough year for livestock producers. Many have had to sell off their herd. I was talking with producers who have seen enormous numbers.

Until the rain came in August, there was real fear that we were going to see a wipeout of the herd, so thank goodness for rain, as always. But, you know—and they're selling it off when—usually when we don't sell off livestock.

Is—can the Minister say when he's going to be announcing funding for the program to help producers rebuild their herds after a lack of available feed?

Mr. Eichler: Well, I would ask the member to support us and if he could get a call in to Minister Bibeau. I'm really not sure when Trudeau's going to announce his new Cabinet or if Minister Bibeau's going to be there.

Personally, I have a great relationship with her and I know that I can pick the phone up and call her but I'm not even sure if she's in the office yet. So once they're there—she's very much in favour of this program, she's told me. So I'm using that as my ace-

in-the-hole for Manitoba producers because she liked the program.

We're the only province that actually has talked about herd-rebuilding program. It's one I think that would be really important for Manitoba because we are known as a cow cap province and we're set up perfect for that.

So my hope is that we announce it very, very soon.

Mr. Lamont: Because I—it's—can you just clarify, because as I understand both Alberta and Saskatchewan announced. Is there any reason why? Is it just that we're waiting for a federal support?

I mean, I'm more than happy to make a call or talk to people and—that—there have been announcements in Saskatchewan and Alberta. I think it was \$200-a-head support.

So is there any reason why we can't proceed provincially, here, in Manitoba?

Mr. Eichler: Yes, Saskatchewan and Alberta did a per-head payment. Now, all of those dollars will not be able to necessarily be—the 60 per cent shared with the federal government. She, to my knowledge, has not approved those.

Our program is different than that. Again, I can't get into details of our program in Manitoba but they went—Alberta and Saskatchewan both went to every cow-calf—every cow in that province and gave them \$200 per cow, whether they had drought conditions or not. So that's on them. That worked out to almost \$100 per taxpayer in this—the province of Alberta.

Now, all of our producers were not impacted by the drought so I want to be clear: our program is not for those that don't qualify for compensation. Ours qualifies for those that are in the drought conditions. There's parts of our province, in particular The Pas—I mean, they're sitting very good with feed, with services.

So our program's based on drought conditions and relied on that and her rebuilding program will be exactly that. It's not for every producer in Manitoba where Saskatchewan, Alberta is. That's the difference between the three provinces, so the member understands.

Mr. Lamont: Thank you, yes. Just some questions about AgriStability.

There seems to be a pattern—you know, we seem to be leaving money on the table, that there's about

\$5.4 million unspent in 2020-21 and clearly, it was, you know, a terrible year for lots of producers. And the line for AgriStability seems to show the Province has budgeted around \$3 million less this year.

So just wondering why the provincial portion of AgriStability was not spent in 2021 and why is there—why is it budgeted lower for '21-22?

Mr. Eichler: Yes, I'll kind of go back a little bit. My critic had asked me a question on this earlier in regards to AgriInvest. I do think it's important to put it on the record again.

Right now, AgriInvest—we're sitting with \$350 million that's available to our farmers. Again, they can apply for this at any point in time that they want. As I said before, a lot of producers, they just try and—what they try and do is find the balance for their particular operation. So, some will use that through crop insurance and take the risk on that, or they can go back through and go through AgriInvest or through AgriStability.

And it depends on what average, so we go with the markets, one year could be a bit higher or it could be a bit less. And the same with crop insurance; it could be up one year and down the next, depending on the varieties and who—what they have for contracts.

Now, a lot of grain buyers now are having margins built within their contracts. Now, this year was an exceptional year; we had lots of calls, farmers wanting to say can I get out of my contract. The grain companies got on board on that. In early July, they said, look, we know that you've already committed a contract with us for X number of acres of—or tonnage of wheat; we know you aren't going to make it, so rather than just us be short on ours, what other crops do you have that's available for you to be able to sell. So they make a deal with them on them.

So it all depends on the year and, of course, this year, some farmers—some farmers, not all—will make off better because we're able to transfer some corn, for example, that wasn't going to make a crop and they'd been paid an insurance claim on that. So we said you can take that crop off for feed and we'll still pay you the amount that you had for crop insurance.

* (17:20)

Now, mind you, that's going to bring the averages down, so a lot of guys will make off better this year than they would in a normal year when they had a bumper crop.

But again, the yields are about 50 per cent of normal, but the prices are 50 per cent higher than what they used to be. So it's a double-edged sword on AgriInsurance, AgriStability. It all depends on each individual farm family's needs and wants to protect their farm family.

Mr. Lamont: So, for—I guess for primary agriculture, it's on the annual report, how many vacancies are there to be almost a million dollars under on salaries and benefits? I know that there was just a report in the Free Press, you know, that we—our civil service has shrunk by 18 per cent and we could be losing a lot more.

And I'm also hearing we were seeing shortages and for all sorts of reasons—burnout, issues with retention in a number of areas, but is there—can the minister just explain why do we have that sort of level of vacancy and is there anything we're doing to reverse the course or re-staff to make sure that the work that needs to get done, done?

Mr. Eichler: Yes, out of 54, we have seven vacancies in primary ag.

Mr. Lamont: Will there be an effort to be filling those spaces in, or are—because I know that there have been issues. We've been talking with people who've had issues, you know, even getting through to—whether it's getting through to MASC or getting through to the department. Is there a plan to fill those vacancies?

Mr. Eichler: I can explain to the member that—from our overall department.

So, our department went from roughly about 200 with the re-org and bringing in forestry and conservation officers and mining. Right now we have 65 positions that we're going to be filling. We hope to fill those sooner than later, but it would bring up an interesting point.

Again, coming back to your party, I would really appreciate any help you could give us in regards to trying to get Prime Minister Trudeau to get people off CERB. We're having a terrible time trying to get people back to work. The \$2,000 a month—I'll use my granddaughter as an illustration. She's working two jobs. She's making \$2,190 a month. She would get \$2,000 a month to stay home.

That's not how she was raised. She said, Grandad, I don't know why I'm doing what I'm doing sometimes, but, you know, my friends are staying home and going to school. And she's going to school at night, by the way, on top of all this. But, really, Manitobans need to get back to work, and we need to

stop the programs and try and help businesses get staff. And we are having trouble hiring people, I'll be honest. It's not easy trying to find people.

And I will talk a bit about my previous role was minister of economic development, training and jobs, but to have to find the skill set and the knowledge that we need in today's society because it's all changed so much. Even restaurants are mostly digital now. When you go and order your meal, it's digital. A lot of people don't know how to do that. So we need the younger generation to help us get to that next level.

Mr. Chairperson: I notice Mr. Wiebe had his hand up. Mr. Wiebe?

Mr. Matt Wiebe (Concordia): Mr. Chair, I simply just wanted to interject.

I know that we had an agreement with our friends in the independent caucus there that we would maybe give them 10 minutes. I am very—you know, just to disclose, I'm very eager to get to the next section and move on.

But I'm hoping that we can all have agreement here today to just move on, get to the question and then get onto the next section in this committee room.

Mr. Chairperson: Thank you for that. Are there any other questions?

Okay. Hearing no further questions, we will now proceed to consideration of the resolutions.

At this point, we will allow all virtual members to unmute their mics so that they can respond to the question.

An Honourable Member: Mr. Chair? Mr. Chair?

Mr. Chairperson: Go ahead, Minister.

Mr. Eichler: Yes, my colleague from the liberal—the Leader of the Liberal Party had his hand up to ask a question.

In fairness, I want to make sure everybody has fairness here.

Mr. Lamont: Thank you. I'll just be very brief.

This is just on the subject of fishers, because I've done a fair bit of work with the commercial fishers. I was at their AGM, just to say that there were some very serious concerns expressed about—actually, at Grand Rapids was a—is a community that has lost over a million dollars in—and issues around, how carefully the quota buybacks need to be done. I hope that these—this is something that'll be done very carefully.

It would be great if the minister would consider retroactively addressing the discriminatory buyback levels, but the other is just to say that for First Nations communities that fishing is absolutely essential, and if you're buying out quotas, it can have a devastating impact on those communities.

So I know we all share the interest that this is a resource that needs to be done.

So I hope that this is something that the minister will consider. Especially, and I'm sure he'd be—I'm sure they'd be more than happy to meet with him as well, if that's something—I'd be more than happy to facilitate that as well as talking to my federal colleagues who, we are actually a separate party so, but I'd be more than happy to help.

Mr. Eichler: Yes, I thank the member for his comments and, yes, we'll definitely—I met with Heidi—Chief Heidi Cook, myself and Chief Easter. We continue to have dialogues with a lot of the First Nation folks.

And fishing sector's a large part of our economy so we'll definitely endeavour to try and find a balance. I did say quite earlier on how important it is to our economic growth in a lot of those communities and we want to make sure we find a balance. So we're happy to partner with you.

Mr. Chairperson: I do have to ask one more time: Are there any other questions?

So, hearing none, we'll move right into resolution, then.

Resolution 3.2: RESOLVED that there be granted to Her Majesty a sum not exceeding \$13,087,000 for Agriculture and Resource Development, Policy and Transformation, for the fiscal year ending March 31st, 2022.

Resolution agreed to.

Resolution 3.3: RESOLVED that there be granted to Her Majesty a sum not exceeding \$132,852,000 for Agriculture and Resource Development, Risk Management, Credit and Income Support Programs, for the fiscal year ending March 31st, 2022.

Resolution agreed to.

Resolution 3.4: RESOLVED that there be granted to Her Majesty a sum not exceeding \$18,007,000 for Agriculture and Resource Development, Stewardship and Assurance, for the fiscal year ending March 31st, 2022.

Resolution agreed to.

Resolution 3.5: RESOLVED that there be granted to Her Majesty a sum not exceeding \$18,067,000 for Agriculture and Resource Development, Production and Economic Development, for the fiscal year ending March 31st, 2022.

Resolution agreed to.

Resolution 3.6: RESOLVED that there be granted to Her Majesty a sum not exceeding \$53,243,000 for Agriculture and Resource Development, Water Stewardship and Biodiversity, for the fiscal year ending March 31st, 2022.

Resolution agreed to.

* (17:30)

Resolution 3.7: BE IT RESOLVED that there be granted to Her Majesty a sum not exceeding \$14,163,000 for Agriculture and Resource Development, Resource Development, for the fiscal year ending March 31st, 2022.

Resolution agreed to.

Resolution 3.8: BE IT RESOLVED that there be granted to Her Majesty a sum not exceeding \$950,000 for Agriculture and Resource Development, Capital Assets, for the fiscal year ending March 31st, 2022.

Resolution agreed to.

Resolution 3.9: BE IT RESOLVED that there be granted to Her Majesty a sum not exceeding \$243,100,000 for Agriculture and Resource Development, Loans and Guarantees Programs, for the fiscal year ending March 31st, 2022.

Resolution agreed to.

The last item to be considered for these Estimates is item 3.1(a), the Minister's Salary, as contained in resolution 3.1.

The floor is now open for questions.

Hearing no questions?

Resolution 3.1: BE IT RESOLVED that there be granted to Her Majesty a sum not exceeding \$7,034,000 for Agriculture and Resource Development, Administration and Finance, for the fiscal year ending March 31st, 2022.

Resolution agreed to.

So this completes the Estimates of the Department of Agriculture and Resource Development.

INFRASTRUCTURE

Mr. Chairperson (Len Isleifson): Okay, good afternoon. Does the—let's see, the—this section of the Committee of Supply will now consider the Estimates of the Department of Infrastructure.

Does the honourable minister have an opening statement?

An Honourable Member: First, I'd like to ask if you could see if there was leave for myself to make a very short statement and the opposition could—

Mr. Chairperson: Sorry—Minister Schuler, sorry to interrupt you, but I do need to recognize you first. So, Minister Schuler, go ahead.

Hon. Ron Schuler (Minister of Infrastructure): I was wondering if you could canvass the committee and see if there is leave for myself to make a very short statement on the passing away of Assistant Deputy Minister Ruth Eden, which happened this week, and then of course, the opposition could respond, and then we would go into the regular statements.

Is there leave?

Mr. Chairperson: Is there leave for the minister to provide a short statement on the passing of Ruth Eden? *[Agreed]*

Mr. Schuler: Thank you, and it is with a very heavy heart that we must say goodbye to a beloved member of our team here at Manitoba Infrastructure. Assistant Deputy Minister of Technical Services and Operations Ruth Eden passed away this week.

It has been a true shock to myself as minister, deputy minister, senior staff and the entire department. Ruth Eden was a mentor, a friend, advocate, trailblazer. She's one of the first women to achieve this high position. She's achieved positions throughout Manitoba. She was a trailblazer. She encouraged young women to get into engineering and was an unbelievable individual in this department.

Personally, she was an incredible friend to myself, and we did a lot of tours together, high-water tours. And she was always level, even keel, always had good advice, and I'm personally very shocked. I've said to the department, I actually don't feel it's even real right now. I'm very, very saddened that we lost an individual who is this—the ranking member of the department, and we turned to her a lot to get advice and what was done there and what did we do there and why did we do things. And she always had those answers.

We can never replace Ruth Eden, and I don't think we should even try. We'll try to fill her position maybe at some point in time, but you can't replace Ruth Eden. We wish her family all the best. I know they're planning a funeral, and I hope at some point in time I can make a proper statement in the Legislature.

Thank you for allowing us to make this statement. I do want to point out to all members of the Legislature, there's a book of condolences outside the deputy minister's office on the second floor. If you wish to come by and leave a little note, please do so. If you had an opportunity to work with Ruth or you knew her or she's—you got to make her acquaintance, please leave a little note, and that will be handed over to the family.

So thank you, committee, for allowing me a few moments to reflect on the greatness of Ruth Eden.

Mr. Chairperson: Thank you for those very kind words, Minister.

Did you want to—wish to make an opening statement at this time?

Mr. Schuler: I was wondering if the opposition wanted to make a statement and then I'd go into the opening statement.

Mr. Chairperson: Yes, the indication, Minister, is to go ahead with your opening statement. *[interjection]* No.

Minister Schuler, go ahead.

Mr. Schuler: COVID-19 pandemic, '20-21 fiscal year was challenging for Manitoba Infrastructure, government at large and all Manitobans. Manitoba Infrastructure recognizes its roles as the department of hope, the department of the day after tomorrow. Strategic infrastructure investments are fundamental to economic growth in Manitoba as we gain control of this pandemic through 2020-2021 and push to restart the economy in 2021-22. Investment in our provincial highway bridge and water control networks will be more important than ever. Budget 2021 commits to a three-year horizon of a minimum of \$500 million per year for the highway capital budget, beginning with a 2021-2022 highway budget of \$505 million, including \$107 million for Manitoba Restart Program.

Overall, budget 2021-2022 include \$786 million for Manitoba Infrastructure strategic infrastructure, an increase of 21 per cent from the \$652 million announced in Budget 2021—twenty—2020-2021. In detail, the 2021-2022 budget includes \$543 million for capital investment in our infrastructure,

\$107 million for Manitoba Restart projects as well as \$136 million for renewal activities, including \$124 million for maintenance and preservation of highways and bridges and \$12 million for maintenance and preservation of water-related assets.

Key department highlights include the following recent upcoming activities. We view ourselves as the international trade hub that will connect east with west and north with south, not just within Manitoba, not just within Canada, but within North America. Manitoba Infrastructure is proceeding with the first steps towards phase 2 of the Perimeter Safety Review, which will include the north section of the Perimeter Highway, PTH 101, from Portage Avenue to Fermor Avenue. The Perimeter Highway is Manitoba's most important international trade hub and is a key link in the Trans-Canada Highway and plays a strategic role in Manitoba's economy by providing industry with access to world markets.

Phase 2 of the Perimeter Safety Review builds upon phase 1, which was developed for the South Perimeter Highway in 2018. We anticipate completing the safety improvement projects identified in both phases over the next several years.

* (17:40)

As a result of Manitoba Infrastructure's recent reorganization, the department's budgetary structure will look significantly different in 2021-2022. These changes will contribute to better service delivery in 2021-22 and beyond.

On May 7th, 2020, the \$500-million Manitoba Restart Program was announced. A significant portion of this funding has been dedicated for highway infrastructure improvement projects, including \$150 million for asphalt, highway and resurfacing, and \$65 million for major projects to improve road safety; \$107 million of this spend is scheduled to occur in 2021-2022.

Manitoba Infrastructure has made significant progress in working through the environment assessment and federal approvals process, and continues to engage impacted communities as part of this process. We are also strongly committed to fulfilling our responsibility for consultation under section 35 of The Constitution Act. We will proceed with construction as soon as we receive environmental approvals. The channels will take approximately four years to construct at a total cost of more than \$540 million.

Manitoba Infrastructure is committed to providing high levels of service while also creating opportunities for better value for money. The department is working to strengthen partnerships and collaboration with municipalities, industry and other private sector entities to enhance service levels and find efficiencies. The department is integrating partnerships into their review of its operating model to determine the best way to reduce soft costs.

Manitoba Infrastructure is developing a five-year strategic highway investment plan. This initiative will include an investment framework to plan and prioritize future transportation projects across the province.

Recently implemented across the government of Manitoba, balanced scorecards foster operational improvements by reinforcing transparency, alignment and accountability. They've been added to the redesigned supplement to identify key priorities for each department that staff will work towards, with appropriate performance measures. With the supplement redesigned to be a business plan that focused on strategic priorities, departments can take steps to create operating plans that further identify how strategic priorities will translate into day-to-day operations. The performance results of these operations will be shared at the end of the fiscal year in the department's annual report.

In closing, I would like to thank Deputy Minister Sarah Thiele and the leadership that she has shown in this department, along with the other ADMs who have been just amazing. We mentioned Ruth Eden, who was just something else to work with. I know with—as department minister I will introduce all the rest of them when we start getting into the Estimates.

Thank you. Those are my opening remarks.

Mr. Chairperson: We thank the minister for those statements.

Does the critic from the official opposition have an opening statement?

No, he does not.

So the floor, therefore, is open for questions. *[Interjection]* Oh, I guess I got to do my job right first. So, sorry about that.

So, under Manitoba practice, debate on the minister's salary is the last item considered for a department in the Committee of Supply. Accordingly, we shall now defer consideration of line item 15.1(a) contained in resolution 15.1.

Does the committee wish to proceed through the Estimates of this department chronologically or have a global discussion?

Mr. Matt Wiebe (Concordia): I would suggest a global manner.

Mr. Chairperson: A global matter? Is—any discussion? Everyone agree? *[Agreed]* Then we shall perform in a global discussion.

Therefore, the floor is now open for questions.

Mr. Wiebe: I thank the minister for his opening statement.

Could the minister undertake to provide with a current organizational chart of the department, including the names of individuals and vacancies for positions that remain open?

Mr. Schuler: Thank you very much for that question.

Joining me here today is—and you can follow along on page 11 of the main Estimates supplement, Budget 2021. If you want to follow along, there is a organizational chart: Deputy Minister Sara Thiele is here virtually for the committee; Corporate Services Division, Assistant Deputy Minister Kristin Seier; Infrastructure, Capital Projects Assistant Deputy Minister Rob Taylor; Emergency Management ADM Johau Botha who is not with us currently, he is otherwise engaged; and, unfortunately, there is chair that will be empty for some time and that will be Technical Services and Operations ADM, the late Ruth Eden. With me is also Andrew Clark, who is my special assistant, who doesn't show up on this org chart.

Hope that answers the member's questions.

Mr. Wiebe: I think what—the minister knows what I'm getting at here and, if he'd refer to pages 65 and 66 of his annual report, he'd note that there is now currently \$48 million that's being underspent in his department because of staff vacancies in various areas.

So what we're looking for from the minister is to provide an update to the committee of the current number of FTEs in the department and, most importantly, the current vacancy rates so that we can get an updated number to work with as we go forward here over the next couple of days.

Mr. Schuler: In Budget 2021-22, we have 1,820 positions. That is down five from 2020-2021.

* (17:50)

I'd like to point out to committee that currently, as of April 1st, we were at 631 vacancies, and that's also because we have many new positions coming on with reorganization and this would also include the seasonal hirings. So we hire a lot of students for the summer who do all kinds of great work. I would suggest that's how we end up recruiting a lot of really good people into the department. We identify individuals who show a lot of talent and a lot of love for what they're doing, and we end up hiring a lot of very smart young engineers into the program.

So this would also be impacted by the fact that we hadn't started our summer hiring, which is reflecting that.

Mr. Wiebe: Well, yes, I'll have to break out the calculator here, but that seems like an incredibly high number. Maybe the minister can just clarify by telling the committee which area each of these vacancies is in. And I can understand that this might be something that isn't, you know, readily available to him right now, so if he wanted to, you know, take this under consideration, I understand—or, I guess, two days until we come back into Estimates—but we could certainly pick up where we left off there.

So, just which area are each of these vacancies in?

Mr. Schuler: With the reorganization of the Department of Manitoba Infrastructure we created an infrastructure capital projects division; that's many new areas. In fact, if you were to go to page 111 of the Estimates of expenditure for the fiscal year March 31st, 2022, page 111 and page 112, Infrastructure Capital Projects, and then under there we have, for instance, under (d) Project Services—this is a new division—will have a centre of excellence, amongst other areas, which we are now hiring for.

And I would point out that there is a lot of hiring that also takes place seasonally, which would also be reflected in why the number as of April 1st was higher. It's because there is a substantive fluctuation that happens seasonally. This is something that happens regularly and under previous governments.

It's under ours, we ramp up for [*inaudible*] too cool we can't lay any more asphalt, and that kind of ends the end of the season, and even with pouring concrete there's a certain limit to which they can pour concrete too.

Mr. Chairperson: Sorry to interrupt there, Minister, but you froze there for about 25 seconds, so we missed

some of what you had said. If you want to just do a really quick recap, that would be beneficial.

Mr. Schuler: So thank you.

Under previous governments, same thing again, we do hire seasonally. Our—as soon as the frost is out of the ground, which was earlier this year, which was very, very advantageous for construction, was a drier year—I know that wasn't very advantageous for farmers or for forest fires, but for construction it was a really big boon. As you know we live at the bottom—in what used to be the bottom of Lake Agassiz and the gumbo, if it gets wet, is very tough to do construction work in.

So we've had a very good season, and with the extended season with the nice weather that we're having, asphalt's still being laid and concrete without hoarding can still be poured.

So we hire for those. We try to keep them on for as long as we can. We understand students are now going back to school, and so that number does fluctuate. And I don't know if you caught that we all said the centre of excellence, which is on page 112. That is new and we're going to be hiring for that as well. So, by next year, the entire number will come down to a degree, but again, it does reflect seasonal hiring.

Mr. Wiebe: So I didn't hear the minister commit to getting me that list, and I do think it would be helpful for the work of the committee. I think it would be helpful for us to understand exactly where those folks are, so I'm just going to ask him very clearly if he can have that list ready to go for us for next opportunity to sit.

The other thing, and I can appreciate we're running very short on time here, that I would ask the minister maybe so that we can be ready to roll next day is for a detailed list of budgeted projects, amounts spent, and deferred projects for the past fiscal year as outlined on page 24 of the public accounts where it breaks down the actuals versus the budgeted amounts for strategic infrastructure for 2021.

Mr. Schuler: While we're getting the answer for that question in the main Estimates Supplement of Manitoba Infrastructure, I would encourage you to go to page 18 where the FTEs are listed out by division, so you can have a look at that where the breakout is and that's—that probably answers the question for the

member there and mindful of the time that we're under.

We've had a very busy season and we are constructing right until the last moment where we can still lay asphalt to pour concrete. We hope to see a lot of projects continue after that if they just involve moving earth or piling can be done in colder weather.

So we will continue with those and mindful that we are just about at the end of our time, if the member has one quick question.

Mr. Wiebe: Well, no, I mean, I'm well aware of the information on page 18 in this, you know, paltry book that's been distributed to us that's been, you know, this is the—you know, compared to the previous years and the detail that's available.

So I'm hearing from the minister that there are 631 vacancies and, you know, he's trying to hand wave these away by saying, well, it's seasonal workers. So, well, maybe it's about the reorg or maybe it's about this, you know, the fact that it's—we can't lay asphalt right now.

Well, I think we need to be very clear here for Manitobans. You know, based on what the minister's bringing forward, you know, this idea that his department is the department of hope, I think is what he called it, and yet, you know, we don't know why there are so many vacancies. And we hear about major issues and concerns when it comes to safety on the highways and roads in our province.

So I think he needs to be very clear and detailed about where these vacancies lie and exactly which area they are in and if they can be explained away as simply just seasonal workers that no longer are employed by the department, then he should be able to come to this committee and bring that information forward and be proud of that and to say, yes, absolutely, we're on track.

But that's not what we're hearing from people out in the field, and we're not—not what we're hearing about the safety and the importance of transportation in our province, especially heading into the winter season.

So, I just ask that the minister, you know, come in good faith. You know, I try to do the same here, you know, and I'm trying to just get to the bottom of this. Hopefully, we'll have more time next session.

Mr. Chairperson: Order. Time being 6 o'clock, committee rise.

CHAMBER EXECUTIVE COUNCIL

* (15:30)

Mr. Chairperson (Doyle Piwniuk): Would the Committee of Supply please come to order.

This section of Committee of Supply will now resume the consideration for the Estimates for the Executive Council, which last met on May 31st, 2021, in another section of the Committee of Supply.

As previously announced, there—as there is only one resolution, that the decision will be proceeded in a global manner. At this time, I invite ministerial and opposition staff to enter the Chamber, and I would like to ask the members to be introduced—their staff once they're here.

Hon. Kelvin Goertzen (Premier): I'd like to introduce David McLaughlin, who is the Clerk of Executive Council; Elliot Sims, who is the associate clerk of executive 'council'; and Braeden Jones, who is the special assistant to the Premier.

Mr. Chairperson: And we'll have the Official Opposition Leader introduce his staff.

Mr. Wab Kinew (Leader of the Official Opposition): In addition to my colleague from St. James, I'm joined by Mark Rosner, the chief of staff to the Leader of the Opposition.

Mr. Chairperson: Thank you. Thanks, everyone.

The floor is now open for questions. The honourable Official Opposition House—the Official Leader of the—of the Official Opposition. Sorry about that. *[interjection]* Yes. I just want to make sure that the mic is on. The official—Leader of the Official Opposition.

Mr. Kinew: Forever. There we go. There's a—*[interjection]* Yes.

So I just want to start by—you know, I just want to acknowledge my colleague from Steinbach who has the opportunity to serve as Premier of Manitoba. It is an interim role but, nonetheless, it's a very important role, and I'm sure that this is going to be one of the highlights of his career. Not an easy job but, you know, we've gotten to know each other over the past few years that I've been here—he's been here much longer than I have, I should quickly point out.

But, yes, I know that he takes his work seriously. He loves his family very much, and so I do hope that he finds meaning in this role that he's been asked to

fulfill, but also maybe he can, you know, stop and smell the roses a bit while he's sitting in that room 204 and just kind of take stock of the journey over politics that's led him here. So I just want to start by saying that.

Just to pose a question right off the top, just to follow up on, I guess, the earlier committee meetings that we've had here. I just wanted to ask if the First Minister can commit to making sure that the previous premier's undertakings in this committee are going to be followed through on.

Mr. Goertzen: I want to thank the Leader of the Official Opposition (Mr. Kinew) for his kind words. I've looked around the office a bit; I haven't found any roses in the office yet. But, you know, it is a historical office and I recognize that many amazing things and probably some difficult things have happened in that office as well.

And I—you know, I really appreciate his comments and we have had the opportunity to speak personally about this role, but then a number of other things—and it is one of the sad things that people don't always get a chance to see that relational things that happen not on the record, not in question period between politicians because they happen more often than people might recognize.

And in the same way, I know that he honours and values his own family. Who—met his wife. I'm not sure that I've met your kids. I don't know if they were at St. John's Park for the powwow, but if they were, they should be very proud of their dad not only in the roles that he's accomplished politically, but then also the other things and activities that you're involved in in the community. And I think that I can say that without any reservation.

I think I can also say without any reservation of the undertakings that were undertaken by the previous premier will be fulfilled.

Mr. Kinew: I appreciate those words and that commitment.

Similarly, I just wanted to ask if the Premier (Mr. Goertzen) can provide an updated staff listing for Exec Council, including OIC appointments and a list of technical officers with their titles.

Mr. Goertzen: Will undertake to do that. I can assure him it has not grown since I've become Premier.

Mr. Kinew: All right, so we look forward to that undertaking.

We know that emergency room wait times have risen again and that there's also a major issue with a staffing crisis in the health-care system. We see evidence of this reported in the media. We also hear about it in terms of case work and phone calls and constituency work. We hear from people in the health-care system who, you know, asking for privacy, but still reach out to us and try and alert us to issues. This has been a persistent challenge and it's one that became particularly acute in the second and third waves during the pandemic.

So given that we're now in that fourth wave, as Dr. Roussin says, and we do expect that, unfortunately, there will be a greater need for increased health-care capacity over the next few months in Manitoba as a result of the pandemic. I'd like to know what steps are being taken to address that staffing crisis and what new measures right now are being put into place to help bolster health-care capacity for the fourth wave?

Mr. Goertzen: I thank the Leader of the Opposition for the question. It's a very real question, a very timely question and a question that is being struggled with across the country.

So he will know and he would be sad if I didn't say that prior to the pandemic, when it comes to emergency room wait times Manitoba had seen among the most dramatic reductions in wait times in ERs in the country. In fact, when other wait times are going up in other provinces, ours were going down and quite dramatically. And it had been, I think, the lowest emergency room wait time prior to the pandemic as—for years, if not decades in Manitoba.

And then during the first wave—such as it was, the first wave of the pandemic in Manitoba—there were also reductions. That was largely driven, though, by people who were not coming to the ER because they were concerned about getting COVID. There was a lot of uncertainty at that time.

* (15:40)

In more recent days, there's been a more normalization of the pattern of those who are coming to ERs, and maybe even a few more, because there may be some pent-up health considerations because some people weren't presenting in hospital before.

So it's good that people go to hospital, go to emergency rooms appropriately. That's not a bad thing. That's not a negative thing. But there's no question that every province across Canada is dealing with those struggles and those pressures. This is not a

Manitoba problem when it comes to the pandemic and ER wait times.

I know, in talking to my colleagues across Canada, everybody is feeling that pressure. And often the minimizing and the challenging factor is staff. It's not physical beds, for example, if it's an ICU. It's not space, necessarily, when it comes to an emergency room. It is the staffing pressure that is happening because of the pandemic.

In Manitoba, we've taken significant measures to, as an example, increase the number of ICU nurses we have by putting in training programs that allow nurses to be able to scale up in terms of their skills to work in an ICU. That was significant in helping us during the third wave. I suspect—well, I know it will be significant in helping in whatever occurs in the fourth wave. So those efforts are well under way when it comes to staffing and resources.

We recognize, of course, there is a burnout factor when it comes to health-care workers. Recognized around the world, not even just in Canada, because there's been a significant load that's been taken on by health-care workers, and so those who are the employers of our health-care workers in the system are working all the time to try to ensure that they can mitigate some of that burnout, speaking to those who are feeling that load and trying to find the ability to provide them some relief in a time that doesn't often offer a lot of relief.

So it gives me the opportunity to thank those who are working in our health-care system and to recognize that things are being done, but the challenge should not be minimized.

Mr. Kinew: The Province has contracted with Dynacare to provide many testing services, including COVID testing. Why has the government chosen to work with a private American company, and why not instead invest in increasing capacity locally here with local providers or investing in Cadham lab.

Mr. Josh Guenter, Acting Chairperson, in the Chair

Mr. Goertzen: I think there has been investment in the public system when it comes to testing and lab work, but the member will—opposite—will recognize and realize that when the pandemic happened, there was a need to be able to respond quickly and in a flexible way, and nimbly with quality care and quality services.

So it wasn't a—you know, a reluctance to support any of the public sector services. In fact, I would say

at Cadham labs there's been significant support, increased support, increased testing, more than they've ever done before, but there was a need to be able to provide additional service providers, and the member opposite is suggesting that we should not have had that additional support.

He may want to reflect upon what the consequences of that might have been, because it's not just that people were getting tested for COVID-19. There were all the other testings that continue to happen in the system—pathology and different sorts of tests that happen within the health-care system.

So I think it would have been negligent of a government not to look for every opportunity to try to increase testing capacity in a quality way in a pandemic to not only—to deal with the issue of COVID-19 testing, but to ensure that those other tests that need to happen in the health-care system—which continued on and in some ways accelerated during the pandemic [*inaudible*] would have happened.

Mr. Kinew: Can the Premier (Mr. Goertzen) let us know how much money has been paid to Dynacare, by fiscal year, for their services that they provide to government and to the WRHA?

Mr. Goertzen: We'll undertake to provide the information to the honourable member.

Mr. Kinew: We saw in one annual report from the Department of Health that Dynacare had been paid over \$41 million in the last fiscal year. So given the numerous reports that we hear in our constituency offices, Legislative offices, about long waits for seniors in particular and about other challenges accessing testing services, does the Premier think that we're getting good money, value for money, out of the arrangement with Dynacare?

Mr. Goertzen: I know that as we, you know, move through the pandemic—and we all hope that that happens sooner rather than later, but nobody's making any predictions about that—there'll be lots of opportunity for folks to look back and to analyze, you know, the different responses that governments have had—and that's not a bad thing. I think, in fact, that sort of analysis should happen across the nation and around the world. Not simply to see what went wrong and what went right, that might be something that an opposition member might want to see, but really to leave a better playbook for others if there, you know, is another pandemic—and hopefully not in our memory, but it could very well happen.

There hasn't, of course, been a pandemic of this scale since 1918, so there wasn't a lot of, sort of, playbooks available. So I think, you know, we have the responsibility to leave some of this understanding and information to other generations if there is another pandemic.

I'm not going to be critical of the fact that we looked for support, testing when other jurisdictions were scrambling for that as well. He will remember, it wasn't that long ago that it was hard to get PPE, that it was hard to get the different things that we needed when it came to testing. There were critical shortages of medical supplies, particularly at the beginning of the pandemic until things could be scaled up in different parts of the economy to deal with some of these things.

So members opposite for, as opposite as critical, that we reached out and tried to find as much support for Manitobans as we could when it came to testing and other things.

He can be critical of that, but it was our responsibility to ensure that those who needed to get tests, those who needed PPE, those who needed other medical services could get them in the best ability possible.

Mr. Kinew: So what's the plan over the coming weeks and months to ensure that seniors aren't waiting in the cold to get testing done inside a Dynacare facility?

Mr. Goertzen: I thank the member for the question.

You know, I think it's, first of all, important to remember that any time we hear concerns about services in the health-care system, whether it's, you know, with Dynacare and testing, or otherwise, we follow up on that and work to try to alleviate those challenges. Some challenges are, you know, harder to alleviate than others, but it's not that the effort doesn't happen. There are different kinds of testing that are happening in the system. Of course, COVID-19 testing is the one that gets a lot of attention, but there are many other tests people are doing when it comes to their health care, and references and referrals that they're getting from their medical professionals.

So, you know, to the extent that there are challenges for those who are going to Dynacare—I know that there are other options. There are online options, you can book an appointment for a test. I am not sure that that's always easy for those maybe who aren't used to booking these sort of things online. There are different options and modalities when it

comes to testing, but we obviously work with 'servirce' providers to try to improve that.

But I would say that, you know, the COVID testing right now—that's particularly what the member's talking about—the turnaround time is, I believe, still under 24 hours on average, might be different in different parts of the province. That doesn't alleviate, necessarily, a lineup, if someone is trying to get a COVID test or another test at Dynacare. But we're always working with those health-care providers to try to smooth that out in a time when we understand that there's a tremendous amount of pressure on the health-care system overall.

But I would say, if the member opposite has a particular constituent concern, bring that to the Minister of Health. That'll be looked at, maybe they can direct them to things like online booking or other things to help alleviate some of those concerns.

Mr. Kinew: We have been hearing from folks who are waiting quite a bit longer to get COVID testing results, and we also noticed that the advice that, I guess, nurses are giving is it's no longer 24 to 72 hours to expect a test. It's now become 48 to 72 hours to expect a test result.

* (15:50)

So just wondering, with that in mind, those sort of reports we're hearing from constituents, the fourth wave continuing to get worse and the comments Dr. Roussin has made about increasing test positivity, particularly in some health regions, what are the plans to expand testing capacity? What is the plan for testing going through this fourth wave?

Mr. Goertzen: We've seen obviously at different times that the demand for testing is different. So you're right, as we go into other waves, naturally, there are higher demands for testing.

At this particular time, when we're in the fall, there are other things other than COVID going around. So the member opposite has young children, mine isn't quite so young but still in school and so, you know, there are other things that happen other than COVID that require somebody to get a test because they think they might have COVID.

So, you know, there are always ways for us and we're looking for ways to scale up the ability to do more tests per day and to turn that around. Sometimes I think—and we talked about the average turnaround time of 24 hours—it can be different if you're in

different parts of Manitoba; sometimes that's part of the issue.

Of course, the average is being reported but it may not be the same experience for everyone. I know when I had a COVID test back in November, I think the average at that time was about 36 hours and I waited three days, but part of that was because I did it, I think, in a rural centre so it was a little bit slower in terms of the turnaround.

The average time right now, I understand, is still, as I reported to him in the last answer—but we'll always consider ways to increase that turnaround time as we get that higher demand on testing.

Mr. Kinew: I want to ask a question on behalf of people that I've spoken with who live in the Southern Health region who've, you know, done their part in terms of getting vaccinated and observing public health restrictions and orders, but are also concerned about what they see in, you know, some of their communities.

Are there conversations or plans to step up enforcement in the Southern Health region?

Mr. Goertzen: You know, I appreciate the fact the member has raised. We spoke about this a little personally a couple days ago about, you know, vaccine hesitancy as an example. I know that's not specific to his question, I'll get up to the issue of enforcement yet.

You know, but we really are at, I think, at a point where we're going to move the needle on vaccination rates in places that are resistant—and it's not just southern Manitoba—it is going to be through those personal conversations. I think that there's, you know, the time where people are necessarily listening just to government leaders or health leaders, that is diminishing. Now, we are relying on them talking to their neighbours and talking to their friends.

In fact, there was a really good article that was written in the Winnipeg Free Press yesterday, and I'm sorry that I don't remember the reporter's name, but they wrote a story about three individuals who had been resistant to the vaccine and why it is that they changed their mind. And exclusively it was because they had individual conversations with people.

And it was—and I thought it was a very thoughtful article. In fact, last night I wrote an email to the reporter and said, like, this is exactly the kinds of conversations that we need to keep talking about and have to keep happening because that is what's ultimately

going to move vaccine hesitancy at the point that we're at now; it is those individual conversations.

In terms of enforcement, there's 3,300 individuals who are qualified to enforce Manitoba health orders in the province. As you know, we draw them from across government, so a lot of different areas. That sometimes comes at the expense of other enforcement.

It's a big province; 3,300 individuals is not just southern Manitoba. The mayor of Winnipeg will tell you that he'd like to see more enforcement; he has certainly said that publicly. There are other areas that have called for more enforcement.

Those 3,300 people are sometimes—you know, it's difficult for them to be 'everywhere.' And while the member opposite might say, well, then, why might not make it 6,600 or whatever number he might throw out, they still have to be qualified and well trained to do that job because we are asking them to enforce things and to often go into people's businesses and to be sort of in their face on certain things. And you need the right kind of people who are properly trained because, if you don't do that, that has consequences as well.

So, enforcement is happening. It is happening regularly in Southern Health. But it's not just Southern Health. There are many areas of the province where there are pockets where there are concerns and challenges and we need enforcement people there as well.

Mr. Kinew: Is there a plan to increase enforcement in the Southern Health region?

Mr. Goertzen: Ultimately, I mean, those decisions are made by Justice officials as they look at where they can move their resources. I can tell you that enforcement continues. I know that as an MLA because I get emails almost daily, maybe not daily, from individuals, businesses who've indicated that there's been an enforcement officer there and sometimes they feel the experience went well, and sometimes they don't feel the experience went well, but there is continued enforcement as officials make a determination that in different areas there needs to be more enforcement, they'll make that determination.

But again, I know the member opposite is focusing specifically on Southern Health. I understand why he's focusing specifically on Southern Health, but there are areas in all parts of Manitoba and every health region where there's a call for greater enforcement, and that is true in the city of Winnipeg as well. The mayor of Winnipeg, who I consider a friend, went out on—publicly a few days ago and called for more

enforcement. So to the best of the ability, they will continue to have enforcement officers in those areas where they are deemed to be most needed.

But again, they have to be properly trained. They have to be the right people. It's not a matter of just saying, well, we're going to pick another 3,000 people off the street and tell them to enforce health orders because that can have consequences as well. They have to be the right people with the right training.

Mr. Kinew: The reason why I'm asking is because, you know, I've had people who live in Southern Health Santé Sud ask whether there is a plan to increase enforcement. We've seen the test positivity rate in the region get very high. The vaccination rate in particular, you know, some sub-regions of Southern Health remain very low.

I just wonder if the Premier's (Mr. Goertzen) own relationships in the area or considerations about, you know, his own relationships with constituents, does that get in the way of some of the decisions that have to be made when it comes to enforcing a public health order?

Mr. Goertzen: I can assure the member and very painfully that many of the relationships that I've had with many people have been severed over the last 18 years because of decisions that I or our government have made, but they've always been made with the best interests of all Manitobans as a whole. That was the case when I was the Education minister, when I filled in as the Health minister.

Now as the Premier, those decisions are made based on the best interests of Manitobans as a whole. If I was concerned about relationships that I held or was holding in southern Manitoba, you know, again, a lot of them have been severed. And I'm prepared for that.

I understand that there is division and that there are different opinions. I don't think the member opposite should drive those divisions, though, any further by simply focusing on one area of the province. Yes, the test positivity rate in southern Manitoba is too high, but it is also too high in other parts of Manitoba as well. So there is a need for enforcement in many places in Manitoba.

I just want to assure that member that the decisions that I make while I'm in this chair or any other chair that I might hold in this Assembly will be made on the best interests of all Manitobans regardless of the relationships that I hold, and I think that has been proven out over the last 18 months and

if he doesn't believe me, I can give him phone numbers of people who used to be good friends of mine who are no longer good friends of mine, and he can have those difficult conversations on the phone with them.

Mr. Kinew: I've spoken at length about Brian Pallister already today and some of those folks that are no longer here that the interim leader is not talking to anymore, as it were.

In preparation of a potential First Minister's meeting, can the Premier just confirm Manitoba's stance on health transfers? Is that unchanged with the interim PC leader in place and, you know, specifically, is—the Premier confirm that the health transfer changes initiated by the Harper government and then implemented by the Trudeau government in Ottawa that cost Manitoba a lot of money each year, that this government opposes those?

Mr. Goertzen: So, this government has been a leader and the former premier was a leader as well in calling for a fair deal when it comes to health cost sharing in Manitoba and across Canada. As the former Health minister in 2016 to 2018 or so and shared the health table during those years or part of those years, we did lead the way in calling for a better deal when it comes to health care. It didn't work out the way I would've hoped, not just for Manitoba but for all of the country. But I do think that there is a renewed resolve among premiers partly maybe driven by the experience of the pandemic, but I think just maybe even before that, to try to get a better, more equitable deal when it comes to health care in Manitoba and in Canada.

* (16:00)

So, as you know, there are many jurisdictions in Canada who now, you know, pay for more than 80 per cent of the health care in their individual province, less than 20 percent contribution from the federal. That's not acceptable and it's not sustainable.

So, in my recent call with premiers across Canada—and it wasn't a first ministers meeting or in preparation of a first ministers meeting. It was simply a call among premiers. There was a restating of the need for a meeting as soon as possible with the Prime Minister. Premier Horgan stated that publicly in a release. We want to have a meeting with Prime Minister Trudeau as soon as possible when it comes to a fair funding model for health care. Prime Minister Trudeau promised that after he was first elected. He never fulfilled that promise.

I spoke to the Prime Minister a couple of weeks ago, reiterated—I reiterated the call for a fair funding of health care for the provinces. He didn't make that commitment, but he understands that the provinces are strongly united on this front.

So I guess that's a long-winded answer to say, yes, Manitoba continues to lead and to be a leader in the country on the need for a fair funding model of health care.

Mr. KineW: And I would just acknowledge the previous answer there from the First Minister.

Can the Premier (Mr. Goertzen) talk about the decision around Bill 64? When did he decide that that bill was bad and it should be withdrawn?

Mr. Goertzen: Well, I think that the Premier—or sorry—the official opposition—I know—don't get too excited yet, you know. It's—it might not happen, you know, the way you think it might happen. A lot of things happen differently in politics. But I'll leave that up for the electorate to decide. I never presume what the electorate's going to make a decision. out of respect for the electorate.

I think you should be careful in labelling something all bad, because I know, when talking with the Manitoba Teachers' Society, the Manitoba association of school boards, that there were many things in Bill 64 that they supported, particularly trying to improve outcomes for Aboriginal students or trying to ensure that there was equity in education across the province because there isn't always equity in education across the province now. There are some areas of Manitoba—the member will know this well—where there aren't as many opportunities in the K-to-12 system as there are in other provinces.

So I don't believe he's wanting to speak against higher outcomes for Aboriginal students. I don't believe he's trying to speak against equity in education, but when he labels an entire bill bad, that is what he's doing. So I'm not putting those words into his mouth. However, there were lots of concerns when it came to governance in Bill 64, and we listened to those concerns, and I do believe that there's an important role for local voice when it comes to education. There's an important role for local voices to be heard when it comes to education. The mechanism has been up for debate in this House for a hundred years, but I believe that it is important to have those local voices in education, and I think that's reflective of what our caucus decided to do in terms of moving away from that bill.

I would say, in stark contrast to my friend—and I don't say this as a political point but it will sound political—that given opportunities of the past in this House, other governments who found themselves at odds with the public, increasing the PST from 7 to 8 per cent, ignored 205 presenters, sat through the summer, rammed that bill through, changed the legislation so that it didn't have to go to a referendum.

We took a different tack. We decided to listen to Manitobans, not that everything in Bill 64 was bad. In fact, I've heard from representatives of those different organizations that I mentioned who said, listen, like, let's make sure we're continuing to look to reform things in a positive way for outcomes for students. And I agree with that, but I do think on the governance piece we listened to Manitobans in a way that other governments in the past didn't.

Mr. KineW: I just want to put on the record that it's pretty clear that, you know, Brian Pallister's party and its successor here are trying to frame the reason they capitulated on Bill 64 as having exclusively been about governance. But I can tell you, having spoken to many many people across the province, that the opposition to that bill went far, far further than that. While I recognize that, you know, there is an element of what we do that is political messaging, and my colleague has to be committed to political messaging, as does the Minister of Education (Mr. Cullen), and that political messaging job that they're going to try and pull in reversing course on Bill 64 but still pursuing many of the same policies, involves trying to frame the objection to it as being exclusively about governance.

But I just want to state emphatically on the record that the opposition to Bill 64 went far, far beyond governance issues. And we will see that any time the PCs try to bring back further cuts or damages to the education system, and you will hear a loud, vocal opposition to those changes from teachers, from students, from parents as much as you did this summer.

Obviously, I'm building up to a question on infrastructure. I just wanted ask about the Lake St. Martin, Lake Manitoba channel. I just wanted to—just see what the status of that is. Is there any updates that the First Minister can provide on costs, timeline—what is the situation when we're talking about the channel project?

Mr. Goertzen: Well—and I do appreciate the member opposite—although I don't agree—you know, indicating that he doesn't support quality in education across the

province. Which, you know, was included in the K-to-12 commission and reflected in the bill. I don't agree, but I appreciate him putting it on the record that he doesn't believe increasing scores for all students in Manitoba, which was reflected in the bill.

That is certainly something he'll have the opportunity to run on in the next election if he wants to run against the quality of education for all Manitobans. If he wants to run on trying to keep our scores the lowest in Canada, I welcome him to do that. Not that I agree with him doing it, but it wouldn't necessarily be a bad thing, from a purely political perspective.

But I do hope that he has an opportunity, at some point, to reflect upon those comments and come to understand that all students, regardless of where they live, regardless of their background, benefit from an education system that is not only quality education but an equality of education. And if he doesn't come to understand that, then I'll leave that in his court for trying to defend.

But when it comes to Lake St. Martin, we are still in the process of trying to get the environmental licence, still consultations ongoing, clearly we hope that the federal government will see this as a priority. We expressed that many, many times that it is a priority, that it is something that is, you know, seen as safety issue, a project that, you know, has been a long time in the making between different governments, having seen the recognition of its importance.

So, still in the environmental licensing process. Don't have a date that I can put it on for the member, other than to say we welcome any assistance that he or others in this Chamber might have in terms of convincing the federal government to move this project along.

Mr. Kinew: You know, I would like to see things proceed in a good way, an inclusive way, including for communities in the Interlake. What update can the Premier (Mr. Goertzen) provide on those conversations with the federal government? Has this issue been raised recently over the summer with your federal—with their federal counterparts, and what is the status of those discussions?

Mr. Goertzen: Issue's been raised. I mean, you know, outside of the federal election, of course, I suppose. But, the issue's been raised by the Minister of Infrastructure (Mr. Schuler) repeatedly, aggressively, emphatically and we all hope that a resolution comes to this quickly.

Mr. Kinew: I'd note that it's going to be difficult for the Minister of Infrastructure to continue raising this issue because soon he won't be able to travel on a plane to go to Ottawa. So, I'd like to know why is it that a sports fan has to be vaccinated to go see the Jets or the Bombers, but the person who signs the emergency measures in Manitoba doesn't have to be vaccinated?

Why is there that double standard for members of the PC caucus, relative to other Manitobans?

Mr. Goertzen: If the member opposite knows something about the Minister of Infrastructure's health status that I don't know, I wouldn't encourage him to put it on the record, but I am tempted to, you know, acknowledge that there might be a breach of PHIA if he has somehow been able to access the Minister of Infrastructure's health records in a way that would be in opposition and a breach of PHIA.

So if he's done that, then he can certainly let me know.

* (16:10)

Mr. Kinew: The interim PC leader unintentionally makes the point about the hypocrisy of the PC caucus. Manitobans right now each and every day ask to provide a proof of vaccination when they enter a restaurant, when they enter a Bombers game, when they go to a Jets game, right? Apparently, that's not a breach of PHI. Apparently that's not a breach of personal health information, right? The government seems to advance the proposition that this is a necessary part of combatting the pandemic, unless such a question were be—were to be posed to one of their own caucus members. Then, in that case, there has to be righteous indignation and scoffing at, you know, how dare people ask the question.

So, again, I recognize that this is probably something that I won't persuade the First Minister on, but I would like him to speak to Manitobans and just let Manitobans know why is it that they have to provide proof of vaccination to be able to enter restaurants, sporting facilities, all number of venues, many of which resemble the Manitoba Legislature in terms of having a lot of people in close proximity to one another, but members of his caucus do not have to abide by the same standard?

Mr. Goertzen: I've been to my fair share of Jets games and Bomber games and I don't know that it resembles the Manitoba Legislature. But I think the member opposite misunderstood me or tried to

misconstrue my words. I did not indicate that providing a proof of vaccination was a breach of PHIA, because that is the individual's choice to provide the proof of vaccination. I do it every time that I go in to a Bombers game. I will do it on Friday evening when I go to the Bomber game. I will happily provide my proof of vaccination.

But the member opposite indicated is that a particular member hadn't been vaccinated. I don't know that to be the case, and the member opposite has some sort of special knowledge on a person's personal health information, I would just like to know how he obtained that.

Mr. Kinew: You know, it's not a credible, plausible or reasonable argument that when you have anti-vaxxers in your caucus, that all of a sudden—and I'm speaking, you, in sort of, like the—the royal sense of the phrase, if I could be allowed to indulge in that usage of the terminology. But I just don't think it's credible that all of a sudden when you have somebody who refuses to get vaccinated, I mean, they've been elevated to being a minister of the Crown and everyone else in Manitoba is rowing in the same direction, and then you have a few leaders who are paid with taxpayer dollars to lead, kicking their feet up and not rowing in the same direction as everyone else.

And so I think that that sort of hypocrisy turns people off for sure, but beyond that I just don't understand, like, how it's plausible to members of the PC political organization that if we simply cling to a misinterpretation of personal health regulation that that would somehow clear the air or escape accountability when it comes to these questions that are rightly being asked by people across Manitoba.

So how is it that, you know, these arguments that everyone else in the province sees right through are still given credence within the PC caucus room?

Mr. Goertzen: This government has led Canada in terms of promoting vaccination. I think that the results have been shown in the vaccination rates in Manitoba. We lead, I think, on a per capita basis. Most other provinces when it comes to the vaccination rate—again, the member opposite presumes to know a person's personal health-care status that I don't know. I don't know how he would have obtained that information.

And when it comes to this Assembly, there's been a decision made that to enter this Assembly you either have to confirm that you have been vaccinated. If you

do not confirm that, you would have to take a rapid test and produce a negative test. If you don't produce either, then you can't enter this Assembly. And that was the case today, and I can confirm and I did confirm that all members of the PC caucus who are in the Assembly today are fully vaccinated.

But, again, the member misconstrues. I regularly produce my proof of vaccination to go to a Bomber game or go into a restaurant. I don't personally believe, having been the minister responsible for PHIA that that's a violation of PHIA. But if he has knowledge of a person's personal health-care status that hasn't been disclosed publicly, then he should indicate how he received that information because that may actually be a breach of PHIA.

Mr. Kinew: You know, again, all this information's been publicly reported. It's part of the reason that Brian Pallister was chased out of office and, again, the evidence is in the Winnipeg Free Press, July 14th, 2021, where the former premier—this is his quote, pulled for the headline—Public has no right to know identity of unvaccinated Tories: premier.

Same exact line that the current PC leader is using today. So it's a bit of a case of the plus ça change, plus ça reste le même, right? The more things change, the more it stays the same. Mr. Pallister, you know, stepped back, was chased out of office, palace coup, however you choose to define that, but again, all the messaging is the same.

Anyway, so I just wanted to offer that rejoinder, but I was going to invite the member for St. Boniface to pose some questions.

Mr. Dougald Lamont (St. Boniface): I'll try to keep my questions fairly focused. Most of them are on pandemic-related spending and preparation.

There's a big picture—there's a report that Manitoba had spent a significant amount of money on PPE. In fact, it had the highest proportion of PPE among the provinces—many multiples of what Saskatchewan spent. So I'll just briefly compare the two provinces, since there's some similarities.

That—if you look at Saskatchewan, they had—I think they've had about 69,000 cases and 733 deaths, whereas Manitoba has actually, I think, a lower number of cases—61,126 and 1,214 deaths. So, you know, tragically, the death toll in Manitoba was considerably higher, in part because of issues in long-term-care homes.

But one of the issues is that a considerable amount of money was spent on buying masks at the beginning of the pandemic which could not be used, and the sum there, I think—N95 and N97 masks from a business in Minnesota—was about, I think, the total amount was about \$35 million US for masks that couldn't be used. So it's about \$50 million Canadian.

So I'm just wondering what happened to those masks, if we had \$50 million in masks, are we getting our money back or what—if there's answer to what happened to those masks that we couldn't use.

Mr. Goertzen: Thank the member for the question. I think it's probably a question better asked to the Minister of Central Services (Mr. Helwer), who's, sort of, hands-on in terms of the procurement and management of PPE.

I know the member opposite sort of referenced comparisons to Saskatchewan. You know, I don't know that I think that's a fair comparison, compared to where—you know, the challenges Saskatchewan is dealing with now, in terms of the pandemic.

I think probably there'll be lots of time in the future to look back at all the different provinces and what happened during the various waves and why they happened, but I don't know, sort of, mid-game in the pandemic, that it's—or maybe, hopefully, closer to the fourth quarter of the pandemic—that it's the right time to be making that sort of qualitative or quantitative assessment.

But particularly on the amount of PPE that remains in stock in Manitoba and how it's been dispersed, I'd refer him to the Minister of Central Services.

Mr. Lamont: Another issue that came up recently was an issue of a shortfall in Families, that there were—there was \$10 million that was supposed to be allocated to disability services, child care and child welfare. I was just wondering—oh, but apparently only \$793,000 was spent. So I'm just wondering how it is—in cases, or often we would—there are really two issues here.

One is that sometimes spending that was not strictly COVID spending was labelled COVID spending. I believe—I remember in June 2020, a fund was announced for improvements to seniors' homes, but it was largely safety—very basic safety things that were not related to infection prevention or it was things like handrails, wheelchair ramps and sprinkler systems, things like that.

So I'm just wondering, is there any accounting for why that—those funds would not have been—because I know that disability services, child care and child welfare were all—these are all areas where people have needed an enormous amount of support.

Is there any explanation for why over 90 per cent of that \$10 million wasn't allocated or spent?

* (16:20)

Mr. Goertzen: Probably the specifics of that would be better addressed to the Minister of Families (Ms. Squires). I believe their Estimates section's probably closed out, I'm advised, but there might be opportunity to raise that in concurrence with the Minister of Families.

I mean, the member will know that there's a lot of things that happen or that are unforeseen, and that sometimes unspent money isn't because there wasn't a desire to spend it, but simply because, you know, as we're working through COVID, we find out that what we thought might be a stronger need is less of a need or is covered off maybe by another level of government. So I wouldn't want to leave on the record that there is anything that is necessarily nefarious that's gone on there. But—be better addressed, probably, in concurrence to the Minister of Families (Ms. Squires).

Mr. Lamont: The other is that I know that we had an eviction ban which, eventually, it ended up being cancelled, and, look, there's no doubt that there's a growing crisis in homelessness. People—I think they just banned people—or, the City of Winnipeg is trying to get people out from under bridges.

And I was recently at a location where they're dealing with people who were being discharged immediately from hospital, people who may be homeless and who have no place to go and they're having to go straight from having, perhaps, a major surgery to either living on the street or being—a homeless shelter. And lots of people have faced evictions over the course of the pandemic.

So I was just wondering whether there was any consideration to returning for an eviction—to bringing back an eviction ban, especially considering that we're going to be going into a fourth wave that could be happening in October, November, December, when it's very cold, you know. It's an—we're supposed to have an exceptionally—we've had a beautiful fall and a very—and we're supposed to have very warm weather for the next few weeks, but there's always a point when the cold comes. And we want to make sure people are safe, especially in the pandemic.

So, has there been any consideration, or would there be any consideration to exploring an eviction ban or returning—bringing back an eviction ban in a fourth wave?

Mr. Goertzen: I mean, while it's not under active consideration now, as we know, in the pandemic, as things change, you can never say that something won't be considered again because there are always challenges, you know, that are unforeseen sometimes in the different waves. So there's nothing imminent on an eviction ban. You know, there are often unintended consequences of those things as well.

I do think that the point that the member raises, though, in terms of homelessness, is a real point, it's a growing concern; it's not pandemic—necessarily—related. You know, when people move out of hospitals and they move into homelessness, I mean, that's a challenge, right? And that clinical advisors, those in the hospital system, are making clinical decisions, generally, based on a person's need to be in hospital. And so, you know, they—it's a challenge for them to sort of look at other things.

I do have a meeting, actually, I believe in the next couple of days with End Homelessness Winnipeg. I asked for the meeting. I want to hear from them, their perspectives on homelessness and things that the government can do, not just this level of government, but the federal government, too, in co-operation.

And I know it's an issue for Justin Trudeau, as well—Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. And, you know, hopefully get some good ideas from them, as well, when I meet with them. That was the purpose of reaching out to them, is to get a sense of, you know, how has the pandemic impacted homelessness, what are some of the strategies that can be used, particularly going into winter and as we go into a fourth wave.

So I appreciate the member asking the question. And while there's not an imminent decision coming on an eviction ban, I certainly take to heart that he's asking it for the right reasons.

Mr. Lamont: Yes, just a bit more on that issue of evictions and homelessness.

It is, I think—just a brief statement for explanation is that throughout—that there have been two things—is—that real estate speculators have been treating eviction—lifting eviction bans with glee because it means that they can—there have been made to be—you know, evictions occasionally of entire buildings, but also individuals, and then in the meantime, people will do superficial improvements and jack up the rent. So—

but one of the things that we've seen with—these massive increases in housing prices have been driven by rental evictions and people—and rental speculation over the last year and half.

You know, a lot to this does not—some of this does not—is beyond the control of the government, but I do think that eviction bans are one area that—are that really have put people—have made people very vulnerable, including some seniors.

The other question was—relates to the rapid—what has been the Province's participation in the federal government's Rapid Housing Initiative? So that came out, I guess, a year ago and as I understand it, it was supposed to function to—that the money would flow through the cities, cities would then fund hospital—you know, you could rent hotel rooms or whatever in order to make sure that people were properly housed.

And I don't know that the government of Manitoba participated in it last year and I don't know where that's at so, if the Premier (Mr. Goertzen) could enlighten me or just let us know where the rapid housing—what the government's participation in the federal Rapid Housing Initiative has been, and whether there's a possibility that we could be exploring that or funding it, or making sure people have a place to stay.

Mr. Goertzen: Probably on the federal partnership it probably best to speak again or to ask the question for the Minister of Families (Ms. Squires) because there might be, you know, specific undertakings that she's undertaking that I wouldn't want to misquote in concurrence.

But, you know, it's not a—it's not an unfair question when it comes to, you know, what is happening to those who can't afford housing, either from a pure financial perspective or there are other issues going on with addictions and, you know, we know that there's lots of correlation between addictions and mental health that have been well-described in this House.

You know, the budget that the member will have an opportunity, I suppose, to speak on, in terms of the implementation of it, does freeze the annual rent increase so that's some relief, although I'm not going to pretend that it's a perfect solution to probably a problem that doesn't have a lot of perfect solutions to.

More money has been allocated. I think \$22 million more has been allocated to Rent Assist. Again, important initiative but not necessarily a perfect initiative but, I mean, as we go through the

fourth wave, I think that we continue to look at the different things that are happening.

We hope to blunt the fourth wave with proactive measures that have been taking place by this government but we know that there's going to be still a significant challenge regardless within the health-care system, which ripples out to other areas of society. So no measures have been excluded as possibilities but we'll continue to provide, you know, support where we can.

I appreciate the member opposite recognizing that some of these issues, like housing prices and that, are not always particularly governed by any level of government, and there's not a lot that can always be done in terms of curtailing a market that is moving as quickly as the housing market is, in many jurisdictions, including in Winnipeg and Manitoba, but those are some of the initiatives that have been taken by the government.

Mr. Lamont: I just have one more question.

So recently there was an Auditor General's report that came out on a City of Winnipeg land transfer. Four different—in the report it said that four different organizations were asked and they got four different answers, including—it involved the City of Winnipeg and the Province.

And the question is to whose responsibility it was or where, it was determined, I think, that the City of Winnipeg's—that the fault lay with the City of Winnipeg, but there was an issue as to who made the proposal first. So, essentially, that if they—if it was something that had been proposed by the Province first, it would have been an issue with the Province. If it were proposed by the City first, it was an issue with the City.

So can I just—is there any—can I get any clarity or confirmation of that, over whether—did the Province contact the City first? Did the City contact the Province first? Over the—it was the transfer—lands transfer of the Vimy Arena, I believe.

Mr. Goertzen: I think the member's referring to the Bruce Oake Recovery Centre and I—I'm not going to add anything to the report that the Auditor General's already done. I guess it's been fully investigated. I don't think they found any fault with the Province and I won't comment on whatever, you know, decisions they found with the City of Winnipeg—other than to say, you know, the City, if it needs to improve upon its processes, in terms of land transfers, then I'll leave that to the City.

But it is worth putting on the record—I had the opportunity to attend the opening of the Bruce Oake Recovery Centre—and I don't think the member would—is taking issue with the centre itself, but certainly Scott Oake and his family and, of course, our condolences go to—out to Scott Oake on the recent passing of his wife.

* (16:30)

And so we, you know, we have a lot of consideration for the Oake family in terms of what they've done to raise funds privately to ensure that that facility is available for anybody to come, regardless of their financial ability. I know right now it's limited to men going into that facility, but there are plans to expand it for women as well, which is needed.

So, you know, quite apart from the controversy around the land transfer which, I think, largely rests in the ballpark of the city of Winnipeg, I think that all Manitobans, or I believe most—might not be one or two. But I think that virtually all Manitobans recognize the importance of the Bruce Oake Recovery Centre, the memory that it is for Bruce Oake and the great work that Scott Oake and his family have done to ensure that that centre is opened.

Mr. Lamont: That's it for me. I'll yield the rest of my time to the Leader of the Opposition.

Thank you.

An Honourable Member: Yes, I think we're good to—

The Acting Chairperson (Josh Guenter): The Leader of the Official Opposition, sorry about that.

Mr. Kinev: Thanks, Mr. Chair. I think we're good to start wrapping up. We wanted to present a motion on the salary, but if you want to get us there, that would be great. [interjection]

No, you can take it back from Brian. You can claw it back. [interjection]

The Acting Chairperson (Josh Guenter): Okay, so I just want to clarify—[interjection] Okay, so we'll just come to order here.

I just want to clarify now, or see if there's any other members with questions.

All right, hearing no further questions, the last item to be considered for these Estimates is item 1(a) the First Minister's salary contained in resolution 2.1.

And at this point, we request that the First Minister's staff leave the table for the consideration of this last item.

All right, the floor is now open for questions.

Mr. Kinew: To move an amendment—a motion, sorry.

The Acting Chairperson (Josh Guenter): All right.

Mr. Kinew: Okay. I move that line 2.1(a) be amended so that the Premier and president of the council's salary be reduced to \$1.

The Acting Chairperson (Josh Guenter): All right, it has been moved by the Leader of the Official Opposition that line item 2.1(a) be amended so that the Premier and president of the council's salary be reduced to \$1.

The motion is in order. The floor is open for questions.

Committee ready for the—*[interjection]* No? *[interjection]* Committee's ready for the—Is the committee ready for the question?

Some Honourable Members: Question.

The Acting Chairperson (Josh Guenter): The question before the committee is the motion moved by the Leader of the Opposition.

Is the committee ready for the question? Is it the pleasure of the committee to adopt the motion?

Some Honourable Members: Yes.

Some Honourable Members: No.

Voice Vote

The Acting Chairperson (Josh Guenter): All those in favour of the motion, please say aye.

Some Honourable Members: Aye.

The Acting Chairperson (Josh Guenter): All those opposed, please say nay.

Some Honourable Members: Nay.

The Acting Chairperson (Josh Guenter): In my opinion, the Nays have it.

The motion is accordingly defeated.

* * *

The Acting Chairperson (Josh Guenter): Okay, we will now consider Resolution 2.1 which is as follows: RESOLVED that there be granted to Her Majesty a sum not exceeding \$4,225,000 for Executive Council,

General Administration, for the fiscal year ending March 31st, 2022.

Resolution agreed to.

This completes the Estimates for Executive Council. Shall we briefly recess to allow the next department to prepare? *[Agreed]*

Okay, committee is in recess.

The committee recessed at 4:36 p.m.

The committee resumed at 5 p.m.

ADVANCED EDUCATION, SKILLS AND IMMIGRATION

The Acting Chairperson (Josh Guenter): Will the Committee of Supply please come to order. This section of the Committee of Supply will now consider the Estimates of the Department of Advanced Education, Skills and Immigration.

Does the honourable minister have an opening statement?

An Honourable Member: I do.

The Acting Chairperson (Josh Guenter): Okay. Go ahead, Minister.

Hon. Wayne Ewasko (Minister of Advanced Education, Skills and Immigration): Thank you, everyone. Just to start off, just want to mention that as all of you know, that in January of 2021 we created—the government created a new Department of Advanced Education, Skills and Immigration. This department will ensure post-secondary education is better linked to workforce opportunities, and it will create stronger links between skills development and job needs by giving Manitobans the skills that they need to succeed.

It will encourage more immigrants to come to Manitoba, the home of hope, where they can enjoy the job opportunities our province can offer. To advance our economy past COVID-19, we need to advance students through their learning and into good jobs, and then into the workforce.

I'd like to take this opportunity to thank the post-secondary institutions, adult learning facilities and private vocational institutes for their ongoing efforts throughout the pandemic to protect Manitoban students and ensure their continued success.

Budget 2021 provides more than \$680 million to post-secondary institutions from Advanced Education, Skills and Immigration, plus \$10 million to support priority maintenance to their facilities. We remain committed to supporting students so they can pursue and complete a post-secondary education. We will ensure our province continues to offer the lowest tuition rates in western Canada.

Manitoba has increased the Manitoba bursary by \$3.9 million. That provides more than \$55 million in interest-free loans for students to successfully achieve their post-secondary education goals and move into employment. The Skills, Talent and Knowledge Strategy, which was launched in February 2021 with the goal of ensuring we have the people with the right skills, talent and knowledge at the right time to rebound from the effects of the pandemic and support economic resilience and growth.

Protecting our post-secondary and adult education system will ensure Manitobans can develop the skills needed to participate fully in the community and contribute to the—to our growing economy. Manitoba's Skills, Talent and Knowledge Strategy provides strategic direction to publicly funded post-secondary institutions to ensure students develop the skills needed to participate fully in the community and contribute to a growing economy. It provides a framework for stronger partnerships between the Province, educational institutions and the business community.

Immigration: it is a key contributor to our province's economic prosperity. COVID-19 has impacted newcomers in Manitoba through closed borders and federal delays in processing work permits. New immigrants make Manitoba even stronger, enriching our culture, filling job needs and creating new jobs for themselves and others. We will be ready to welcome new immigrants to our province as soon as it's safe to do so. The—Manitoba's Provincial Nominee program ensures our province continues to attract skilled workers and entrepreneurs with the potential to make the strongest contributions to our economy soon after their arrival in Canada.

Under the Skills, Talent and Knowledge Strategy, we are working to increase opportunities to recruit newcomers to Manitoba by promoting Manitoba as an immigration destination of choice. This includes working with our federal partners to ensure the successful integration of newcomers to Manitoba.

The new department will also better position us to streamline systems, focusing on the unique talent

needs of Manitoba's employers, bringing in talent that is not accessible locally.

While the COVID-19 pandemic continues to create challenges for our advanced education and skill alignment programs, we remain committed to ensuring Manitoba has the skills and talent needed to grow the economy and contribute to a high quality of life in our province.

I look forward, Mr. Chair, to taking questions from the committee.

The Acting Chairperson (Josh Guenter): All right. I thank the minister for his comments.

Does the official opposition critic have any opening comments?

Mr. Jamie Moses (St. Vital): No.

The Acting Chairperson (Josh Guenter): Okay.

Under Manitoba practice, debate on the minister's salary is the last item considered for a department in the Committee of Supply. Accordingly, we shall now defer consideration of line item 44.1(a) contained in resolution 44.1.

Does the committee wish to proceed through the Estimates of this department chronologically or have a global discussion?

Mr. Moses: Discussion.

The Acting Chairperson (Josh Guenter): Okay, a global discussion.

Is that agreed? *[Agreed]*

The floor is now open for questions.

Mr. Moses: Looking forward to the time we have to discuss questions today. Hopefully we can go through it pretty quickly.

Can the minister undertake to provide with—provide us with a current organization chart for the department, including some names and possible vacancies and more specifically to kind of let us know the current FTEs, where those vacancies might be?

Mr. Ewasko: Mr. Chair, can you hear me okay? Just doing a quick check. I'm actually looking to my friend, the member from St. Vital, to see if he can hear me okay.

The Acting Chairperson (Josh Guenter): Okay, Minister, we're just having a little bit of a—I see you've got your headset here, so that's great, you're on it. We were just having some trouble hearing you.

Mr. Ewasko: Okay, so I'm going to do a mic check. Can you hear me? Is that better, Mr. Guenter?

The Acting Chairperson (Josh Guenter): Minister, you're sounding great. Much better, thank you.

Mr. Ewasko: Much better. Sounds great.

So, again, back to my friend, the member of St. Vital's question. Absolutely. I guess the speed and the timing of our Estimates time is sort of up to him, so I'll try to answer his questions as best that I possibly can, and if I can't get the answers, we'll definitely get them to him in a timely manner.

So, in regards to an organizational chart, right now, I guess I'll share with him sort of our, I guess our high level for now, and if he wants a more detailed—I actually, I'm looking at—give me a second here. In the Main Estimates booklet, is he wanting something a little more specific than page—roughly page 11 off the Main Estimates Supplement?

Mr. Moses: Yes, I am. Tell me more detail, please.

Mr. Ewasko: Okay, thanks for that. Also, my friend from St. Vital, in the annual report that we just released—do you have that handy in front of you?

Mr. Moses: Yes, I've also reviewed that, and I'm looking for something more detailed to explain the, you know, the org chart with names and also the vacancies and what departments or what areas they are in. *[interjection]*

The Acting Chairperson (Josh Guenter): Sorry, Mr. Minister—the honourable minister.

Sorry, just want to recognize you, Minister. You have—the floor is yours.

Mr. Ewasko: So right now my deputy minister is Mr. Eric Charron. My policy and performance executive director is Anne Janes. My Advanced Education assistant deputy minister is Mr. Joe Funk. My Student Access and Success executive director is Ms. Sonya Penner. Right now, our ADM for Immigration Pathways is vacant. My CFO for the Department of Advanced Education, Skills and Immigration is Ms. Melissa Ballantyne. And I'm just sort of taking a look around and I think that's it for now.

* (17:10)

And then as far as a more in-depth org chart, what I can do is definitely, you know, get you something, you know, so-called a little bit deeper throughout. So I'll endeavour to do that.

Mr. Moses: I appreciate you being able to look into that and I look forward to hearing the response.

I wanted to just dive into the, you know, tuition from what we're seeing for tuition increases over the last few years as it relates to the amount that students have actually had to pay.

Can the minister comment on whether he anticipates tuition to continue to increase for the 2022-2023 school year and if he can provide, you know, an estimate on how much that would be? We know the budget has continued to decrease for advanced education for post-secondary institutions, when that will inevitably lead to increased tuition for post-secondary students.

So wondering if the minister can outline what he anticipates tuition increases to be for the 2022-2023 school year.

Mr. Ewasko: So, Mr. Chair, the way that I just did that, sort of putting my hand up, is that good enough to acknowledge or represent the fact that I want to speak?

The Acting Chairperson (Josh Guenter): Yes, minister, absolutely. That works great. Thank you.

Mr. Ewasko: Okay, great, great, great. Well, you know, I appreciate the question from my friend from St. Vital.

When we start talking about any kind of tuition, we know—and he knows because he's heard me say this quite a few times. I mean, here in Manitoba, we—the students and ourselves as a government—have worked quite hard to make sure that our post-secondary education system here in Manitoba is very affordable and accessible. And we know that—and he knows, I mean, because he can do the looking—the research himself as well—that right now we're sitting at third-lowest in all of Canada and lowest tuition rates in western Canada.

As far as accessibility and affordability, because I think that's sort of where he was going on a little bit of his questioning—the fact is is that we put in—directly and indirectly, we fund post-secondary institutions in Manitoba well over a billion dollars.

And so when we start to take a look at student success and, again, accessibility—so under the NDP, the previous government, what ended up happening was that they had some of the scholarships and bursaries sort of at the back end. You had to—you sort of had to get yourself into post-secondary institutions

and then hope that you finished it off and maybe get some money back later on.

And we worked hard listening to students, my predecessors did, and started putting in place—the students wanted to see the money at the front end. And so what we did was, we created the scholarships and bursaries to the tune of, you know, about \$30 million each and every year.

And on top of that, you know, we've got, as I said, almost \$60 million in Manitoba student loans and also through Canada Student Loans as well. We're looking at roughly over \$250 million that we process each and every year serving many, many students.

So as far as accessibility, I mean, that is something that I've shared—not only with the member from St. Vital but also our post-secondary education partners—that we're going to try to work hard to make sure that we've got strong programs and accessibility, low tuition for students right here in Manitoba.

And that's why I think, also, we do a good job of recruiting students and youth or adults who want to get into some post-secondary education, recruiting them to Manitoba, because of our affordable tuition rates. So I thank the member for the question.

Mr. Moses: So, the minister mentioned that \$30-million amount in loans.

Can the minister specifically detail how much of that is actually provincial dollars and how much of that is private partnerships or other funding? And if he doesn't have the specific breakdown, maybe he can endeavour to do so.

I wanted to just ask that because the minister did mention that in his previous response, but really I wanted to also just follow up on the train of thought there about tuition, and the minister didn't answer the question about whether tuition would be increasing and how much that students could expect for the upcoming school year, and I think, you know, I want to just to clarify whether the minister is prepared to, you know, give students a heads up so they can properly plan for their financial—for their finances for the upcoming school year as to what they actually think tuition increases are going to be. We know that with the decreasing funding from the Province to post-secondaries, it's undoubtedly that tuition's going to increase.

So I would ask the minister again if he can clearly identify how much tuitions will be raised in the

upcoming school year and if he can let us know about that today.

Mr. Ewasko: Thank the member for—from St. Vital for the question.

So—but I do have to clarify something that he did say. In regards to the \$30 million that he references, basically that's not loans. That's scholarships and bursaries. So I just want to make sure—and I'll just double-check with the member, did he just misspoke—misspeak, or was he actually asking some further clarification on that? And then I'll answer the rest of his points after I ask for some clarification from him.

Mr. Moses: Referring to \$30 million in scholarships and bursaries.

Mr. Ewasko: Thank you.

So, as you've corrected yourself, yes, absolutely. That's \$30 million in scholarships and bursaries and, you know, basically it's—for this year we've put in \$10 million, and that's a matching two-to-one dollars. So the post-secondary institutions go around and they get some funds from their stakeholders or their partners to help with that, and so it is a total of \$30 million.

Now, as far as student loans go, like I said, we were—we're up to about \$60 million and then Canada Student Loans at about 93.7, so that's the federal. Keep in mind, to the member from St. Vital, that our Manitoba student loans are actually interest-free loans—\$55.5 million, to be exact. And we're looking at helping roughly just over 15,000 students. The Canada Student Loans, we're looking at just about \$94 million, to the tune of roughly 15,250-ish students. And that was in the 2020, you know, pandemic year.

So I think we—you know, when you start to drill down and take a look at the supports for students—up-front supports—I think Manitoba is doing a great job in regards to per capita.

Now—yes, so the rest of your question. Okay, I'll leave it at that for now and then I'll answer your next question.

* (17:20)

Mr. Moses: So, you've mentioned the amounts you're putting for loans, but you have to realize also—the minister should also realize that loans eventually need to be repaid. So students are still on the hook for that amount of money. If it comes upfront or after the fact,

students are still going to be responsible for paying that amount.

Is the minister interested at all in providing any of that money to actually make tuition more affordable, make tuition less, and make it more manageable for students so that they, at the end of the day, have less to pay for their education. Is that something that the student—that the minister is looking into?

I also want to also address the fact—I understand the minister is looking into doing reviews on Student Aid, and I wanted to know if that's something, if the minister is doing a review on Student Aid, and the status of that program.

Mr. Ewasko: And just to continue commenting on the scholarships and bursaries. So, the upfront grants has been actually changed to an upfront grant: \$2,000 for lower income students, an additional \$1,500 for Indigenous students. And those are—those do not have to be repaid or paid back. And keep in mind that any Manitoba student loans, again, are interest free, and I know that my department and officials and the staff absolutely worked tirelessly to help accommodate and work with students on plans that—you know, for whenever it comes time to repay.

Also I just wanted to give a bit of a shout out to our department as well. Previous—you know, my predecessor, I guess—the fact that we ended up putting an additional \$5 million into those scholarships and bursaries because of the pandemic, trying to make it a little bit easier for the post-secondary institutions to do their contribution piece. And so that was a one-year \$15 million. So basically we are looking at a one-to-one ratio with our post-secondary partners, and I think, you know, many students definitely benefitted from that.

So, in 2020-2021 we had—almost 22,500 students actually received over \$33 million, which actually was—is the most ever. So we've got more students accessing our post-secondary programs here in Manitoba. And so I think many students are very much appreciative of the fact that they are getting these dollars, you know, upfront so they can get their foot in the door into a post-secondary program that best suits them and be able to better afford their education.

And, again, you know, being the lowest tuition west—in western Canada I think is a big feather in Manitoba's cap, you know, and I think we're about \$1,200 in tuition lower than BC, and I do believe that BC is run by an NDP government right now, and so I

think we're doing quite well on trying to keep the accessibility rates relatively low for students to come to Manitoba and find out which programs that best suit them and moving into their careers afterwards.

Mr. Moses: I also just wanted to clarify, as I said in my previous question, about Student Aid, whether the minister is conducting a review on it. I know that—I ask about the review because I know that there are students who say the program—that they have had difficulties with the program, getting through and accessing it, the lengthy wait times. I also know that enrollment is falling for underrepresented groups, groups of people, and I know the Student Aid program benefits those folks.

So I want to know, is the minister doing a review? Is he changing or adjusting the Student Aid program?

You know, I know, for example, Indigenous students decreased by 1.4 per cent in 2021 alone. So I just want to clarify

So I just want to clarify about that Student Aid program, as well as what the minister's doing to address falling enrollment in under-represented groups of people.

Mr. Ewasko: Thanks to my friend from St. Vital for the question on Student Aid and doing a review.

And so, as the member may know or may not know—I'm assuming he does know because we did send this out, and we did a client satisfaction survey and we had well over 2,000 responses for our Manitoba Student Aid and assistance programs. And what we have is all those various different—the feedback had come back in and so we're just—right now we're gathering a report that's going to be basically titled, what we heard report, and it's going to be published soon.

And basically some of that feedback that we had heard from students and not just students. So these are past students, you know, people who have gone through the system, our post-secondary partners, staff, students—everybody who would possibly have touched the system.

So there was a survey put out with some very good questions—and maybe even the member from St. Vital took part in that and maybe submitted his view on the survey on Manitoba Student Aid, and I'm not going to say one way or another whether I think or he did or did not access Manitoba Student Aid for when he was, you know, a younger man going to post-

secondary but anyways, that's going to be published shortly.

And because the survey went out on EngageMB, that—the results and that will also be published on EngageMB and those responses—the well over 2,000 responses we received, those individuals will be getting an email and basically touched base with to make sure that they can see the report, see the feedback that they had sent in.

Another couple key things that I did want to mention in regards to Manitoba Student Aid is a fact that with our scholarships and bursaries, this is allowing more and more students to access and complete their post-secondary education.

I really do feel—and I know that the member from St. Vital would agree with me as well on this—is that this is the foundation for building a better Manitoba and delivering on Manitoban's Skills, Talent and Knowledge Strategy. And I'm sort of hoping—I'm hoping that the member from St. Vital took me up on the—sort of, the invite to make sure he checked out the strategy and took a good look, because I really haven't received any questions on the Skills, Talent and Knowledge Strategy from the member but I'm assuming because it's such a good strategy that there's not too many critical critiquing-type questions in there.

But just want to also assure him that we are committed to making sure that Manitobans have access to the higher education by providing the student programs and the financial supports. And so these programs, which include the Manitoba Student Aid, provides those interest-free loans.

And I know the member's—you know, it sort of sounded—and he can maybe make some clarity here, that it sounded as if he was sort of talking down to the fact that Manitoba student loans are interest-free or something, I'm not quite—I'll catch that—you'll clarify for me right away.

But I do feel that it's very important that these opportunities are there for students—to make sure that those monies are there. Of course, again with the scholarships and bursaries initiatives and working with our various different partners throughout the province, making sure that those—some of those bursaries and scholarships are just that.

* (17:30)

And I know for a fact the member received some of those himself, and—back in the day when he was

going to post-secondary. It just makes it easier. And those are upfront bursaries and scholarships. They don't have to be paid back.

Basically, some of the—you know, I just got a bit of a heads-up. I can go more on the, sort of the review on the student aid questionnaire that went out on Engage Manitoba and I see that I've only got a few seconds left, so I'll finish with this and then I can go more on the review that we did or there—questionnaire that we put out there.

But again, just making sure that the member is putting correct information on the record, making sure that he knows that, you know, that we're putting in \$30 million into scholarships and bursaries each and every year, which is astronomical.

The Acting Chairperson (Josh Guenter): All right. The minister's time has expired.

Mr. Moses: Okay. So I'd like to—thank you.

I'd like to ask the minister about the ongoing negotiations and what we've seen in the past year with the, you know, 2016 and previous years—in 2016 there was a strike—faculty at the University of Manitoba. Last year, there was obviously negotiations and bargaining between the administration and the faculty and—seemed—appeared to come close to a strike. That didn't happen, thankfully.

I'd like to ask the minister about a mandate letter that was sent out last year that went into—played into the negotiations between the faculty and administration at U of M—letter that came from the government, the Minister of Finance (Mr. Fielding), saying specifically the amounts that could be negotiated for salary increases, which I think is a clear interference in the negotiation process between faculty and administration.

So I'd like to know if that—such letter has been given this school year in this year, as the faculty and the administration are engaging in discussions.

Mr. Ewasko: Thank the member from St. Vital for the question.

So, please take this the right way. During the discussions over Bill 33, the member had questioned me on a few occasions in regards to leaving it up to post-secondary institutions and—because of their autonomy. And now it almost sounds like the member from St. Vital—and I'm just going to ask for clarity on this one—so it almost sounds like the member from St. Vital wants me now to get involved in those

negotiations that are sort of a, you know, autonomous with those post-secondary institutions?

I'm just going to ask for clarity on that one, because I'm unsure if he's maybe unsure of how the process actually works.

Mr. Moses: I'm asking specifically, has the provincial government sent a mandate letter of any form to the University of Manitoba, their board of administration, in regards to negotiations or of any sort? And I'd like to know the content of that letter.

We know that there was a letter sent last year that directly influenced the negotiations, and we want to know if there was one sent this year and if there was, what the content of that letter is.

Mr. Ewasko: Thank you, my friend from St. Vital, for the question. So, in regards to process, in regards to any type of—whether it's labour relations or things along those lines, we in the department we actually don't get involved in that.

That would have to be potentially a question for the Department of Finance because, as I've stated before, we work closely with our post-secondary partners—post-secondary education partners, and—you know, and I'll take this time, since we've got a few minutes, to commend them and our public health officials for actually working together and collaborating and really putting in a huge effort to make sure that our students that were seeking, you know, post-secondary education are still able to access their education. In some cases, it's a bit of a hybrid model. I mean, we've got some that are remote, some that are in-person classes. You know, they worked quite closely with Public Health to make sure that they were abiding by all public health orders.

So, this sort of goes with that autonomy. I mean, we're partnering and collaborating and basically listening to what our post-secondary partners basically are looking towards to doing. And so with that, I mean, I don't get involved, my department does not get involved in negotiating, no matter how much, unfortunately, my friend from St. Vital tries to tell people that that's what's going on.

So if there was any correspondence, I personally have not sent out anything to our post-secondary institutions on the matter for any type of negotiating with any staff of theirs because, again, they are the employers; we just work with them.

So, thanks.

Mr. Moses: Thanks for clarifying that a letter wasn't sent from your department.

You said there's a possibility that it was sent from the Department of Finance, as it was last year, and I'd like to clarify whether you have knowledge of that, if that was sent out, because I find it hard to believe—I mean, perhaps your government is so siloed that, you know, the Minister of Finance (Mr. Fielding) wouldn't even inform you if he sent a letter out to one of the institutions that you're responsible for and you wouldn't even be aware of it.

Perhaps that's the case. Perhaps you do know; I'm not sure. That's why I'd like to clarify again if you know if there was a letter sent, even by the Department of Finance or another department, to the University of Manitoba, to their board or administration, that would've directed them and perhaps given them a mandate or some direction on the negotiation process with the faculty.

Mr. Ewasko: So, just to be clear on a couple things.

So, I didn't say that a letter did come from the Minister of Finance. I did say that the member would have to ask the Minister of Finance.

So—but in regards to correspondence back and forth in regards to any type of mandates or anything else, I do know that back in 2016—and this is shortly after the member himself was elected, but I'll just give him a bit of a history here—that, when we formed government in 2016—and I was in opposition for five years and I had the pleasure of being the education and advanced education advocate back then—I'm hoping that the member from St. Vital is taking it more of—as an advocacy as opposed to a critique role because I know that, deep down, we want to see student success here in the province and I'm hoping that we'll continue, you know, decent enough dialogue moving forward.

But the NDP had saddled the new government—our government in 2016—with roughly over \$900 million as a deficit. The debt alone, when you combined the provincial debt and the debt from Manitoba Hydro, was not far off of \$50 billion—that's billion with a B, not million with an M—a whole huge chunk of change.

And so, I do know that, you know, back in 2016, some of the asks to our taxpayer-funded—you know, whether it was institutions or any organization within the government—was asked to take a 00.75-in-one.

So that, for sure, was out there and that's public knowledge, I mean, that was asked. And matter of fact, you know, I know that my colleagues and myself on the Progressive Conservative side of the House took zeroes as far as wage increases and—you know, and we disclosed that, and we did public announcements on that. And I don't really remember the NDP side, and maybe, you know, now is a good time for the member for St. Vital (Mr. Moses) to put it on the record whether his side of the House took zeroes or what they did with their wages but we've taken zeroes for five years now.

* (17:40)

And so, back to his original question on post-secondary institutions and dealing with any type of union negotiations or staff negotiations or anything along those lines, I mean, the fact is is there's a process, and that process goes along with the post-secondary institutions themselves and their boards and their, you know, president's offices and their financial people within their institutions.

So, again, that's a process our department doesn't get involved in. So I thank the member for the question.

Mr. Moses: I just want to clarify for the minister, I was elected in 2019, not 2016.

I did want to just move on and ask the minister about the provincial government used and provided a one-time traditional–Transitional Support Fund last year during the pandemic.

Wondering if the minister can provide and, you know, hope the minister can just endeavour to provide this information: a breakdown of how much, when and to whom that Transitional Support Fund was distributed and if there are and how much of that fund is still remaining unallocated.

Mr. Ewasko: Thank the—my friend from St. Vital for the question.

Yes, thanks for the clarity on the 2019 thing. Boy, time flies when we're having fun, and I absolutely do miss my colleague, Colleen Mayer, who was an exceptional MLA for the St. Vital area, and I think she's absolutely sadly missed at this time in the St. Vital area but, you know, brings us to today. It is what it is. So I gave you the extra three years by accident there, member for St. Vital (Mr. Moses), so hopefully you'll forgive me.

So, in regards to the transitional one-time investment. So, keep in mind that this is a global pandemic

and post-secondary institutions, I mean, you know, with varying different reasons, they needed some transitional support funding. So for the year of 2020–2021, we provided colleges and universities, again, with a one-time investment of \$25.6 million and through the Transitional Support Fund. This funding helped them to respond to unanticipated changes in enrolments and other challenges posed by the pandemic.

Now when the member asks about specifics, and I know the member does some decent research, so I'm just going to give him a link so that he can check it out and if there's further questions after this, definitely no problem. But go to infoMB, and that's basically where anything is—any letters or any kind of correspondence that is publicly disclosed is on that website. And each letter that was sent to each institution, with the amounts and everything, is on that site.

Mr. Moses: I'd like to move on to ask some questions about Bill 33, but as I do so, I'd also just like to clarify the second part of that question as to whether there are any unallocated funds that are part of that fund and what that amount is, and I'll also move on to Bill 33 and ask a few questions about that as to the minister—and I know he's mentioned this several times about consulting on Bill 33 and the consulting on the regulations that will be—or have already been perhaps developed as a result of Bill 33.

So, asking the minister if he's done that consultation work, if the regulations have already been developed or is that work ongoing, and if he is planning on actually doing consultation work to develop the regulations on Bill 33.

Mr. Ewasko: So, in regards to the Transitional Support Fund, as I've said, it was a one-time support fund that basically went to the post-secondary institutions to help them sort of navigate the unexpected, unanticipated challenges that we all faced through COVID, whether that was PPE or whether that was hand sanitizer or masks or, you know, cleaning materials, anything that they saw fit; we actually did not put a stipulation exactly what they had to spend it on, but those dollars were actually all transitionally sent to the post-secondaries, so there was no monies sort of left over; it was all sent to the post-secondary institutions.

And, again, the website—I think you've probably got a pen; I can't see you from here, but infoMB is the link where we disclose all that correspondence. And in that correspondence, each letter actually is on there and it gives you the total amounts that were allocated

to each post-secondary institution, and, yes, the total amount again for the Transitional Support Fund was \$25.6 million.

Now, Bill 33. It's one of my—it's become one of my favourite topics, and I think Bill 33 was a great demonstration of working with our education partners. And I know that, you know, the member had heard me on more than one occasion about, you know, the consultations and the opportunities that we did with many different stakeholders. And keep in mind, and as he said, you know, Bill 33 had seen a couple different post-secondary education ministers as the time had gone, and so we brought Bill 33 forward again, and it passed, and throughout the consultations, of course, he knows that the students had requested some clarity.

* (17:50)

And so, actually, it was shortly after I was appointed minister in January that—about Bill 33, and we actually had, you know—and back then, of course, through the pandemic, I mean, we had to do some Zoom or team meetings, and we had student organizations come in, and some of their concerns were the fact that they were concerned that Bill 33, when we're talking about doing a shoulder check, and I'll bring that term up again just to remind the member we're doing shoulder checks on—they're just touching base with our post-secondary partners.

What are they looking at as far as any kind of tuition fee increases, any type of programming changes, things like that, to sort of let the—let our department know so that we can check, because he knows that there was a, you know, college review and there was also the report from the Auditor General to sort of, you know, to keep an eye on these types of things because as he knows, as the member from St. Vital has been a lifelong Manitoban himself, I mean, it's taxpayer funded, it's taxpayer money at the end of the day and so it doesn't hurt to do that shoulder check.

So we had the students come in and they—on the Zoom meetings they had basically put their concerns in regards to the fact that they were worried that I or the minister of the—you know, of Advanced Education was going to have authority over their student fees that are put forward by unions, their student union fees. And we said to them on the Zoom meeting, you know what? It doesn't affect your student union fees; these are student fees set by post-secondary institutions and the tuition as well.

Well, they wanted some further clarity so we had them in again to do a technical briefing with my officials who are non-partisan civil servants. And so sat down with them, went through, explained, and what we did was we basically put forward an amendment to Bill 33 so that it actually spelled it out word for word that it actually did not touch on student union fees. And so as far as collaboration goes I think our record proves that we do consult with our post-secondary education partners.

Mr. Moses: The minister clearly didn't really answer my question. I asked whether the regulations have been developed or are they being developed right now as a result of Bill 33. I'd like to get clarity on that specifically.

But I'd also like—you know, the minister's so proud of Bill 33. I'd really like to see if the minister can point to which part of Bill 33 makes tuition affordable and makes our universities and colleges more accessible. Can the minister point to one part of Bill 33 that actually works to that end?

Mr. Ewasko: Well, you know it's as if the member from St. Vital and I sort of got a—had a chat before today and you sort of threw me up a nice lob, a lob there, my friend from St. Vital, because when you want to talk about affordability and accessibility, absolutely, I can talk for minutes and minutes and minutes on that. And so when you talk about Bill 33—so first of all, I'll go to your first part of the question because I know that you had clearly pointed out that I didn't answer part of that.

So I did want to make clear that the consultations with our post-secondary partners—and, again, post-secondary partners are the post-secondary institutions themselves, the students, the staff, other stakeholders that possibly might have something to do with our advanced education system here in this great province of ours.

So, in regards to Bill 33, some of our commitments in Bill 33 is to make sure that we maintain the affordability and accessibility for the students with the need for our universities and colleges to remain sustainable. So there's that fine balance. I know that, you know, in the previous government, they really focused on, you know, the tax-and-spend theory, and, you know, somebody's grandkids or great-grandkids will pay for stuff later on sometime into the future.

That, I'm really not going to make too many more comments on, but, I mean, I think as we move forward making sure that we're looking to our various different

regulations and touching base with our post-secondary institutions. We're going to make sure that those education partners are in the loop with those consultations and, matter of fact, if the member from St. Vital is still the post-secondary education advocate at that time, we'll put the olive branch out and, as he knows, my door is open to have a conversation about that and we'll definitely include him on that list of people to come in and consult with.

When you talk about remaining and keeping it affordable, I mean how many times, I'm not quite sure and I'll continue to say it: our goal is to, again, make sure that our post-secondary education here in Manitoba is affordable and accessible.

How do we do that? We do that with making sure that we've got that \$30 million on scholarships and bursaries, upfront grants to students to make sure that they can get their feet in the doors to their post-secondary dreams about going ahead and bettering themselves. And at the same time, hopefully then, after they graduate, staying right here in this great province of ours, as the member from St. Vital has done, as I've done, as my kids are doing, as, you know, we hope that many, many more kids as time goes on, students and young adults. We want to train and retain them right here in this great province of ours.

So as far as accessibility and affordability, again, the member knows we are still, you know, third-lowest tuition in all of Canada, the cheapest, the lowest tuition in western Canada, and I've put it on the record more than one—on more than one occasion, that that's our goal. We have to make sure that we've got strong programming but, at the same time, making sure that our tuition remains affordable for our students here in Manitoba.

And so, moving forward on, you know, the policies within Bill 33, we want to—we are—we're going to be consulting on that as time goes on. I think, you know, some of the hopes were going to be that we were—we would have started some of that in the summer after, you know, the bill passed and into the fall. But as the member knows, I mean, worldwide pandemic, you know, various different other challenges have been going on as well. We're in the midst of doing that and we're going to make sure that he gets an invite for the consultation piece as well, on the policies on Bill 33.

Mr. Moses: I just want to go back to the discussion around the negotiation between the U of M and their faculty and their mandate letter. And I want to just be crystal clear with the minister if he says that he didn't put out a letter of any sort or any directive of any kind, I just want to be crystal clear on that.

I also said that, you know, if a letter did come out, perhaps from the Minister of Finance (Mr. Fielding), as it did last year, if it did come out and his department was unaware of it, it would really show that this government has huge silos—has huge silos between departments for the Minister of Advanced Education to not know what the Minister of Finance is doing with one of his institutions.

So I just want to be crystal clear: from the minister's knowledge, has his department or any other department put out any mandate letters of any kind to U of M, to direct them into—in regards to their negotiations with the faculty?

Mr. Ewasko: Sorry, Mr. Chair, I unmuted before I put my hand up.

But to go on, you know—and I appreciate the member from St. Vital. He's bringing in his ag background into this discussion, talking about silos and that, so it's very interesting. So, growing up on a small farm southwest of Beausejour, it brings me to some great fall pictures when our local farmers are filling those silos up with various different forages ready for their animals throughout—for the winter and all that.

But just—I'd just like to put another thing quickly on the record, as I see we're—I'm not sure what's going on with the clock but it's all good.

When the member—the member from St. Vital needs to stop calling in Bill 33 the regulations. The point is is that they're policies, and why they're policies is because policies are more flexible and so—

The Acting Chairperson (Josh Guenter): The hour being 6 o'clock—order. The hour being 6 o'clock, committee rise. Call in the Speaker.

IN SESSION

The Acting Speaker (Josh Guenter): The hour being 6 o'clock, this House is adjourned and stands adjourned until 10 a.m. tomorrow.

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF MANITOBA

Wednesday, October 6, 2021

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Maloway 3814

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