

Fifth Session – Forty-Second Legislature
of the
Legislative Assembly of Manitoba
DEBATES
and
PROCEEDINGS
Official Report
(Hansard)

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MANITOBA LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
Forty-Second Legislature

Member	Constituency	Political Affiliation
AL TOMARE, Nello	Transcona	NDP
ASAGWARA, Uzoma	Union Station	NDP
BRAR, Diljeet	Burrows	NDP
BUSHIE, Ian	Keewatinook	NDP
CLARKE, Eileen, Hon.	Agassiz	PC
COX, Cathy	Kildonan-River East	PC
CULLEN, Cliff, Hon.	Spruce Woods	PC
DRIEDGER, Myrna, Hon.	Roblin	PC
EICHLER, Ralph	Lakeside	PC
EWASKO, Wayne, Hon.	Lac du Bonnet	PC
FONTAINE, Nahanni	St. Johns	NDP
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	Brandon West	PC
ISLEIFSON, Len	Brandon East	PC
JOHNSON, Derek, Hon.	Interlake-Gimli	PC
JOHNSTON, Scott, Hon.	Assiniboia	PC
KHAN, Obby, Hon.	Fort Whyte	PC
KINEW, Wab	Fort Rouge	NDP
KLEIN, Kevin E., Hon.	Kirkfield Park	PC
LAGASSÉ, Bob	Dawson Trail	PC
LAGIMODIERE, Alan	Selkirk	PC
LAMONT, Dougald	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, Hon.	Seine River	PC
MOSES, Jamie	St. Vital	NDP
NAYLOR, Lisa	Wolseley	NDP
NESBITT, Greg, Hon.	Riding Mountain	PC
PEDERSEN, Blaine	Midland	PC
PIWNIUK, Doyle, Hon.	Turtle Mountain	PC
REDHEAD, Eric	Thompson	NDP
REYES, Jon, Hon.	Waverley	PC
SALA, Adrien	St. James	NDP
SANDHU, Mintu	The Maples	NDP
SCHULER, Ron	Springfield-Ritchot	PC
SMITH, Andrew, Hon.	Lagimodière	PC
SMITH, Bernadette	Point Douglas	NDP
SMOOK, Dennis	La Vérendrye	PC
SQUIRES, Rochelle, Hon.	Riel	PC
STEFANSON, Heather, Hon.	Tuxedo	PC
TEITSMA, James, Hon.	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>	Morden-Winkler	

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF MANITOBA

Monday, May 8, 2023

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.

We acknowledge we are gathered on Treaty 1 territory and that Manitoba is located on the treaty territories and ancestral lands of the Anishinaabeg, Anishinewuk, Dakota Oyate, Denesuline and Nehethowuk nations. We acknowledge Manitoba is located on the Homeland of the Red River Métis. We acknowledge northern Manitoba includes lands that were and are the ancestral lands of the Inuit. We respect the spirit and intent of treaties and treaty making and remain committed to working in partnership with First Nations, Inuit and Métis people in the spirit of truth, reconciliation and collaboration.

Good afternoon, everybody. Please be seated.

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS

Madam Speaker: Introduction of bills? Committee reports?

TABLING OF REPORTS

Hon. Jon Reyes (Minister of Labour and Immigration): Madam Speaker, I'm pleased to table the 2022 Annual Report and Five Year Plan for the Workers Compensation Board of Manitoba, and the 2022 Appeal Commission and Medical Review Panel Annual Report.

MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS

Madam Speaker: The honourable Minister of Sport, Culture and Heritage—and I would indicate that the required 90 minutes' notice prior to routine proceedings was provided in accordance with rule 27(2).

Would the honourable minister please proceed with his statement.

Asian Heritage Month

Hon. Obby Khan (Minister of Sport, Culture and Heritage): Today I rise, recognize and celebrate Asian Heritage Month in Manitoba, for which we observe annually during the month of May.

For more than 150 years, Manitobans of Asian heritage have been contributing to our collective provincial identity, while establishing roots in communities throughout our province and providing strong leadership across many sectors.

Madam Speaker, this month, we celebrate the diversity of perspectives, traditions and cultural practices that our province's Asian communities bring, enriching the experiences of all those who live here. By respecting and celebrating our differences, we create inviting spaces for our shared civic, social and economic sectors to flourish and grow.

Asian Heritage Month celebrates the complexity and the breadth of Asian culture. It is not a monolith; it is a collective of languages, cultures, ethnicities, religions, representing over 40 countries. This month, we celebrate the numerous examples of leadership, achievements and contributions by Asian community members from across Manitoba, representing many sectors, whether it be in science, business, trade, arts or anything else.

Members of Manitoba's Asian 'diaspora' have enriched life in our province for many generations, from Sikh Manitobans who served in the Canadian army during World War I, to Philip Lee, the 24th Lieutenant Governor of Manitoba.

For over 20 years, the Asian Heritage Society of Manitoba has sought to educate Manitobans about Asian culture by organizing celebrations that highlight Asian communities. Thank you to all of the community organizations, volunteers and families that continue to make this province the wonderful diverse place it is.

I would like to encourage all Manitobans to participate in the many activities scheduled for Asian Heritage Month. In recognition of our province's multicultural identity, we fortify our common goals and shared hopes for the future.

Madam Speaker, I encourage all my colleagues in the House today and all Manitobans to get out, participate and celebrate Asian Heritage Month in Manitoba.

Thank you.

Ms. Amanda Lathlin (The Pas-Kameesak): May is Asian Heritage Month, an opportunity for all Canadians to learn more about the diverse culture and history of Asian communities in Canada, as well as we celebrate the many achievements and contributions Canadians of Asian descent have made throughout history in—and in our communities today.

Sadly, we must also take this opportunity to recognize that anti-Asian racism has been increasing in Canada. We saw this concerning rise especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, and we know that it remains today as well. In a survey conducted by Angus Reid in 2021, over half of Asian Canadians reported experiencing discrimination in the past year, with 28 per cent saying that this happens all the time or often. We also acknowledge that in the past, all levels of government in Canada have contributed to anti-Asian racism through discriminatory policies. Today, we have a responsibility to take actions and raise awareness about anti-Asian racism and to combat it in all forms.

One of the ways we can do this is by supporting the sectors that have high rates of Asian Manitoban workers. We know that Asian woman—women were 'disapotionately' impacted by pandemic job loss and higher rates of COVID-19 that come from higher—that come from working high-risk, low-paying jobs in care economy. Protecting these essential workers in the practical step we can to take—support Asian communities in our province.

This year, the Asian Heritage Society of Manitoba is hosting many events to celebrate the Asian Manitobans and offer opportunities to learn about Asian cultures and history. I encourage all Manitobans to get involved in celebrating Asian heritage and working to end anti-Asian racism in all forms.

On behalf of the Manitoba NDP, I'd like to reiterate our commitment to addressing and combatting anti-Asian racism and to wish all Asian Manitobans a happy Asian Heritage Month.

Ekosi.

Ms. Cindy Lamoureux (Tyndall Park): Madam Speaker, I ask for leave to respond to the minister's statement.

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

Ms. Lamoureux: I rise this afternoon to speak about Asian Heritage Month and how it's been celebrated here in Canada for nearly half a century, and it's been officially 21 years since the Government of Canada signed an official declaration to designate May as Asian Heritage Month.

During this month, I'd like to acknowledge a few groups that really teach us about the rich history of Asian Canadians and the importance of acceptance.

This year, I would like to begin by recognizing the Asian Heritage Society of Manitoba. This group brings together representatives from numerous Asian Canadian organizations to share art, culture, cuisine, faiths and traditions right here in Manitoba. Later this month, May 27th to 28th, the society will be putting on its Asian Canadian Showcase at Taste of Asia at The Forks, and everyone is invited.

We also have incredible groups here in Manitoba, like AWOW, the Asian Women of Winnipeg, and I'd be remiss if I didn't mention the event they held in March at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights where they brought women of different backgrounds from all over the province together to build acceptance and a better understanding of one another.

* (13:40)

Madam Speaker, we have many groups like Asian business councils that connects fellow business owners and communities together through networks, galas and seminars. We have MAFTI, the Manitoba Association of Filipino Teachers, and the role they play in our education system.

And another group that I think is very important to speak to is the Ethnocultural Council of Manitoba. Every single day, people are experiencing racism here in Manitoba and we need to continue to work towards creating a more diverse and welcoming province for everyone. ECCM does this through spreading awareness about speaking up and motivating, inspiring and creating safe places for all of us to have these conversations.

Madam Speaker, diversity is our greatest strength. It's what makes Canada the great country that it is, and we need to do a much, much better job at cherishing our diversity and creating space and safety for diversity in our province.

In closing, I want to thank the minister for the opportunity to speak to this statement and wish everyone a very happy Asian Heritage Month.

Thank you.

MEMBERS' STATEMENTS

National Nursing Week

Hon. James Teitsma (Minister of Consumer Protection and Government Services): Today, I'd like to spend a couple of minutes talking about people—well, people like you, Madam Speaker. I hope that's okay. Now, to be clear, I'm not referring to your role as an elected official, or even to your role as the auspicious Speaker of this august establishment. No, I'm going back a little further than that.

I'm speaking of your decision, the same decision taken by thousands and thousands of Manitobans, to begin a much beloved, highly trusted and incredibly vital career as a nurse.

This week is National Nursing Week, and it takes place every year from the Monday to the Sunday of the same week as Florence Nightingale's birthday, which is on May 12th.

This year's theme is Our Nurses. Our Future., which highlights various roles that nurses play in a patient's health-care journey. Nurses are critical to the health-care system and play an essential role in delivering quality care to our communities.

Before, during and since the COVID-19 pandemic, nurses have gone above and beyond the call of duty. They have been seen putting their own health and safety on the line to care for their patients. Indeed, we know that there are times when they put the interests of their patients ahead of their own well-being. We owe a debt of gratitude to every single nurse in our province.

I myself am very happy to report that I am the proud father of a nurse. My daughter Melannie recently graduated and works at St. Boniface Hospital. I have seen first-hand the hard work and dedication that goes into becoming a nurse and the importance of their role in our health-care system. I'm incredibly proud of my daughter and of all the nurses who work with her and who work in the entire health-care system to tirelessly provide quality care for their patients. I would wager that most Manitobans know a family member or friend who works in health care and, oftentimes, that person is a nurse.

So I urge all members of this Assembly to join me in celebrating National Nursing Week and to recognize the important role that nurses play in our health-care system. Let's show our appreciation for their commitment to their patients and to the health and well-being of our—all our communities.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Silica Mine Project and Drinking Water Safety

Mr. Mark Wasyliw (Fort Garry): Madam Speaker, communities in southeastern Manitoba have grave concerns over the Sio Silica mining project in the RM of Springfield. Residents of Dawson Trail and Springfield-Ritchot are among those who have raised their voices over the concern of water contamination resulting from the project. These concerns also include Sio Silica's environmental impact assessment. These concerns are that the scope is too limited to the project itself and ignores the impact to the region as a whole.

Southeastern Manitoba is one of the fastest growing regions in Manitoba, and prior to this mine proposal the area had already expressed concerns of whether its water supply was sustainable. Now this project potentially threatens the clean water source that is already under threat.

The minister could assuage fears of the communities by guaranteeing that the Manitoba government will protect the safe drinking water of southern Manitoba and take concerns seriously. Despite the many opportunities, this minister has been steadfast in his refusal to guarantee clean water to the citizens or to publicly address their concerns. This is absolutely unacceptable and reeks of attempting to pre-emptively evade responsibility. Unfortunately, it won't be very long before this PC government is once again saying woulda, coulda, shoulda.

Final approval for this project rests with the Environment Minister, and regardless of what the environment commission says, PC Party members have a vested financial—*[interjection]*

Madam Speaker: Order.

Mr. Wasyliw: —interest in this project—*[interjection]*

Madam Speaker: Order.

Mr. Wasyliw: —and residents are rightfully concerned about the spectre of political interference. David Filmon, prominent PC Party member and son of former PC Premier Gary Filmon, is a board member of Sio Silica.

The MLAs for Dawson Trail and Springfield-Ritchot have been completely silent on this issue and—
[interjection]

Madam Speaker: Order.

Mr. Wasyliw:—constituents have said they feel ignored on the topic of advocating for the protection of clean drinking water supply for their communities.

We are calling on these MLAs to speak out on this issue and calling on—[interjection]

Madam Speaker: Order.

Mr. Wasyliw:—this minister to publicly guarantee the right of southeastern Manitobans to—

Madam Speaker: The member's time has expired.
[interjection]

Order. I'm disappointed to see us start out like this and I'm going to ask members for their co-operation, please.

Springfield-Ritchot Community Projects

Mr. Ron Schuler (Springfield-Ritchot): And now for some good news.

Our local communities and organizations are the lifeblood of our great province. Our government recognizes this and has been diligent in promoting the growth, safety and vibrancy of our communities through multiple different streams of funding. I want to highlight today just a few of the many projects and organizations that have been funded in Springfield, Niverville and Ritchot.

In Springfield, there was a \$4.7-million announcement for the Springfield Community Recreation Centre project that was 23 years in the making. Another project that will benefit the recreation of the community is the \$300,000 that our government provided for a swimming pool complex in Dugald. Tying it all together is the \$10 million our government is providing for a water plant that will allow for not just these projects to go ahead but also provide the water supply needed for future expansion.

In Ritchot, I was pleased to take part in an announcement of \$300,000 to replace the Ste. Agathe rink ice plant. This was on top of the over \$133,000 that was provided for multiple other community space grants. And who can forget the \$61 million that has gone into upgrading Highway 75 to make it safer for daily commuters?

Finally, Niverville, the Hollywood of the north. Last month, I had the pleasure of taking part in

announcement of \$50 million of combined provincial, private and municipal funding for a movie studio, hotel and highway upgrades. Then there was the announcement: over \$110 million for waste-water treatment facility, or the \$250,000 for expanding arena seating.

This is just some of the funding provided for the communities of Springfield, Niverville and Ritchot. In total, over \$211 million have been brought to my communities just this year, helping them stay the vibrant, growing places that they are.

Cystic Fibrosis Awareness Month

MLA Tom Lindsey (Flin Flon): I stand today to recognize Cystic Fibrosis Awareness Month.

Cystic fibrosis is a genetic condition that causes severe lung damage, digestive system damage and other organs of the body to suffer damage.

Joining us in the gallery today are Flin Flon constituents Richard Rebelo and his wife, Sarah. Richard lives with cystic fibrosis. Also joining us is Gillian Maiorino from Cystic Fibrosis Canada.

I have known Richard for many years and have watched how cystic fibrosis has affected his and his wife's lives. Over the years, there has been much advancement in the treatment of cystic fibrosis but no cure yet.

We intensively lobbied the government to allow medication like ORKAMBI and then TRIKAFTA to be covered by our drug formularies here in Manitoba, and, thankfully, that has finally happened.

Richard qualified to use TRIKAFTA, which has worked like a miracle for him. His quality of life dramatically improved almost as soon as he started taking the medication. It has been life changing.

Richard has been able to have his medicine because his private insurer covers some of the cost. However, we need to ensure that essential medications like these are made affordable to all Manitobans, regardless of them having private insurance.

The Pharmacare deductible amounts mean many Manitobans still cannot access these life-saving medications.

TRIKAFTA has allowed Richard and so many others living with cystic fibrosis to have an improved quality of life. As research continues and as new miracle medications become available, we need to make sure they're also accessible and affordable to everyone in our province.

We must commit to doing everything within our power as legislators to support Richard and all Manitobans living with cystic fibrosis.

Please join me in wishing Richard Rebelo and all cystic fibrosis warriors more success on their life's journeys.

Cadena Brazeau–Loran Scholar 2023

Hon. Greg Nesbitt (Minister of Natural Resources and Northern Development): Cadena Brazeau from the Keeseekoowenin First Nation is one of two Manitoba students to be named a 2023 Loran Scholar.

The grade 12 student at the Strathclair Community School is among a cohort of 37 out of nearly 4,800 applicants from across Canada to earn the prestigious award. The Loran Scholars Foundation looks beyond conventional measures such as grades and rankings to find strength of character and the promise of future leadership.

The pursuits and accomplishments of the newest recipients of the Loran Award are exemplary, but it's their value-driven approach to leading and dedication to uplifting their communities that distinguish them as Loran Scholars, said engagement and communications officer Roxy Rae.

* (13:50)

Brazeau, also known as Niimi Miiigwan, is the chairperson of Keeseekoowenin's youth committee, a community representative for Treaty 2's Youth Council, and sits on her school's student council. She also established her community's youth centre, where she plans and hosts events, programs and activities for youth in Keeseekoowenin.

Derek Caldwell, principal of the Strathclair Community School, said Brazeau has grown into an exceptional young adult. He said her incredible leadership skills and her positive attitude has made her a tremendous impact on the Strathclair school and community at large. Brazeau played an active role in organizing and leading the school's truth and reconciliation event.

The Loran Award, valued at \$100,000, is a four-year leadership enrichment program consisting of summer work experiences, mentorship, scholar gatherings, an annual living stipend and a tuition waiver at one of 25 university partners.

Brazeau was drawn to the Loran Scholars Foundation's values, diversity and investment into future leaders. She said that by becoming the chairwoman of

the youth committee in her community, she hopes to create a safe and sober environment for the youth of the Keeseekoowenin First Nation.

Please join me in recognizing Cadena Brazeau on the great work she has been doing in Keeseekoowenin and congratulating her as becoming a Loran Scholar.

Introduction of Guests

Madam Speaker: I would like to draw the attention of all honourable members to the Speaker's Gallery, where we have with us today Mr. George Hickey Jr., who is a Deputy Speaker of the Legislative Assembly of Nunavut. And we're honoured to have him here. I had to add the word junior in there because we didn't want you to get mixed up between senior and junior, and we're honoured to have you with us today.

Also in the public gallery we have Mr. Stan Struthers, the former member for Dauphin, and we welcome you here today, too.

ORAL QUESTIONS

Grace Hospital Orthopedic Surgeries Number of Procedures Cancelled

Mr. Wab Kinew (Leader of the Official Opposition): Manitobans are waiting too long to get the surgeries that they need. Too often, Madam Speaker, surgeries are being cancelled because a lack of resources, a lack of capacity in our health-care system because of PC cuts.

New documents that we've obtained show just how bad the situation is getting. It turns out that in just over a year, this PC government cancelled more than 2,600 surgeries for Manitobans. That's at a time of a great wait-list. Madam Speaker, 247 hip and knee surgeries were cancelled at the Grace Hospital alone.

Can the Premier tell the House why she cancelled 247 hip and knee procedures at the Grace Hospital?

Hon. Heather Stefanson (Premier): I first off want to just congratulate Lanette Siragusa, who has agreed to take on the role of CEO of Shared Health. We know—we all know that she has tremendous experience in the health-care system, both as a registered nurse herself, but also having worked in administrative at—areas in the system, as well, Madam Speaker.

So, on behalf of all Manitobans, we just want to take this opportunity to welcome her to her new role.

And, Madam Speaker, when it comes to the litany of false accusations by the Leader of the Opposition, I'll address that in the next question.

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

Mr. Kinew: You know, interestingly, these documents were prepared by Shared Health, and they prove that this Premier cancelled thousands of surgeries last year.

In fact, from the time the Premier took office until January of 2023, there were 578 orthopedic surgeries cancelled in Winnipeg alone. Now, we should remember that that means there are hundreds of seniors waiting for hip and knee procedures to be done.

Now, the Premier has refused to listen because, at the same time, we know that surgeons from the Grace Hospital were bringing forward solutions, only to be rejected by this very same Premier. That's one reason why, at their hospital alone, according to these documents, 247 joint procedures were cancelled in just over a year.

Why did the Premier not only cancel all those surgeries, but also reject the solutions that could have fixed the situation?

Mrs. Stefanson: I hope the Leader of the Opposition will also welcome Ms. Siragusa to her new role as CEO of Shared Health, Madam Speaker.

What I will say when it comes to the Grace Hospital, Madam Speaker, I was just there a week ago Sunday with an announcement on their new ICU: more than \$30 million that we contributed and \$5 million by the foundation. This is going to make a significant contribution, not just for that community, but for all Manitobans.

And so, I know it was very, very well received by those who were there, and it will be very well received by all Manitobans because it means more ICU capacity, not just at the Grace Hospital, but for all of Manitoba.

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

Mr. Kinew: Madam Speaker, Manitobans know that for seven years, this government has cut ICU capacity and cut health care in Manitoba.

And this PC government knows that Manitobans want change; that's why even the PCs are trying to convince Manitobans that they're going to change just because it's an election year. But Manitobans see through this election-year gimmick.

I'll table the documents, which prove there were thousands of joint surgeries cancelled, hundreds at the Grace Hospital alone—247—[interjection]

Madam Speaker: Order.

Mr. Kinew:—surgeries cancelled at the Grace, the very same hospital where surgeons were stepping forward from and offering solutions to this government, only to be ignored by this Premier.

Why did the Premier cancel all 'hoise'—all those joint surgeries, and then turn around and ignore the very surgeons who were offering a solution to the problem she created?

Mrs. Stefanson: Well, Madam Speaker, I want to take this opportunity to thank our surgical and diagnostic task force, who has been working day in and day out to ensure that we increase the capacity to be able to perform more hip and knee surgeries, which is exactly what is happening in Manitoba.

At the Concordia Hospital, Madam Speaker, we'll be able to perform more than 1,000 more hip and knees surgeries at the Concordia Hospital.

Now, I know the members opposite don't want to hear this because it's good news for Manitobans, Madam Speaker, but we will continue to stand up for Manitobans each and every day.

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

Education Property Tax Credit Out-of-Province Rebates

Mr. Wab Kinew (Leader of the Official Opposition): Madam Speaker, for seven years this government has cut health care, and Manitobans have shaken their heads throughout. And why do they do this? It's so that they can turn around and give big handouts to their wealthy friends.

You know, they have been giving cheques to billionaires. They've been taking that from revenue that should have been funding schools in Manitoba. Now, on this side of the House, we say that that money should go to kids and not out-of-province billionaires.

We're calling on this Premier to stop her handouts for billionaires who don't even live in Manitoba, and instead to invest those resources in our schools.

Will she announce that she is going to abandon Brian Pallister's policy of giving handouts to billionaires who do not live in Manitoba today?

Hon. Heather Stefanson (Premier): Indeed, it's a pleasure to stand in the House and put some facts on the record now, Madam Speaker.

Of course, Manitobans know that there has been a 22 per cent increase in health-care funding in the province of Manitoba since we took over from the dark days of the previous 'enderpy'—[interjection]

Madam Speaker: Order.

Mrs. Stefanson:—government, where they were shutting down emergency room departments all over Manitoba, Madam Speaker. Manitobans don't want to go back to those dark days.

But we also have a 23 per cent increase in education, Madam Speaker, as well, since 2016 when we took over office. That is 23 per cent more invested in education, 22 per cent more in health care.

The Leader of the Opposition is just plain wrong.

* (14:00)

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

Mr. Kinew: What's wrong, Madam Speaker, is giving handouts to billionaires who don't live in Manitoba while our schools are underfunded.

Consider the example of Charles Koch. He's the 21st richest person in the entire world. And yet, the Stefanson government gave him a cheque for \$100,000 this year, just like they did the year before that.

And then, of course, there's their friend, Galen Weston, who's been making life more expensive for everyone in this province. Last year, this government cut Galen Weston a cheque for \$300,000. I'll table the documents which prove that this happened under the Stefanson government.

We all know that Galen Weston has been making groceries more expensive for the people of Manitoba, and yet, unbelievably, this Premier thinks he deserves even more money.

With this latest evidence, will the Premier finally stop handing out cheques to out-of-province billionaires?

Mrs. Stefanson: Well, Madam Speaker, again, we'll put some facts on the record.

The latest budget that we tabled in this House offered a very significant increase to the basic personal amount, from less than \$11,000 to \$15,000. That took more than 47,000 low-income Manitobans off the tax

roll in Manitoba altogether. Those are low-income Manitobans, and the Leader of the Opposition and every member opposite voted against that.

They like to say that they stand for those low-income Manitobans, but when it comes time to stand for them, what do they do? They sit down, Madam Speaker.

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

Mr. Kinew: Madam Speaker, on this side of the House, we've been fighting each and every day to make life more affordable for people here in Manitoba.

And yet, for the Premier, it's not enough to make Autopac premiums more expensive and to make hydro rates more expensive. In fact, she wants to go to Galen Weston, the owner of Superstore, who has been raising the prices on hard-working Manitobans so much during this period of inflation. She wants to go to him and give him \$300,000. Not just \$300,000 out of general coffers, by the way; \$300,000 that should be going to fund public schools in Manitoba.

The choice Manitobans have in this election is very clear: more handouts for billionaires with the PCs or better funded schools with the Manitoba NDP.

We've got 15 sitting days left, Madam Speaker.

Will the Premier announce now that she is going to reverse course and stop her policy of handing—

Madam Speaker: The member's time has expired.

Introduction of Guests

Madam Speaker: I'm going to ask for everybody's co-operation. We have students that have joined us in the gallery, and I would like to take a moment to leave—a moment to introduce you to these students.

Seated in the public gallery, from École West Park, we have 40 grade 5 to 6 students under the direction of Stephanie Fortier, and this group is located in the constituency of the honourable member for Borderland (Mr. Guenter).

And—behalf of all honourable members here, we welcome you to the Manitoba Legislature.

* * *

Madam Speaker: And while I'm standing, before I recognize the honourable First Minister, I'm going to ask for everybody's deep co-operation in listening

and showing some respect on this floor; I'm having difficulty hearing the questions and answers.

And to those members that are putting their hand over their mouth and thinking I don't see them when they're heckling: I see you. And I'm going to start to recognize those of you that are actually breaching what I would call a rule of civility in this House.

So, I'm going to ask for everybody's co-operation today, and especially with students—and you know how I feel about that—so, everybody's co-operation, please.

Mrs. Stefanson: The Leader of the Opposition has made a number of commitments during his campaign out in Manitoba—to Manitobans. And those campaign commitments cost money, Madam Speaker.

And yet the Leader of the Opposition has no plan whatsoever to grow our economy, and in fact, in questions earlier there—in statements earlier in this House, Madam Speaker, they were saying how we should shut down jobs in Manitoba.

That would have a negative impact on economic growth in the province of Manitoba. Manitobans know, Madam Speaker—*[interjection]*

Madam Speaker: Order.

Mrs. Stefanson: —that the only plan by the NDP to pay for their litany of expenditures in the promises that they're making to Manitobans is by raising their taxes.

That makes 'lise'—life less affordable for Manitobans, not more, Madam Speaker.

Health-Care System Staffing Levels

MLA Uzoma Asagwara (Union Station): Madam Speaker, for seven straight years the PCs have attacked our health-care system. They've cut services, they disrespected front-line workers and have refused to fill severe staff vacancies.

And now the PCs are desperately trying to mislead Manitobans by pretending they've added health-care workers. Yet they won't say where these new staff are working, and they won't say how many staff have left the system.

Will the Premier do the right thing, be transparent and tell Manitobans how many health-care workers have left our health-care system?

Hon. Audrey Gordon (Minister of Health): Madam Speaker, I'd like to begin by echoing the warm

welcome that the Premier has stated for Lanette Siragusa, who's the new CEO of Shared Health.

I had the opportunity to work with Lanette during our time with the Winnipeg Regional Health Authority and then throughout the 'paramet'—the pandemic, and she proved to be very committed, dedicated, very competent and skilled health professional. And I wish her all the best in her time with Shared Health as the CEO, Madam Speaker. Great things will happen under her leadership.

Madam Speaker, nearly 900 new hires in our health system; that is something to celebrate.

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

MLA Asagwara: Madam Speaker, Manitobans continue to suffer thanks to the PC cuts to our health-care system. And rather than taking action to fill the vacancies that they created, the PCs are offering only political spin.

They won't say where these new staff are working and they won't say how many staff have left the health-care system. Thankfully, allied health-care workers have fact-checked the PCs. The PCs claim they hired 82 allied health professionals, but at the same time, Madam Speaker, 151 have left our health-care system. That's fewer workers by the bedside of Manitobans.

Can the Premier tell this House why she hid this information—very important information—from Manitobans?

Ms. Gordon: Madam Speaker, nearly 900 new hires in the health system: 259 nurses, 82 allied health providers, 438 health-care aides, 32 physicians and clinical assistants, 73 new physicians and clinical assistants.

* (14:10)

Madam Speaker, 73 new physicians in that number have been hired in and are practising in Manitoba under the health human resources action plan. That includes 30 family physicians, a cardiac surgeon, a neurologist and a neurosurgeon, among many others.

But I'm proud to say that Manitoba is one of the only provinces who has no unfilled family medicine spaces this year, another great announcement to celebrate.

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

MLA Asagwara: I've asked the question twice now, and neither the Health Minister nor the Premier (Mrs. Stefanson) can be bothered to answer basic questions.

And that's why Manitobans cannot trust the PCs when it comes to their health care. After years of cuts, they're now pretending they've hired workers, but they won't say where they're working; they won't say how many have left the system.

We know the Province has this information; they're just refusing to release it. And we know why, Madam Speaker: hundreds of burnt-out health-care workers continue to leave the health-care system thanks to the PCs' cuts and mismanagement.

Will the Premier stop the spin and stop cutting our front-line health care?

Ms. Gordon: I must say, the only thing that the opposition members know about front line is possibly how to spell the word.

When I went to the front line and met with nurses, they said during the 17 years they were in office, not once did any member go and sit with them and listen to their ideas, Madam Speaker, but our government did.

And we implemented the \$200-million health human resources action plan, and we've already implemented 12 initiatives from this plan to support retention, training and recruitment: 11,600 weekend super premiums; 8,747 wellness bonuses; 11,562 licensure reimbursements; and 810–

Madam Speaker: The member's time has expired.

Introduction of Guests

Madam Speaker: And we have some—it looks like the other half of École West Park that might be joining us right now, and they are only here for a few minutes in the gallery, so I would like to introduce them to you.

Seated in the public gallery, from École West Park, we have 40 grade 5 to 6 students under the direction of Stephanie Fortier, and this group is located in the constituency of the honourable member for Borderland (Mr. Guenter).

On behalf of all honourable members, we welcome all of you here to the Legislature.

RRC Polytech and Assiniboine Community College Possibility of Collective Strike Action

Mr. Jamie Moses (St. Vital): It's clear that PCs don't respect workers at Manitoba's colleges.

For years, they have repeatedly attacked and disrespected them, and they've cut funding to post-secondary institutions. It's resulted in Red River College Polytech and Assiniboine Community College staff now considering strike action.

Can the minister simply explain why her government has failed to support Manitoba's colleges and their workers?

Hon. Sarah Guillemard (Minister of Advanced Education and Training): The member opposite couldn't be more wrong.

We support employers and employees to continue the negotiations with the students' best interest in mind. And that is what I understand is ongoing right now. There are offers made, they are considered and it's a negotiation practice.

I know the member opposite knows about this process. I don't know why he's pretending right now to be ignorant to that.

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

Mr. Moses: The minister fails to acknowledge the reality that Brian Pallister cut funding to post-secondary institutions and interfered in their affairs.

The result is, the staff at Red River polytech 'nang' Assiniboine Community College are being forced to consider strike action.

These staff do essential work, work to help train the future workers of our economy that we need in our society today, yet this government continues to disrespect and ignore them.

Can the minister explain why she is failing to bargain fairly with these workers?

Mrs. Guillemard: I'll once again reiterate, we are not the employers. In this situation, it is the post-secondary institutes and their employees who are in the midst of this negotiation. We'll respect the process. I understand the member opposite is confused about respecting processes; we are not. Thank God we're in government.

Madam Speaker, we have increased funding to post-secondaries this year by over 12 per cent.

I don't know where the member is getting his information from, but it's not based in fact.

Some Honourable Members: Oh, oh.

Madam Speaker: Order.

The honourable member for St. Vital, on a final supplementary.

Mr. Moses: The only thing we're confused about is why this government can't bargain with workers fairly.

The staff at Red River polytechnic and Assiniboine Community College do amazing work. They help train the workers that our economy and our society needs. They give a hundred per cent at their jobs, and all they want in return is respect from this government. But they're not getting it. Years of disrespect and interference have forced them to consider striking.

Will the minister stop disrespecting RRC Polytech and ACC staff and allow them to bargain fairly today?

Hon. James Teitsma (Minister of Consumer Protection and Government Services): Madam Speaker, I don't understand why that member can't seem to understand the very simple and direct responses being given by this minister. He's perhaps purposely ignoring what she has to say. Perhaps he'll accept it from me; I don't know.

But what I would say to that member—*[interjection]*

Madam Speaker: Order.

Mr. Teitsma: —is that nobody wants a strike—or, at least, that's what I thought when I stood up here—that nobody wants a strike. But now I'm wondering if I'm wrong.

Maybe the members opposite think it would be politically convenient for there to be a strike. Is that what they think? Is that they want? Because it's not on best interest of Manitobans; it's not in the best interest of students; it's not in the best interest of our province.

Shame on them.

Women's Correctional Centre Request to Restore Beading Program

MLA Nahanni Fontaine (St. Johns): Madam Speaker, beading is medicine to our women. It offers healing, empowerment and pride. Beading is connection to those matriarchs who came before us. Beading is an act of resistance to colonization.

Indigenous women started a beading program in the Women's Correctional Centre many years back, which saw them sell their beading and their artistry.

When will this program be fully restored?

Hon. Kelvin Goertzen (Minister of Justice and Attorney General): My understanding, Madam Speaker, is that the program's transitioning to a new program managed within the facility to increase access to beading.

Like the member opposite, I agree, and we support the practice and we want to ensure that it's successful to all those who are in the facility.

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

MLA Fontaine: The beading program is a means of earning income. There is a network of community supports, many of whom are with us here today, who sell the beadwork and then either e-transfer the funds to family and friends, pay for phone bundles to keep in touch with their family, deposit funds in their trust, purchase clothing or hygiene products for their release date or hold the funds in a separate account until the women are released.

These women are seeking their financial independence through this beading program.

Can the minister tell us when this program will be fully restored?

Mr. Goertzen: As I indicated, Madam Speaker, I learned about the transition of the program on the weekend. I reached out to officials within corrections. They indicate that the program is transitioning so that more of the inmates can participate in the program. The beads will still be the personal property of the inmate so they can distribute it to those on special occasions.

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

* (14:20)

MLA Fontaine: So, I think that the minister just confirmed that the corrections facility isn't going to allow any of the women to sell their beadwork outside the institution.

I'm wearing some beautiful earrings that I purchased from—or were gifted to me from the women's program. They were beaded by—*[interjection]* They were beaded by a woman named Dottie, who has since tragically passed. I'm honoured to wear her art and her creation, physically bringing into this Chamber all of the women that are housed at the centre. It's my way of acknowledging them and lifting up and supporting their healing journey.

Beading helps; beading helps with recidivism. The program should be fully reinstated. Community thinks so and agree. We agree on this side.

Does the minister agree that it should be fully restored today?

Mr. Goertzen: I'd like to welcome those who are in the gallery today and those who might be watching online. I'm sorry to hear the loss of the member's friend.

I agree with her that the artwork earrings that she's wearing, they are beautiful. We think that the program is important. That is why officials have indicated to me that they want to expand it and ensure that all those in the facility can participate.

Crown Land Unit Transfers Rancher Survey Results

Mr. Diljeet Brar (Burrows): Manitoba ranchers agree this PC government's mismanagement of Crown lands has made their lives harder. And now this government's own data agrees. A provincial survey found that 85 per cent of the respondents opposed the government's changes to unit transfers.

Ranchers have been saying for years that cutting unit transfers was a bad idea. That's why this government hid their plans from Manitobans before the last election.

Will the PC government do the right thing today and finally listen to what ranchers are telling the government?

Hon. Derek Johnson (Minister of Agriculture): I always welcome a question on supporting and consulting with our producers. I want to take a second to thank the producers for not only keeping the great people of Manitoba fed but keeping the people of the world fed, Madam Speaker. On this side of the House, we support Manitoba farmers and appreciate the hard work that those producers do.

Not long ago, Madam Speaker, we had a vote here in the House on Budget 2023. The member for Burrows could've supported the budget, but he chose to vote against it. To all the producers watching and listening today out there, the member for Burrows and his NDP colleagues voted against \$54.8 million back in your pockets from—

Madam Speaker: The member's time has expired.

The honourable member for Burrows, on a supplementary question.

Mr. Brar: Let me remind the member that we are talking about Crown lands. And I didn't hear even these two words in this answer; I would say it was not even an answer.

The results of the survey are clear: ranchers think the PCs' changes to unit transfers are bad. Manitoba Crown Land Leaseholders Association president, Brent Benson, said that the survey results show exactly what they told this government four years ago. Instead of listening, the PCs hiked rents and ended unit transfers, pushing young ranchers out of the industry.

Will the minister admit they refused to listen to ranchers for the past four years?

Mr. Johnson: Madam Speaker, the member well knows that his statements are not accurate. Nearly 40 per cent of the Crown lands was won by young farmers at our last auction. I wish the member would not mislead this House.

His leader stood up today and confirmed they will take \$54.8 million out of producers' pockets from the education property tax rebate. This side of the House, we're committing to double that to over \$100 million and—when we form government again after this fall's election. *[interjection]*

Madam Speaker: Order. Order.

The honourable member for Burrows, on a supplementary question.

Mr. Brar: I don't know how this minister defines young farmers; might be 76 years plus, in his eyes.

It's no wonder that the PC government tried to hide these survey results. They say exactly what ranchers have been saying for years. But instead of listening to the ranchers, this government hiked their rents and are allowing out-of-province companies to push local producers out of the industry.

That's the wrong approach, and it's making life harder for ranchers across the province.

Will the minister do the right thing by admitting their mistake and will he start listening to ranchers today? I expect an answer, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: The honourable Minister of Agriculture, on this final supplementary question.

Mr. Johnson: I think the member opposite's been spending too much time with Rachel Notley. Madam Speaker, we all know that Rachel Notley has actioned

the most regressive attacks on producers in the history of her home province.

Well, guess who's coaching the Manitoba NDP, Madam Speaker, and guest speaker at their NDP convention? That's right: Rachel Notley. Maybe this explains—the Manitoba NDPs voted against the education property tax pay rebate in the tune of \$54.8 million to the producers' pockets.

And I want to table the March—I want to table March 14th Hansard. On page 806, it shows the member for Burrows and his entire—entire—NDP caucus voted against \$54.8 million for Manitoba producers.

Political Attack Ad Campaigns Origin of Funding for Ads

Mr. Dougald Lamont (St. Boniface): Both the government and the official opposition have some explaining to do about how attack ad campaigns against each other are being paid for. People shouldn't be surprised that politicians govern the same way they run campaigns. *[interjection]*

Madam Speaker: Order.

Mr. Lamont: Right now, the NDP attack ad campaign, which the CBC—is deceptive, is being 100 per cent paid for with taxpayers' money. That deserves an explanation.

So, does the PC Party's relationship with a group called ManitobaWatch 2023, which is run by the Regina-based Canadian Growth Council, a branch of the Canada Strong & Free Network, formerly the Manning Centre for democracy in Calgary.

Can the PCs explain what their connection is with a far-right political front group from the—Saskatchewan running misleading attack ads on Manitoba MLAs?

Hon. Cliff Cullen (Minister of Finance): Certainly, we believe that Manitobans should know how their government is investing their hard-earned tax money, Madam Speaker.

This year's budget created a historic record tax savings for Manitoba families. Madam Speaker, this year alone, we increased the basic personal amount from \$11,000 to \$15,000. That's saving the average Manitoban over \$500 this year alone. When you combine that with next year's indexing in the tax brackets, the average Manitoban will save \$1,400.

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

Mr. Lamont: Free and fair elections don't happen on their own. We have laws to make sure that it's a fair fight, from finance through to who's standing behind the message. The PCs and NDP both want the benefits of being able to attack each other and have someone else foot the bill. Neither one will put their own money with their mouth is.

I table the Facebook page of attacks by ManitobaWatch on Manitoba MLAs, which are a mix of unfounded accusations—*[interjection]*

Madam Speaker: Order.

Mr. Lamont: —deep cuts of offices and research into Manitoba MLAs and embarrassing spelling mistakes. They misspelled NDP.

Only Manitobans should be choosing their government, Madam Speaker.

Can the PCs explain exactly what—*[interjection]*

Madam Speaker: Order.

Mr. Lamont: —their relationship with—personal, political, contractual, financial and communications with a Saskatchewan organization that's going out of its way to mislead Manitobans in an election year?

Mr. Cullen: Well, Madam Speaker, obviously a very important election coming up. We feel that Manitobans should have all the facts in front of them when they go to make that decision in October.

That's why we've invested some money in advertising, making sure that Manitobans understand fully our 9.2 per cent increase in health-care funding. They represent and understand the 6.1 per cent increase in funding for K-to-12 education and also they make sure they fully understand our record investments in both justice and our record investments in social services.

* (14:30)

Madam Speaker, we take no lessons from members opposite in making sure that Manitobans fully appreciate where their money is being invested. *[interjection]*

Madam Speaker: Order.

Cystic Fibrosis Medication Pharmacare Coverage

Hon. Jon Gerrard (River Heights): Madam Speaker, TRIKAFTA is a game-changing medication for individuals with cystic fibrosis.

Those with cystic fibrosis who are not able to get TRIKAFTA may need multiple emergency room visits and hospitalizations, may need treatment in an 'insentive'-care unit and may need a lung transplant. These treatments can add up to millions of dollars and far exceed the cost of TRIKAFTA. Furthermore, the decrease in the use of emergency rooms and hospitals frees up these resources for others.

When will the government remove the Pharma-care deductible so that all children who need TRIKAFTA can get it? And when will the government also fully cover the cost of other medications needed by individuals with cystic fibrosis?

Hon. Audrey Gordon (Minister of Health): I was pleased to join Cystic Fibrosis Canada today for their MLA luncheon, as well as individuals who are living with this devastating disease.

I'm so pleased that it was our government, in 2021, that added TRIKAFTA to the provincial formulary. And then, in 2022, we expanded coverage for the little ones, so children six years of age and over.

It was then that I met Jack, who was six years old. And I got a report on Jack's outcome since taking TRIKAFTA. He has improved, is playing hockey and is having a very good quality of life.

Our government will continue to respond to the needs of all Manitobans.

Grace Hospital Foundation Funding for ICU Expansion

Mr. Shannon Martin (McPhillips): While the NDP continues to politicize health care in Manitoba, our government is focused on patients and quality care.

That is why our government has invested nearly \$8 billion in health care; \$2 billion more than under the dark days of the NDP.

This includes \$1.2 billion in a multi-year capital investment for expansions and improvements of rural hospitals and other hospitals throughout Manitoba.
[interjection]

Madam Speaker: Order.

Mr. Martin: Can the Minister of Health elaborate on the additional investments our government has made to both the Grace Hospital and its intensive-care unit?

Thank you.

Hon. Audrey Gordon (Minister of Health): I thank the member for McPhillips for the great question.

Madam Speaker, our government is investing nearly \$30 million in the Grace Hospital Foundation's campaign to expand and improve the intensive-care unit at the Grace Hospital by 20 ICU beds. This expansion project will triple the amount of ICU patients that the Grace will be able to serve and ensure that its dedicated health-care professionals can continue to provide the highest standard of care to more Manitobans.

I'm thrilled that the new ICU will meet the latest standards for health-care facility design and will include 33,000 square feet of additional renovated space; another thing to celebrate, Madam Speaker.

Paid Leave for Miscarriage or Stillbirth Request to Call Bill 210 to Committee

Ms. Amanda Lathlin (The Pas-Kameesak): Experiencing a miscarriage or a 'stillburse' is devastating for both parents and their loved ones. Grieving families should be able to take the time they need after a miscarriage or stillbirth without fear of loss of wages.

Three times now, our party has put forward amendments that would provide guaranteed paid leave while families are grieving a pregnancy loss. Manitobans need access to this support as soon as possible.

Will this PC government call 210 to committee today?

Ekosi.

Hon. Kelvin Goertzen (Minister of Justice and Attorney General): This is one of those great things about the Manitoba Legislature, is that there are times when MLAs representing different parties bring forward important ideas.

And certainly, I think that all members stand united about the need to do more and to support those individuals who have suffered a miscarriage and the devastation that it can have on themselves and their families.

There are two bills before the Legislature right now which would provide greater support to those who have suffered miscarriages, and I can assure you that we'll be calling one to committee.

Madam Speaker: The time for oral questions has expired.

PETITIONS

Madam Speaker: The honourable—*[interjection]*

Order.

The honourable member for Point Douglas.

Foot-Care Services

Mrs. Bernadette Smith (Point Douglas): I wish to present the following petition to the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba.

The background to this petition is as follows:

(1) The population of those aged 55-plus has grown to approximately 2,500 in the city of Thompson.

(2) A large percentage of people in this age group require necessary medical foot care and treatment.

(3) A large percentage of those who are elderly and/or diabetic are also living on low incomes.

(4) The northern regional health authority previously provided essential medical foot-care services to seniors and those living with diabetes until 2019, then subsequently cut the program after the last two nurses filling those positions retired. *[interjection]*

Madam Speaker: Order.

Mrs. Smith: (5) The number of seniors and those with diabetes has only continued to grow in Thompson and surrounding areas.

(6) There is no adequate medical care available in the city and region, whereas the city of Winnipeg has 14 medical foot-care centres.

(7) The implications of inadequate or lack of podiatric care can lead to amputations.

(8) The city of Thompson also serves as a regional health-care service provider, and the need for foot care extends beyond just those served in the capital city of the province.

We petition the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba as follows:

To urge the provincial government to provide a—provide the services of two nurses to restore essential medical foot-care treatment to the city of Thompson effective April 1, 2022.

And this has been signed by Heather Muhr, Michelle Mellish *[phonetic]*, Augusta Anderson and many others.

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

Provincial Road 224

Ms. Amanda Lathlin (The Pas-Kameesak): I wish to present the following petition to the Legislative Assembly.

The background to this petition is as follows:

(1) Provincial Road 224 serves Peguis First Nation, Fisher River Cree Nation and surrounding communities. The road is in need of substantial repairs.

(2) The road has been in poor condition for years and has numerous potholes, uneven driving surfaces and extremely narrow shoulders.

Due to recent population growth—(3) Due to recent population growth in the area, there has been increased vehicle and pedestrian use of Provincial Road 224.

(4) Without repair, Provincial Road 224 will continue to pose a hazard to the many Manitobans who use it on a regular basis.

(5) Concerned Manitobans are requesting that Provincial Road 224 be assessed and repaired urgently to improve safety for its users.

Madam Speaker, we petition the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba as follows:

To urge the Minister of Infrastructure to complete an assessment of Provincial Road 224 and implement the appropriate repairs using final—using public funds as quickly as possible.

This petition has been signed by many, many fine Manitobans.

Ekosi.

Diagnostic Testing Accessibility

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

The background of this petition is as follows:

(1) 'Til recently, diagnostic medical tests, including for blood and fluid samples, were available and accessible in most medical clinics.

(2) Dynacare blood test labs have consolidated their blood and fluid testing services by closing 25 of its labs.

(3) The provincial government has cut diagnostic testing at many clinic sites, and residents now have to travel to different locations to get their testing done, even for a simple blood test or urine sample.

(4) Further, travel challenges for vulnerable and elderly residents of northeast Winnipeg may result in fewer tests being done or delays in testing, with the

attendant effects of increased health-care costs and poorer individual patient outcomes.

(5) COVID-19 emergency rules have resulted in long outdoor lineups, putting vulnerable residents at further risk in extreme weather, be it hot or cold. Moreover, these long lineups have resulted in longer wait times for services and poorer service in general.

(6) Manitoba residents value the convenience and efficiency of the health-care system when they are able to give their samples at the time of the doctor visit.

We petition the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba as follows:

To urge the provincial government to immediately demand Dynacare increase their testing capacity so residents can better access these services locally and re-establish blood testing services at medical clinics in the local community.

* (14:40)

And this petition is signed by many, many Manitobans.

Brandon University Funding

Mr. Nello Altomare (Transcona): I wish to present the following petition to the Legislative Assembly.

To the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba, these are the reasons for the petition:

(1) Since taking office, the provincial government has cut operating funding to post-secondary institutions such as Brandon University, while simultaneously increasing tuition and student fees.

(2) Brandon University is the only university in rural Manitoba and serves as an important hub for Westman.

(3) Brandon University is the largest university outside of Winnipeg with over 2,200 full-time students and just under 1,000 part-time students.

(4) Despite the important role Brandon University plays in Manitoba, the provincial government is continuing to cut the university's funding in Budget '23-24, as funding yet again fails to keep pace with inflation.

(5) Inadequate funding hurts students and the quality of education they receive as it may force Brandon University to raise tuition, cut programs and services or both.

(6) Funding cuts also negatively impact Brandon University's faculty who are at risk of having their courses cut or being let go altogether.

(7) The provincial government has refused to explain why Brandon University's '23-24 operating funding increase falls below inflation, and why it is lower than other universities in Manitoba.

We therefore petition the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba as follows:

To urge the provincial government to adequately fund Brandon University so that the institution can avoid making cuts and continue to serve students, faculty, Westman and the province of Manitoba as a whole.

This petition, Madam Speaker, is signed by Geneviève Pearce, Leeanne Gerry and Ananna [*phonetic*] Laluk, as well as many other Manitobans.

Thank you.

Foot-Care Services

Mr. Eric Redhead (Thompson): I wish to present the following petition to the Legislative Assembly.

To the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba, the background of this petition is as follows:

(1) The population of those aged 55-plus has grown to approximately 2,500 in the city of Thompson.

(2) A large percentage of those people in this age group require necessary medical foot care and treatment.

(3) A large percentage of those who are elderly and/or diabetic are living on low incomes.

(4) The northern regional health authority previously provided essential medical foot-care services to seniors and those living with diabetes until 2019, then subsequently cut the program after the last two nurses filling those positions retired.

The number of seniors and those with diabetes has only continued to grow in Thompson and the surrounding areas.

(6) There is no adequate medical care available in the city and the region, whereas the city of Winnipeg has 14 medical foot-care centres.

(7) The implications of inadequate or lack of podiatric care can lead to amputations.

(8) The city of Thompson also serves as a regional health-care service provider, and the need of foot care

extends beyond just those served in the capital city of the province.

We petition the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba as follows:

To urge the provincial government to provide the services of two nurses to restore essential medical foot-care treatment to the city of Thompson effective April 1st, 2022.

This has been signed by many Manitobans.

Health-Care Coverage

Mr. Jamie Moses (St. Vital): I wish to present the following petition to the Legislative Assembly.

To the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba, the background for this petition is as follows:

(1) Health care is a basic human right and a fundamental part of responsible public health. Many people in Manitoba are not covered by provincial health care: migrant workers with work permits of less than one year, international students and those undocumented residents who have lost their status for a variety of reasons.

(2) Racialized people and communities are disproportionately affected by the pandemic, mainly due to the social and economic—[interjection]

Madam Speaker: Order.

Mr. Moses:—conditions which leave them vulnerable while performing essential work in a variety of industries in Manitoba.

(3) Without adequate health-care coverage, if they are ill, many of the uninsured will avoid seeking health care due to fear of being charged for the care, and some will fear possible detention and deportation if their immigration status is reported to the authorities.

(4) According to the United Nations Human Rights Committee, denying essential health care to undocumented irregular migrants is a violation of their rights.

(5) Jurisdictions across Canada and the world have adopted access-without-fear policies to prevent sharing personal health information or immigration status with immigration authorities and to give uninsured residents the confidence to access health care.

(6) The pandemic has clearly identified the need for everyone in Manitoba to have access to health care

to protect the health and safety of all who live in the province.

We petition the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba as follows:

(1) To urge the provincial government to immediately provide comprehensive and free health-care coverage to all residents of Manitoba, regardless of immigration status, including refugee claimants, migrant workers, international students, dependent children of temporary residents and undocumented residents.

(2) To urge the minister of Health and seniors care to undertake a multilingual communication campaign to provide information on expanded coverage to all affected residents.

(3) To urge the minister of Health and seniors care to inform all health institutions and providers of expanded coverage for those without health insurance and the details on how necessary policy and protocol changes will be implemented.

(4) To urge the minister of Health and seniors care to create and enforce strict confidentiality policies and provide staff with training to protect the safety of residents with precarious immigration status and ensure they can access health care without jeopardizing their ability to remain in Canada.

And this has been signed by many, many fine Manitobans.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Grievances?

ORDERS OF THE DAY

GOVERNMENT BUSINESS

Hon. Kelvin Goertzen (Government House Leader): Could you please resolve into Committee of Supply.

Madam Speaker: It has been announced that the House will consider Estimates this afternoon. This House will now resolve into Committee of Supply.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, please take the Chair.

COMMITTEE OF SUPPLY (Concurrent Sections)

ROOM 254

MENTAL HEALTH AND COMMUNITY WELLNESS

* (14:50)

Mr. Chairperson (Dennis Smook): 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 Mental Health and Community Wellness.

Does the honourable minister have an opening statement?

Hon. Janice Morley-Lecomte (Minister of Mental Health and Community Wellness): I do.

Mr. Chairperson: The honourable Minister of Mental Health and Community Wellness.

Ms. Morley-Lecomte: On behalf of the Department of Mental Health and Community Wellness, I am pleased to present the financial Estimates for the 2023-24 fiscal year.

In doing so, I commit to making Mental Health and Community Wellness an effective and results-oriented department that will respond rapidly and effectively to the evolving mental health and wellness landscape in our province.

We will continue to implement our five-year road map, A Pathway to Mental Health and Community Wellness: A Roadmap for Manitoba, launched in 2021-22, and will continue to lead a whole-of-government approach to invest in core services and supports focused on improving co-ordination and accessibility of our mental health, addictions and wellness system.

The proposed 2023-24 budget in core reflects an expenditure of \$439.3 million and 75.2 staff-years full-time, an increase of \$35.9 million from the restated 2022-23 budget, or an 8.9 per cent increase.

In terms of summary, the 2023-24 Mental Health and Community Wellness summary budget is set at \$439.3 million. This year's budget includes funding across a number of areas to improve access to mental health, addictions and wellness initiatives for Manitobans.

A couple of examples include \$17.3 million in funding to support year 2 of the five-year road map in the following areas: funding for more mental health and addictions services for Manitobans; improved system access; chronic disease prevention initiatives; additional investments of \$6.9 million in ongoing funding and \$2.5 million in one-time funding to support the expansion of new treatment spaces, as committed to in November's Speech from the Throne—this will ensure all Manitobans accessing addictions treatment receive high-quality, safe and effective care in pursuit of recovery; \$3.9 million in funding for medical remuneration increases for psychiatry service

supports for both fee-for-service and alternative funding; \$1.5 million in funding for ongoing support for the Child Nutrition Council of Manitoba to address increased food costs and demand for additional child nutrition services after expiration of the Home Nutrition and Learning Program.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to say a few words on this year's Estimates. In closing, I would also like to thank those many public servants involved in the policy, planning, funding and oversight-related decision making for the proposed budget.

I would now be happy to answer any questions you may have.

Mr. Chairperson: We thank the minister for those comments.

Does the critic from the official opposition have an opening statement?

Mrs. Bernadette Smith (Point Douglas): Good afternoon, and I want to welcome the minister to her new role, and I look forward to working collaboratively for the betterment of Manitobans, especially in the area of addictions as well as mental health.

We know that there are a lot of people—there's an increase in deaths in our province, and, you know, recovery is one thing, but actually getting people to that stage is another. We know that there is increased need for more resources in our community. You know, we've heard from RAAM clinic staff that they're underresourced. They're turning folks away daily, which means someone that may leave their clinic could leave there and ultimately die, and it's tying the hands of many staff.

We've recently, you know, heard from a number of organizations calling on this government to open a safe consumption site to support the work that they're doing in harm reduction, which also includes a safe consumption site.

We know that, over the past four years, the number of fatal overdoses have skyrocketed with over 400 people losing their lives last year alone. Those are somebody's loved ones. That included one of my family members. My brother-in-law succumbed to his addiction. He was in treatment three or four times. His mother has spoken out about it greatly, but often when you leave these centres that there's no wraparound services for folks, which means it leaves them, you know, at a vulnerable state to go back to their addiction without having the proper supports.

So, you know, I really would like the minister to look at something like that in terms of if they're looking at recovery, that recovery also includes wraparound supports when people leave recovery centres. Because relapse is, you know, a reality for folks, and we know that addiction isn't something that ever goes away, that people struggle with that day to day.

There's a crisis that needs urgent attention, and this government is not treating it accordingly, and Manitobans need this government to come up to the plate and actually start addressing this as a health issue.

The lengths they've gone to, you know, to keep their loved ones safe and to keep them, you know, alive; families are doing their part. But they need this government to do their part.

We're hearing a lot from schools that have had to cut social work positions, which means, you know, kids aren't getting the mental health supports that they need. This is the wrong direction. We need this government to be supporting mental health initiatives in schools and First Nations. We've seen an increase in suicides.

You know, there's lots of work to do and I look forward to, you know, hearing the member answer the question—or the minister answer the questions—and I look forward to maybe working together—hopefully working together—to address some of these barriers that people are facing, especially our children. They're our next generation and we have to ensure that we're investing in them and making sure that the resources are there when they need them in helping to keep people alive.

And recovery is not the only way to keep people alive. It's making sure that people get connected to the services that they need to get to recovery. That includes health care. You know, if someone goes into a safe consumption site—and I'm not sure if the minister has visited any safe consumption site in Canada—I would encourage the minister to go and visit some of those sites, because you'll hear from, first-hand, front-line workers, many of whom were in those positions that now have become nurses, have become mentors, have become health-care providers because of the help that they received through those safe consumption sites.

It's saving lives. Nobody has ever died in those safe consumption sites. It's also connecting people to primary-care health providers, which we know that there's an increase in blood-borne diseases in our province and we need to start making sure that those are decreasing.

We know that there's a symbiotic relationship between syphilis and HIV. Those numbers are increasing in our province and we have a duty as a government. And I'm hoping that this minister will, you know, hear what front-line workers are saying and actually take some of those to heart and start doing some work around them.

* (15:00)

And I get that there's been investments, but when people are continuing to die and people are continuing to struggle with mental health issues, then that means that we need to make more investments to make sure that people live in this province and that our kids have the access to mental health supports that they need, as well as adults.

Miigwech.

Mr. Chairperson: We thank the member for those comments.

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 24.1(a), contained in resolution 24.1.

At this time, we invite the minister's staff to join us at the table and we ask that the minister introduce the staff in attendance.

Ms. Morley-Lecomte: I have with me today Kym Kaufmann, the deputy minister for Mental Health and Community Wellness; Sandra Henault, the assistant deputy minister and executive financial officer; Maria Contreo [*phonetic*—I hope I say that correctly—senior adviser to the deputy minister; and Laura Guttormson, special assistant to the minister.

Mr. Chairperson: Thank you, Minister.

According to our rule 78(16), during the consideration of departmental Estimates, questioning for each department so—shall proceed in a global manner, with questions put separately on all resolutions once the official opposition critic indicates that questioning has concluded.

The floor is now open for questions.

Mrs. Smith: Can the minister tell us how many overdose deaths there were in Manitoba in 2022, which—and which drugs were the leading cause of the overdoses?

So these are actual numbers that I'm asking for, not preliminary numbers. I know the minister has said on record many times that they're on the website,

but those aren't definitive numbers from medical examiner. So, if you could provide those?

Ms. Morley-Lecomte: I'd like to thank the member for that question. So I'm going to try to break it down and answer it for what we have.

So for the 2022—the numbers that we know for sure, Q1 is 78 overdose deaths. The number of individuals who have been put—for the preliminary number are at 418, which is a reduction from 2021, which was at 432. We know that there may be a couple of more numbers added to that, we're not sure, but we'll wait for the final report to come out.

Justice would most likely be the best place to go for the substance type, but when we're looking at the majority of deaths, we are looking at stimulants and opioids, and the leading cause for substance harm is still alcohol-related.

Mrs. Smith: So can the minister just clarify why I would have to go to Justice to find out why—what drugs people were overdosing on? And also, could the minister answer how many overdoses there were in 2022; so not deaths but overall overdoses, including people who succumbed to their overdose?

Ms. Morley-Lecomte: So, Justice would be the department that you would be referred to because the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner is under Justice, and he oversees all of the toxicology reports.

As for the second question, the number of individuals reported having had an overdose but not possibly dying, the total number: for Q1 it is 1,154; for Q2 it's 1,248; and for the third quarter it's 1,193.

* (15:10)

Mrs. Smith: I thank the minister for those answers.

The minister referenced alcohol in the first question; that was one of the leading causes of death.

I asked about overdose deaths, so alcohol is included in those numbers, just to clarify?

Ms. Morley-Lecomte: Just to clarify, I stated alcohol was one of the 'leading'—leading causes of hospitalization.

And yes, it is included in the calculations for overdose, but not deaths, sorry.

Mrs. Smith: Okay, I thank you for that clarification.

The second part of my question, the minister didn't answer. So, the overdose death number that she provided, can she also provide a breakdown of what drugs were the leading cause for the overdoses?

Ms. Morley-Lecomte: The Department of Justice oversees the Chief Medical Examiner who would be the expert on this, so I would suggest that the member ask the Department of Justice for the leading causes so that the person in charge—the expert would be able to give her that information.

Mrs. Smith: It's the department of—it's your department that releases the numbers though, that is on the website that I'm looking at right now, so I don't understand why I have to go to Justice to get those numbers if it's your department who releases them and it's not the Justice Department.

And I'm sure the minister has those numbers, or could get those actual numbers of what contributing factors those drugs were—led to overdose deaths, but also led to overdoses, so I'm wondering if the minister can undertake that and provide that, maybe tomorrow, or at a later date.

But, you know, going to Justice for these numbers when it's under addictions doesn't make sense, and I think the public would agree with that, and all of the front-line workers. Like, why would they have to go to Justice to get those numbers when it's mental health and addictions has their own department?

Ms. Morley-Lecomte: To answer the member's question: fentanyl, methamphetamine and cocaine were the most common causes of overdose deaths in Manitoba.

Mrs. Smith: I thank the minister for those answers.

Could the minister provide data for 2023 overdoses, as well as how many overdoses, how many resulted in death and what were the leading drugs?

Ms. Morley-Lecomte: That information usually is not released until the Chief Medical Examiner releases it and, as of to date, we don't have that information, so I wouldn't want to misinform.

Mrs. Smith: So, that's a good segue into my next question.

The Office of the Chief Medical Examiner used to provide updated overdose numbers until March of this year.

Can the minister explain, did she direct the Chief Medical Examiner to stop releasing overdose numbers?

Ms. Morley-Lecomte: To answer that question, no. I have not had contact with the Chief Medical Examiner's office nor have I directed him to not put—but what he has done is put preliminary numbers on his website, and he's not giving numbers out to individuals who phone his office. Everyone has to go

onto the website, so everybody within the public system can see the numbers at the same time.

Mrs. Smith: Miigwech.

So, I've been in contact with Moms Stop the Harm overdose awareness group, as well, that used to work closely with the Chief Medical Examiner, in order to get those numbers to let the public know about the toxic drugs that are out there.

They're telling us that the medical examiner is telling us—telling them that they now have to go through the government to get those numbers, where that didn't exist prior to March.

Would the minister agree that there's no harm in the medical examiner releasing those numbers to those groups that are making the public aware of what toxic drug supply is out there, as well as the amount of people that are losing their life due to this toxic drug supply?

Ms. Morley-Lecomte: So, the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner will provide that data on a broad basis, so that everyone is able to see the information. This is proactive. It's for the public to see at the same time. That way, everyone is able to access the information.

* (15:20)

And to go back to one of your previous questions, in 2023, the first quarter, the number of overdose events, as reported by the fire and paramedics, were 476.

Mrs. Smith: So, I just want to go back to that question. The minister has cited many times that they don't have access to the numbers, that it has to go through Justice. It is the department of addictions, so I just—I'm not fully understanding why the Department of Justice would have to give those numbers to the addictions minister when that is the minister's portfolio.

And to adequately respond to what's going on out there and make sure that the supports are there, that the—Manitobans know about the toxic drug supply, that they know how many Manitobans are losing their lives as well as how many people are overdosing. I think the City has done, you know, a great job in terms of providing those numbers, but we have a Province who is not doing their job in providing those numbers. And we need to be leaders in this to ensure that these numbers are decreasing.

Like, you've given me a preliminary number. We don't even know if that is the accurate number yet, because you said it's a preliminary number and you are waiting from the numbers from the Chief Medical

Examiner to go to Justice, and then for Justice to look at those and then that to be sent to you. Like, that is a lot of red tape and, you know, we need to eliminate that. These are people's lives that we're talking about.

So, again, I'll ask the minister: Why is this red tape in front? Why is it having to go through Justice? And why doesn't the minister have up-to-date numbers, and why aren't those being accurately reported to the public?

Ms. Morley-Lecomte: So, the office of the medical examiner is under Justice, and as the chief coroner for the province, he reports on all deaths—so he's the centralized person for all the deaths in the province. So that is why we would have to go to him for any of the overdose deaths or any death of any kind for our department. So, as a whole of government, that would be where everybody would go.

Service information from other resources are also utilized so that we can get other information when it comes to substance-related harms and trends that are going on currently.

Mrs. Smith: So, I hear what the minister's saying. I still don't understand the process. There's still lots of red tape. The minister should be able to go to the Chief Medical Examiner about her own file that relates to addictions and addiction overdoses and to find out what drugs people are overdosing on.

So I'll ask the minister: Is the minister aware if anyone in her department or the Justice Department directed the medical examiner—Chief Medical Examiner not to give any information to any of these groups—whether it's Overdose Awareness, Moms Stop the Harm—about the overdoses that are happening in our province and—as well as the drugs that they're overdosing on?

Ms. Morley-Lecomte: Okay, so this is going to answer a few of the points that the member opposite has brought up.

So, under the Manitoba Fatality Inquiries Act, the Chief Medical Examiner is the—has the responsibility for the investigation of all unexpected and violent deaths occurring in the province, so that's why it falls under Justice.

As per the—directed to the Chief Medical Examiner to—I—no. There's no to that.

And then have access to information for—from the Chief Medical Examiner. If I'm needing to access information, I am able to access it. So, it's not that it's not available to me. It's publicly put on his website

when he's—when puts it on; I guess when he gets the numbers.

Mrs. Smith: So, just to be clear, so the minister has to wait until those numbers are published before they have access to those numbers? Or they have to go through Justice otherwise?

Ms. Morley-Lecomte: Sorry, can the member clarify what she is asking?

Mrs. Smith: So [*inaudible*] had said that they have access to the numbers, but they have to access through it—through the website.

So I'm asking the minister whether they have to wait until those are published on the website before they have access to those numbers and the drugs that—the toxic supply that people are overdosing on? Or do they go through the Justice Department? So, could they have clear access to the medical examiner to get those numbers, or do they have to wait 'til it's published on the website or go through the Justice?

Ms. Morley-Lecomte: Okay, thank you.

So, the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner will inform the department prior to the release of any public numbers what the numbers are for that period prior to their releasing it. So, if it's Q1, it's Q1, but these would be the preliminary numbers.

* (15:30)

Mrs. Smith: So, I'll ask that question again.

So, I know that you said that you have to wait for those preliminary numbers, but what I'm asking the minister is, does the minister have access to those numbers before they are published, or do they have to go through Justice to get those numbers?

And if they have to go through Justice or they have to wait to see it on a website, how are they able to adequately get in front of what's happening in the community and, you know, give timely data to front-line organizations that rely on this data?

Ms. Morley-Lecomte: Okay, so I'm going to hopefully be able to answer the question through this explanation.

So, the information that the Chief Medical Examiner provides, we have access to prior to it being published. He is the only individual within the legislation, within the province, who can provide those numbers. So we have to wait for him to give us that—those numbers.

We also have other resources that we look to when we're looking at, the trends or the causes of, like, individuals who are accessing different drugs. So he

is one of many that we utilize, but he is the only one with the authority to give those numbers.

Mrs. Smith: Okay, I'm hoping that the minister has access to those numbers and doesn't have to wait 'til that—'til they are on a website or go through Justice because it is in—within your portfolio, and you should be able to access those numbers and not have all that red tape. And if the minister does have that red tape, I hope the minister clears that red tape because, again, we're talking about people's lives here in Manitoba.

Can the minister tell us how often the medical examiner provides those numbers? Like, is it monthly? Is it quarterly?

Ms. Morley-Lecomte: Okay, just think I need to clarify.

The numbers that we have from the chief medical, I have access to. So, we are able to access numbers from the Chief Medical Examiner. There is no red tape; we're able to access them when we need them, so we can rely on the professional to assist us with it.

When it comes to the policy, you would be better to go to the Department of Justice and ask them the question with reference to how the legislation is set up with the chief medical.

Mrs. Smith: Okay, I'm happy to hear that, because the minister did refer me to Justice to get those numbers, so that's why I kept clarifying whether the minister actually had access to those numbers. So I'm glad to hear that.

I don't know why the minister would direct me to Justice if they have those numbers. And we are in addictions and mental health, you know, Estimates here and it is questions around that overdose reporting. So—and I did ask how often those numbers are provided, so whether they're monthly or whether they're quarterly, from the Chief Medical Examiner to—whether it's Justice or mental health and addictions.

Ms. Morley-Lecomte: Okay. So, the numbers provided from the Chief Medical Examiner's office are provided monthly, but the numbers are dependent upon a few conditions. They're dependent upon autopsy, toxicology, and if family members have been notified. So the numbers can change, depending on some of those.

Mrs. Smith: Front-line organizations rely on timely data. I just heard the minister say that they're given those numbers monthly.

I'm wondering why the minister's office is not reporting on those numbers monthly. We are the only province in all of Canada that doesn't even report numbers, and other provinces are reporting monthly. And this is information that front-line organizations rely on to keep, you know, the folks alive that they're working on.

They also rely on that data to inform people in the community of the toxic drug supply that's out there. I've seen a number of media releases from the Winnipeg police letting the public know about the toxic drug supply.

We, as a province, as a—and you, as a government, as a minister, you know, have a responsibility to let the public know about that.

So can the minister tell us why this isn't—why we're not getting timely data when they're receiving that data monthly, and why isn't it being reported on the Canadian website?

* (15:40)

Ms. Morley-Lecomte: So, if the member opposite would go to the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner's website, there is monthly reporting of all of the data that she's looking for, up to as current as they have.

So that information is there. And if they go to the website under the Mental Health and Community Wellness, the website also has the numbers of overdose, substance-related omissions, fatalities, naloxone; it's all broken down, even by gender. So she'd be able to find all of that information.

Mrs. Smith: So can the minister tell us why that data isn't released to the public, and why we are the only province in all of Canada that doesn't publish on the Public Health Agency of Canada?

Ms. Morley-Lecomte: Okay, so if the member were to go to the Public Health Agency of Canada, she would see that we do report to that site. And if she were to take a look at the site, you would see that there is up-to-date on the hospitalization and emergency room services for Manitoba.

Mrs. Smith: I would ask the minister to actually go on that website and look at it. We are blank in that department; we've never reported as a Province on there. So if you go onto that Public Health Agency of Canada, we're right in the middle, and it's got a big circle that has nothing in it. There's no number for Manitoba.

So I would ask the minister, if the minister receives data monthly—*[interjection]*—I'm still recognized—the minister receives data monthly from the Chief Medical Examiner, why is there a lag in the numbers coming out?

The minister gave me the first quarter. We should be reporting monthly. Why are we not reporting monthly when the minister is receiving those numbers monthly—on the website?

Ms. Morley-Lecomte: So if the member were to go back to that website and scroll through, she would see that the data is in there. The data has been put on there every year, up to 2022—the updated. And we don't put or report anything that's not been audited on the website, because it could be subject to a lot of change.

So, if you're looking at the quarterly, the quarterly would be—what we would put, that would be the accurate information.

Mrs. Smith: I just went onto the government website, and there's no monthly reporting. There's quarterly reporting, and it's from last year. There's nothing for 2023.

The minister did say that they receive monthly reports from the medical examiner's office. The Office of the Chief Medical Examiner says that there's no lag in toxicology reports, and the Province themselves have said that they choose not to submit the data.

Why is the minister choosing not to submit up-to-date data?

* (15:50)

Ms. Morley-Lecomte: So, just to clarify some of what's being said. So, the monthly reports are internal and they're with preliminary numbers.

The reports going to the Public Health Agency of Canada are quarterly and those take about three to four months to have the toxicology reports come back, so we can't do the preliminary numbers monthly until the toxicology is in place. So then that's the three- or four-month wait time for those numbers to go out.

So the preliminary numbers monthly on the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner are preliminary. The public health ones are not preliminary, but they also wait for toxicology to come back to put them on.

Mrs. Smith: I am just going to clarify, here. I did cite that the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner said that there's no lag in toxicology reports.

So I think what the minister is trying to say—that maybe autopsy reports are slowing that down, which

I could, you know, agree with, but because there's not enough resources and people are having to wait up to a year, we've had several complaints from community members in regard to autopsy reports.

But when it comes to toxicology and identifying the drug that people are overdosing on and losing their lives on, there's no lag in that.

So I don't understand, the public doesn't understand, the front-line organizations that are, you know, doing harm reduction work with folks, trying to help keep them alive, as well as the family members who have lost loved ones, and those are—that are trying to keep their loved ones alive, don't understand why these numbers are being kept from the public and why the drug—the toxic drug supply in which they are overdosing on is also being kept from the public.

So when the minister says that they're reporting quarterly because there's a lag, because they have to wait for reports from the Chief Medical Examiner, the Chief Medical Examiner said themselves that there is no lag in toxicology reports.

They do a toxicology; they test the system for drugs and see if that was an indicator of an overdose. My father himself died of a cocaine overdose, so I know exactly what a toxicology report looks like. It tells you what was the leading cause of death, and we got that within 30 days.

So I'm just putting that out there. But I want to ask the minister if they'll commit to releasing up-to-date 2023 data before the next election—overdose death data, before the election?

* (16:00)

Ms. Morley-Lecomte: So, I just want to correct something. So there are no delays with the chief medical officer's office because the process tends to take three to four months to determine toxicology. For certain individuals, depending upon the incident, they may let family members know, but that wouldn't be the accurate data that they would be coming up with for the numbers for a month. They'd have to wait for the toxicology report. So in their process, they're not delayed. Their process is on time.

When it comes to the process of how they go about getting all these numbers, I would have to redirect you—or, sorry, the member back to the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner through his policy process. How he does that would be under his department, not mine.

And I don't have the authority under the act to release numbers from the office of the chief medical; that is his office that releases them. I can't force them.

So, process is three to four months. He is not behind; he is going within his process timeline. There may be the independent ones, but those would be specific to certain families.

Mrs. Smith: So, I'll move on, but I'm going to come back to that probably tomorrow. So I'd like the minister to undertake some of the questions that I asked, as well as look at those websites for themselves, because you've referenced that those numbers are on the website. They're not, so you should be aware of that.

The other thing is, so if it's not a delay in the Chief Medical Examiner, then what you're saying is it's a delay in your department in releasing those numbers because they're releasing them to you, then you're not releasing them to the public. So, it's not the Chief Medical Examiner's job to put them on the website, the government website, which is a bill that I brought forward asking the government to put, in a timely manner, on the website how many overdoses as well as the drugs that the people are overdosing on.

So, the Chief Medical Examiner can't do that. It's up to the government to do that. You get the numbers, you put them on; he can release them through his office.

But anyway, I'll move on from there.

So, I want to talk a bit about the VIRGO report and what the VIRGO report referenced in terms of safe consumption sites. I'll ask the minister whether she believes the experts when they say that safe consumption sites save lives.

Ms. Morley-Lecomte: Okay, so I just want to clarify that the authority is given to the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner under the fatalities act to release the information. It is not dependent on us. Information we get prior to it going out to the public we have and we will put—once the office has given us the information, we'll put it on our website. So we're not withholding anything. We're putting it when we're getting it, and we can't put it before they do.

And any other questions, I guess, related to the chief, you need to redirect back to Justice because that's under the Justice Department.

Mrs. Smith: So, the minister earlier said that they received monthly data from the Chief Medical Examiner, so I'm, like, totally—I'm lost here, because if you get monthly data from the Chief Medical

Examiner and they release it to you and you're not releasing it to the public and to community organizations that are on the front lines to adequately do their work and to adequately let the public know about what toxic drug supply is out there, I'm confused whether, you know, who's holding it up?

So you're saying the Chief Medical Examiner is taking up to three months to give you these numbers, which is holding your department up to release these numbers, or is it the Chief Medical Examiner is holding the numbers up and giving them to you so that you can't release them?

I hear what you say, that they released—they put them on a website, but the Chief Medical Examiner says there is no lag in toxicology reports. They're taking up to 30 days to release. You're getting preliminary numbers, and that's what your data is from 2022. We have no data for 2023 yet.

We're now into June, so that's how many months? We don't even have a quarterly report. You just provided that number to me, but the public has no idea what those numbers are. Front-line organizations have no clue what those numbers are, so how are they to adequately do their job?

And then the third thing is the Chief Medical Examiner was directed by—I don't know if it was your department, or the Justice Department—but somebody directed the Chief Medical Examiner not to speak to anybody outside of government.

He is now being directed to tell folks that go and try to access those numbers to go to the government for those numbers. So, if it's the Chief Medical Examiner that has those numbers, why isn't the public having access to them, and why is the government silencing the Chief Medical Examiner from giving those numbers out to the public and to front-line organizations?

And why is your government silent on those numbers? We're now into June. The public should know about those numbers. Front-line organizations should know about those numbers. Families that are fighting to keep their loved ones alive should know about those numbers, and certainly people who are thinking about doing drugs should know about the toxic drug supply that's out there.

And it's disheartening for me to sit here and continue to hear the minister say that it's taking up to 90 days; we're not getting any reports. But then earlier the minister said that we're getting monthly reports and then they're saying that we have to go through

Justice because the Chief Medical Examiner is under Justice.

I'm just really getting a little bit frustrated here and I'm kind of paraphrasing and kind of summarizing everything because our Health critic is here now and I just want them to also hear, because there is—we do a lot of work together and we work with a lot of the same front-line organizations.

So, again, if the member can reiterate some of that information, because I didn't get any answers from those questions that I asked. And you referenced—you went to the Chief Medical Examiner's website and you actually read directly from there. I can do that.

You also referenced going to your website and said that there were monthly numbers, which there is not, and then you also said that you report to Public Health Agency of Canada, but how many months after the whole year is that number being reported? We're the only province that isn't giving monthly updates, we're the only province that doesn't report monthly, and we're the only province that isn't working collaboratively with front-line organizations to ensure that they have the services and supports that they need to save lives.

Mr. Chairperson: Excuse me. Before we continue on, I'd just like to remind the member to go through the Chair, you know, directly, instead of going directly to the minister. Thank you. *[interjection]*

I would just like to remind members, if they need to use the phone, to please go to the back of the room, not at the table, please.

* (16:10)

Ms. Morley-Lecomte: Okay, so there's a lot of accusations, so I'm going to clarify the accusations.

So, there is one data source, and the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner is that data source. And the preliminary numbers are up to date as of December 2022, and the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner posts those numbers.

The department—our department—does not release data. That is not our job, that is the office of the chief medical. And quarterly numbers are on the website, and the public health association of Canada, the provinces report quarterly.

So, when we're looking at the numbers, our department does not release it. Quarterly numbers on the website are audited; they're not preliminary. And the numbers

that are on the December 2022 of the office of the chief medical are preliminary.

I don't know if that cleared it up, but that's clear—answers to what you were stating, which you were misstating.

Mrs. Smith: I just want to clarify that the minister did say that they—that there were up-to-date numbers on their website—so mental health and addiction—community wellness website, that there were reported monthly. They are not.

The minister just said that the numbers are up to December '22. Yes, they are there, but it took how many months for those numbers to get released onto the website?

So when the minister's saying that, you know, they don't release those numbers, that it's not up to their—the government to do that, we are asking—and so are front-line organizations, so are families—that the government takes responsibility and actually releases those numbers and lets the public know what the accurate numbers are monthly or in a timely manner.

If the minister is saying, well, we can't report them every 30 days then make a commitment to report them maybe every 45 days, make a commitment to report on what toxic drug supply is out there so that organizations can do their work and adequately resource themselves and that the adequate resources can be put in place by this government; 2022 numbers, when we're already into, you know, almost the six month—like, halfway mark of the year—is unacceptable, when people are losing their lives?

These are people. These are Manitobans. These are folks struggling with addictions. And having a recovery model doesn't suit those that aren't at that place for recovery.

So, I'll ask the minister again—and I cited the VIRGO report, in which a safe consumption site was referenced. So, I'll ask the minister: Does the minister agree with experts on the fact that supervised consumption sites save lives?

Ms. Morley-Lecomte: Okay, so, we know recovery is possible for all Manitobans, and we know that our government is committed a recovery-oriented system of care.

That is why we believe in investing in the supports to put them in place for individuals who are seeking these services so that they are available to them. It's why, since 2019, we have invested in more than 47 different initiatives, over \$62 million, to assist

individuals with access to RAAM clinics, clean supply, naloxone, supports, counselling, resources.

Mrs. Smith: So, my question to the minister was, does the minister agree with experts on the fact that a safe consumption site saves lives? And I'll ask again.

Ms. Morley-Lecomte: So, the recovery-oriented system of care is based on evidence, and my opinion of recovery is mine; it's of no relevance.

Mrs. Smith: You know, I'm kind of at a loss here because, you know, this government believes in a recovery-based model. And they say that they believe in harm reduction, and safe consumption sites have proven to save lives.

And I talked—I said to the minister earlier that I encourage them to actually go and visit a safe consumption site, to actually talk to front-line workers who, every day, are heroes who are saving lives. And it is a responsibility of this government to actually look at best practices across other jurisdictions and to do everything that they can do to help save lives. And this has been proven to save lives.

* (16:20)

So, I'll ask the minister: Will the government open a safe consumption site before the 2023 election? If not, why not?

Ms. Morley-Lecomte: So, the Stanford-Lancet Commission's report from 2022 stated research on supervised consumption sites is 'methodologically' weak. There is no evidence that assessing a site lowers an individual's risk of fatal overdose over time, or that sites lower community overdose rates.

Rigorous research on supervised consumption sites is necessary.

Mrs. Smith: I see the minister has looked for cons. Has the minister also looked at pros? Like, looked at expert advice from across Canada and beyond?

You know, you have a Premier (Mrs. Stefanson) who misled Manitobans when they claimed that a supervised consumption site failed in California, despite the fact that there is no safe consumption site in California.

So, I'll ask the minister: Does she agree with her Premier, and does—has the minister looked at any other expert advice on safe consumption sites, other than why not to open one?

Ms. Morley-Lecomte: So, I just want to refer back to your opening comments. Contrary to what you said,

that there have been no deaths, there have been deaths reported in a supervised consumption site.

And have we consulted? Absolutely. We've consulted with experts from other jurisdictions and we've seriously considered benefits and risks before making any changes to our policy. And it's for these reasons that we have maximized benefits and risks before making any of the policy changes.

Mr. Chairperson: Before I recognize the member, we should—I—things have been going very good here but I'd just like to remind everybody about going through the Chair and, you know, things are nice and calm, so I'd like to keep them that way.

Mrs. Smith: So, you know, the—in the fall, the minister's predecessor stated that her continued opposition to safe consumption sites was reinforced by tours of Vancouver's site.

However, BC officials corrected the record, saying that the minister never actually toured Vancouver's sites.

Does the minister think her predecessor misled Manitobans by claiming that she toured a safe consumption site in Vancouver when she—when the fact is she never did?

Ms. Morley-Lecomte: I can't speak to what another individual or member does, but I am here to speak to the budget, if you would like to ask questions about the budget.

Mrs. Smith: Well, the minister did reference that they have done extensive research, and I would think that, you know, the minister's predecessor misleading Manitobans in, you know, visiting a safe consumption site versus, you know, walking by and taking pictures of people who are struggling.

You know, that's very disrespectful, for one; (2) you know, looking at, again, through a biased lens at people who are struggling versus actually going into a safe consumption site—and I've—encourage the minister again to go and visit one of these sites because, again, these sites are staffed by people who provide primary health care, so they connect people who may have not ever seen a doctor in their life, who may have infected veins, who may be infected with HIV and possibly spreading that, or a blood-borne disease through unsafe, you know, use.

People go to these sites to access safe supply, and we've had over 400 deaths here in Manitoba. And when the minister references, you know, that people

are dying and that there have been deaths in safe consumption sites: 416 Manitobans have lost their lives here.

And even more are being infected every day with an STBBI. Syphilis is on the rise, congenital syphilis is on the rise, HIV is on the rise. People are getting infections. They are not being medically treated. They are going to RAAM clinics and being turned away. They're being told to make an appointment.

When somebody wants to go into treatment or recovery, as this government is taking that stance, and I know, when I visited Alberta, you know, they also have, you know, a Conservative government over there, they have been closing safe consumption sites in their province, which has led to a rise in deaths; which has led to a rise in STBBIs. Risky, risky, risky.

When you're looking at the amount of money it costs to support someone with HIV—and my colleague here, the member from Union Station—it's over \$1 million, they shared with me, for one person. One person.

So when we're looking at the amount of people who are using drugs unsafely and not having access to the services and resources of a safe consumption site where they can use clean needles, where they can use it in a safe place, where they can learn to actually use it in a safe way where they're not getting infections in their veins, where they can actually connect with someone to look at recovery, where they can actually connect with someone to maybe get in to see a counsellor about some trauma that they've dealt with—and we know that's one of the underlying issues why people are using—why would we not invest in those sites?

* (16:30)

Why do we continue—or why does this government continue to look at why we should not invest in safe consumption sites? They've been proven to save lives. There's expert advice—out there. There is data on, you know, the benefits of a safe consumption site and the overall health of the folks that are using those sites.

And I referenced this in my opening statement, that when I was visiting—you know, I went to four different provinces and visited probably about six different safe consumption sites. And went inside these sites, actually spoke to the folks who were using, spoke to the front-line workers that were there.

And, you know, they were so respectful that they introduced me and asked the folks that were in there

using that if it was okay if I was there. So, they didn't just invite me in and say come, watch these people using. They actually explained that I'm from—I'm a politician from another province looking at best practices, is it okay if this person comes in and, you know, speaks with you.

So, it was done in a respectful way. I would never go into somewhere and take pictures or use that for my gain. For me, it was about seeing, hearing and having—how—helping these folks to have voices.

And it was resounding that they were connected with the resources that they needed. And I shared that many of the people that—folks that worked in these sites became nurses, became mentors, became—

Mr. Chairperson: Unfortunately, the member's time has expired. We'll continue on.

Ms. Morley-Lecomte: I'm not sure if there was a question in what you were stating, if you want to put a question.

Thank you.

Mrs. Smith: There was a question in there. I asked why we would not invest in safe consumption sites when we have all of these, you know, resounding benefits that are getting folks connected to the resources that they need, whether it's safe supply; whether it's connecting with a primary health-care provider; whether it's even having hope, listening to other mentors who are working there that actually were users themselves.

Looking at best practices—and again, you know, actually going and listening to these folks and seeing them as human and, you know, not looking through our biased lens, but actually looking at what's best for Manitobans and what's best for helping to save lives.

Because again, you know, we can cite the numbers, but at the end of the day, these are humans. These are people. These are Manitobans. And we do have a duty to look at best practices from not our own lens, but the lens of what's best across different, you know, jurisdictions and what's worked there, and will it work here? And if it won't work here, how do we make it work here?

You know, recovery is—and, you know, this government keeps talking about recovery. I still drive down Main Street every day. You know, that's my constituency. I see people struggling all over.

You come downtown, you see people struggling here. When you leave outside this Legislature when it's winter, there's people in the bus shacks; even in the

summer. Like, these are people that are struggling, these are Manitobans that need our support. And they're using unsafely in bus shacks.

We should be providing the services that they need, and there is a real need for safe consumption sites. Over 80 organizations signed on asking for this government to open up a safe consumption site, to help them do the job that they need to do, that there is a need—and they're on the front lines. They're the ones that are doing the work.

So, why would we not open a safe consumption site here in Manitoba, is my question.

Ms. Morley-Lecomte: So, all of the resources and supports that you cited are not—are there for a site, but they're not always implemented. That's why we introduced the bill, to help ensure that all the services you described are available to individuals who are seeking a supervised consumption site.

So, to follow that up, in April, we also invested \$2.1 million in—sorry—in spending to support the existing emergency mobile crisis support programs in MKO and the Southern Chiefs Organization, which received \$1.06 million to support Indigenous-led and 'cultural' appropriate care in their communities. This was an INIR announcement.

And then on March 14th in 2023, the Manitoba government announced more than \$12 million in initiatives aligned with the Throne Speech commitment to enhance and support up to 1,000 addiction treatment spaces, including nearly \$1 million to support existing community addiction treatment agencies to address fiscal changes, ensure quality service, maximize existing capacity; \$2.64 million to add rural medical withdrawal management spaces in Brandon, Portage and Ashern, which are expected to provide services up to 300 Manitobans annually; and \$8.8 million to secure publicly funded treatment spaces through an expression of interest for qualified addiction services providers to bid on opportunities to implement additional spaces, including bed-based treatment, intensive day programs and supportive recovery housing.

And then on the 28th of February 2023, the whole-of-government one point—or, sorry, \$126-million announcement to address chronic homelessness through strengthening existing services; delivering 24-7 access to shelters; training shelter support workers with critical skills in mental health and addictions, de-escalation techniques and trauma-informed care; funding 700 new

social housing units to be built this year; and increasing the maintenance budget of existing social housing through Families.

Our government opened the RAAM clinics. That is seven clinics, which is seven times the number of clinics that were open under the previous government.

So, we are putting supports in place, we are listening to individuals and we are ensuring that they have places to go to assist with their addictions.

Mrs. Smith: So, the minister referenced all of those, you know, supports, but the numbers are trending in the wrong way, in the wrong direction. More people are dying in the last seven years through addictions than previous years.

Does the minister think that the government is doing enough to address the addictions crisis here in Manitoba?

* (16:40)

Ms. Morley-Lecomte: Okay, so I'm not here to give an opinion; I'm only here to talk about facts.

So, the number's trending down: from 2021 to 2022 there are fewer individuals with overdose than there were in '20-21. We have invested monies into supports so that individuals are able to seek the support where they need, when they need it; withdrawal mobile units, short-term, long-term mobile services, so individuals are able to seek the support in their community.

We are investing, and we are here today to look at what resources we could further implement and put in place, if members opposite would pass our budget.

Mrs. Smith: So, the minister is the minister of this department, and has the authority to, you know, administer the funds in the areas that are needed.

So, does the minister think that their government's 5 per cent increase in mental health and addictions core services and areas of need this year is not enough to meet the demand?

And I'm asking the member as the minister, not as, you know, themselves. They are the head of this department and they could've answered the question, because it was directed: does the minister?

Not my personal hat—you know, you may have your own personal opinions and biases—but I'm not asking as, you know, that member, I'm asking as the Minister of Mental Health and Community Wellness, whether they think their government is doing enough

to address the addiction crisis, and whether a 5 per cent increase in mental health and addiction core services in the area of need this year is enough to meet the demand.

Ms. Morley-Lecomte: So, the increase to the Department of Mental Health and Community Wellness is 8.9 per cent, and that money has gone into the addiction supports and treatment services, which we've made as a priority within this department.

So, in 2022 the Manitoba Mental Health and Community Wellness launched the five-year strategy plan, A Pathway to Mental Health and Community Wellness: A Roadmap for Manitoba, and it focused on improving wellness, mental health, substance use, addiction services and programs throughout the province.

An investment of \$17 million supported the first year of this road map. As part of this road map and the historic investments for the new and continuing initiatives, our government continues to focus on harm reduction and recovery-oriented addiction treatment services.

Since 2019 we've announced more than 52 initiatives at more than \$65 million to improve mental health and wellness.

Mrs. Smith: I just wanted to go back to what the minister said prior to this about, you know, the numbers trending down.

We knew that the number was 408 before the definitive numbers came out in 2022—or 2021. We don't know the definitive numbers for this year yet or for last year—pardon me—because those haven't come out.

Could the minister provide when the definitive numbers are going to come out?

And, just to be clear, like, and I've said this many times, like, regardless if it's one person who's died of an overdose. You know, these are Manitobans; these are people we're talking about, and if it's one Manitoban, 400 Manitobans, like, we have a duty as Manitobans to act.

And I just want to refer the minister to page 20 of the Estimates book that says, performance—under increase equitable access in co-ordination, the performance measures—it says that an increase mental health and addictions core services in areas in need, that the target was 5 per cent and that the target for this year is 5 per cent.

So, are these books not accurate if you're saying that there's been 8.9 per cent increase versus what's in the Estimates book? I'm a little confused here.

* (16:50)

Ms. Morley-Lecomte: Okay, yes, and I would agree with members opposite: one death is one too many, and we can't be playing with human lives as data on a sheet.

But in 2021 the numbers were 432; and in 2022, 418, and then they will be confirmed. So, that is a decrease in the number of individuals who were—who had died from overdose.

With respect to the 5 per cent, that's not a fiscal target. That is a goal to add that much more percentage for supports to the existing supports that we currently have, so individuals are able to access more.

Mrs. Smith: Okay, the minister referenced 1,000 treatment spaces earlier. How does the government define an addiction treatment space?

Ms. Morley-Lecomte: So, the 1,000 treatment spaces will 'include' a variety of services, if the budget passes.

So, it is the number of people that can be served through these. For example, on average, there would be 1.25 spaces for supportive recovering housing units, as the average length of stay is six to 12 months.

As for longer term bed-based treatment, one bed could potentially result in four spaces; an average—as a person stays, on average, in these programs for about three to four months. So, the bed treatment spaces would be determinant upon the individuals accessing the services.

Mrs. Smith: So, just to clarify, these aren't 1,000 new beds. These are, like, 100 people who might access that same bed 10 times or 100 people may go through that bed—okay, hang on a second. I need to wrap my head around this.

So, 100 people—or, 100 folks going and using that bed 10 times would count as 1,000 beds. So, it's not 1,000 new beds.

So, let's look at Morberg House, for instance. Let's say they have 30 spaces: 30 people go through there, and then another 30 come through and another 30 come through. It's not actually 1,000 new beds. It's just 25 new beds, but 1,000 people will go through there. Am I correct? Or, are you understanding what I'm saying?

So, it's not 1,000 new beds. It's treatment spaces for multiple people to use. So it could be 25 spaces and let's say 100 people go through there and it's counted as that many spaces.

Mr. Chairperson: The hour being 5 p.m., committee rise.

ROOM 255

TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE

* (14:50)

Mr. Chairperson (Brad Michaleski): 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 Transportation and Infrastructure. Questioning for this department will proceed in a global manner.

And the floor is now open for questions.

Mr. Ian Bushie (Keewatinook): Welcome back from the constituency break, everybody. Just a couple of questions before we actually wrap up.

I did have some clarification I was looking for in regards to a figure that the minister had put out our last day of sitting when he had spoken about the channels project that we—well, we're—kind of in relation to channels project, but the Indigenous kind of set aside work that would potentially be—put aside any kind of work, and the minister had made mention of the figure of 10 per cent.

And I'm just wondering if, for clarification, the minister could then define what the department's definition of an Indigenous-owned company would be.

Hon. Doyle Piwniuk (Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure): Just for the member for Keewatinook, the question that he had, it's—the minimum of requirement was, like, minimum of 10 per cent.

So that means that it could—it's very broad. It also includes, like, if—not just ownership, but a—say, participation when it comes to employees to—of organizations that will be able to—you know, are working on this project. Especially that close to First Nation communities, that's our policy. And we'll—that's, again, a minimum.

So we're hoping that, when it comes to the \$15 million that are going to be allocated to apply for, for First Nations—it can be one big company, it can be number of companies that will have some—give some

advantage to allow First Nations to compete on some of the bidding process when it comes to the tenders of a major project. With \$600 million, it's a lot of work out there.

And so we're allowing this to—this happen so that there's abilities for them to apply, when it comes to this grant money, to—up to \$15 million, and this will actually allow them to either invest into equipment or equip—invest in training. Whatever they apply for, this is what the amount is for. So we're hoping that that participation could be a lot greater when it comes to the incentive out there.

And I always—when I always talk to First Nation communities, they always say, we want to be partners. We want a hand up, not handouts. And so, this gives an opportunity to have an—a hand up when it comes to building their business opportunities going forward.

This project would be a good example of, you know, when it comes to amount of participation for a First Nation community, this is good experience and good to have on their—part of the projects that they were working on so that they can apply in the future for any other projects. If it's even with provincial governments or if it's federal government or if it's local governments, if it's private sector, they have the experience.

This is what this is—this is basically seed money of—that \$15 million.

Mr. Bushie: I'm just looking for clarification on what the department defines as an Indigenous-owned company.

For example, does a company have to come in having 50 per cent ownership—Indigenous people owning the company versus non-Indigenous people owning company? And what's the percentage of a company to be able to apply for and bid on various work in the department? And what does that percentage of ownership—Indigenous ownership have to be for them to be quantified as Indigenous owned?

Mr. Piwniuk: I—just for the member there, it's not—has—based on—in—ownership. It could part—be part ownership or a broad definition. We'll get—we'll actually get you a—more of a detailed description of the participation of 10 per cent, that would also include employees within a company of 10 per cent participation when it comes to employees.

Again, this is a great opportunity, again, for—when it comes to the channels of \$600 million, gives an opportunity for people to be—there's going to be jobs. There's going to be a lot of contractors who come

there—again, lot of contractors are looking for employees. And the fact is, since they're up there, there's going to be a lot of opportunities for employment for First Nations who want to have some experience working for a company.

Again, minimum 10 per cent participation would include employees in—within a company. The thing is, we're hoping that Indigenous companies will be formed with this \$15-million seed money when it comes to—able to participate in—on the tender process of this channel work.

And, again, there's going to be a lot of work out there. There's \$600 million for clearing to digging to—again, it's this—basically getting equipment, getting human resources to be there, to be employed.

This—again, we were hoping that more participation comes from First Nation companies themselves.

Mr. Bushie: I'm just looking for a confirmation, then.

So, the minister is talking about the—a minimum of 10 per cent, whether it be ownership or whether it be employees.

So, for example, then, if a company of—with an employee base of 10 has one Indigenous person as part of their staff, does that, then, mean they're qualified to be an Indigenous-run organization that could bid on contracts that are set aside for Indigenous communities?

* (15:00)

Mr. Piwniuk: Yes, Mr. Chair, we'll be able to table some procurement when it comes to First Nation participation when it comes to the actual definition of company.

Also, participation within—you're right: when it comes to the amount of employees that are working within, that is the minimum. The opportunity there is that we will be looking at—to, as this project moves forward, opportunities to look at possibly the minimums again and have a different threshold on this.

Again, this is all opportunities; again, that's why we wanted that \$15-million seed money for First Nations to apply for this money. This gives a 'opportunial'—basically what you need is equipment, because a lot of the tenders that we're going to be having is to do—is a lot of moving of earth. And this gives opportunities to—for First Nations to participate.

But we will definitely table the definitions of all the requirements when it comes to First Nations of a minimum of 10 per cent. And, again, we're hoping that

we can have companies out there that will have a hundred per cent participations of—owned by First Nations and employed all First Nations. And this is where the minimum requirement is.

And so we'll get that definition to the member.

Mr. Bushie: Well, I was going to give some time to the independent Liberals, but apparently they're not prepared to do anything here today, so that's the end of the questions for the day.

Mr. Chairperson: Okay, so we're out of questions, and we will move on to resolutions. Okay.

Resolution 15.2: RESOLVED that there be granted to His Majesty a sum not exceeding \$6,929,000 for Transportation and Infrastructure, Infrastructure Capital Projects, for the fiscal year ending March 31st, 2024.

Resolution agreed to.

Resolution 15.3: RESOLVED that there be granted to His Majesty a sum not exceeding \$163,311,000 for Transportation and Infrastructure, Transportation Operations, for the fiscal year ending March 31st, 2024.

Resolution agreed to.

Resolution 15.4: RESOLVED that there be granted to His Majesty a sum not exceeding \$36,327,000 for Transportation and Infrastructure, Engineering and Technical Services, for the fiscal year ending March 31st, 2024.

Resolution agreed to.

Resolution 15.5: RESOLVED that there be granted to His Majesty a sum not exceeding \$10,183,000 for Transportation and Infrastructure, Emergency Management, for the fiscal year ending March 31st, 2024.

Resolution agreed to.

Resolution 15.6: RESOLVED that there be granted to His Majesty a sum not exceeding \$703,389,000 for Transportation and Infrastructure, Capital Assets, for the fiscal year ending March 31st, 2024.

Resolution agreed to.

The last item to be considered for the Estimates of this department is item 15.1(a), the minister's salary, contained in resolution 15.1.

At this point, we say goodbye to the minister's staff—as she leaves the table.

The floor is now open for questions.

Mr. Bushie: I move that line item 15.1(a) be amended so that the Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure's salary be reduced to \$21,000.

Mr. Chairperson: It has been moved by the honourable member for Keewatinook that line item 15.1(a) be amended so that the Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure's salary be reduced to \$21,000.

The motion is in order.

Are there any questions or comments on this motion?

Seeing none, is the committee ready for the question?

An Honourable Member: Question.

Mr. Chairperson: Shall the resolution pass?

Some Honourable Members: Pass.

Some Honourable Members: No.

Mr. Chairperson: I hear a no.

Voice Vote

Mr. Chairperson: All those in favour of the motion, please say aye.

Some Honourable Members: Aye.

Mr. Chairperson: All those opposed to the motion, please say nay.

Some Honourable Members: Nay.

Mr. Chairperson: In my opinion—[*interjection*] Order.

In my opinion, the Nays have it.

The motion is accordingly defeated. [*interjection*]

* * *

Mr. Chairperson: Order.

Resolve—resolution—one final resolution.

Resolution 15.1: RESOLVED that there be granted to His Majesty a sum not exceeding \$12,207,000 for Transportation and Infrastructure, Corporate Services, for the fiscal year ending March 31st, 2024.

Resolution agreed to.

This completes the Estimates of the Department of Transportation and Infrastructure.

The next set of Estimates to be considered by this section of the Committee of Supply is for the Department of Municipal Relations.

Shall we briefly recess to allow the minister and critics the opportunity to prepare for the commencement of the next department? [*Agreed*]

We will briefly recess.

The committee recessed at 3:08 p.m.

The committee resumed at 3:23 p.m.

MUNICIPAL RELATIONS

Mr. Chairperson (Brad Michaleski): 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 Municipal Relations.

Does the honourable minister have an opening statement?

Hon. Andrew Smith (Minister of Municipal Relations): I do.

Mr. Chairperson: The honourable Minister of Municipal Relations.

Mr. Smith: It's—I'm pleased to be able to make a few comments on the '23-24 Estimates and discuss some important initiatives and activities of the Department of Municipal Relations.

Before I begin, I'd also like to recognize the hard work of my department staff and the professional work that they do in collaboration with Manitoba municipalities, the City of Winnipeg, the Association of Manitoba Municipalities, the Association of Manitoba Bilingual Municipalities, planning districts, fire services, mutual aid districts, non-profit and community developmental organizations and our many other clients. I know that this good work has also been recognized by the communities and municipalities that we serve.

We recognize that municipalities and communities across the province are facing significant pressures that impact the ability to deliver important projects and services that Manitobans depend on, and we are taking action.

Our commitments for the coming year affirm our support for municipalities while establishing a strong foundation to grow Manitoba. As we all know, a stronger province starts with stronger communities and supports for affordable, quality services close to home.

Our government has increased funding of the municipal operating basket by 28 per cent. This raises the total value of the unconditional municipal operating grant provided to municipalities from \$170 million up to \$217 million. That is \$47 million more than last year and is the largest increase of the municipal operating grant in a decade.

Every municipality will receive a minimum increase of 24 per cent in operating grant funding when taking into account all funding that will be provided to municipalities in 2023. This will form the base to build from going forward.

The municipal operating grant formula has been simplified and now includes a revised per capita calculation aligned with '21 census data, and a need-based calculation that results in a more even distribution of funding. Smaller municipalities, and municipalities in northern Manitoba, are also now guaranteed a new base grant of \$25,000 to reflect relatively higher proportional funding challenges experienced.

This significant funding will become a permanent part of the unconditional operating base in future years, and we look forward to working with our partners to modernize the funding formula to support the unique needs of municipalities now and well into the future.

Our government has committed to a \$23.4-million increase to the strategic infrastructure basket, raising the total amount from \$137 million to \$160.4 million; that is a 17 per cent increase, providing an additional \$23.4 million in 2023. This increase is in direct response to the continued economic pressure facing municipalities and impacting the completion of critical infrastructure projects.

The increase means the City of Winnipeg will be receiving \$89.8 million to strategic infrastructure funding in 2023, up from \$75.3 million, while other municipalities outside of Winnipeg will receive \$70.6 million in 2023, which is up from \$61.7 million. We have also allocated an additional \$13.4 million in one-time supports for Manitoba's five public transit communities to address operating shortfalls created during the pandemic.

Prioritizing our vision of building vibrant, thriving communities where people choose to live, we will maintain expanded funding support of up to \$25 million for the Building Sustainable Communities program. This provided for up to—it has also provided for up to \$9 million, the urban and home-grown—hometown green program, as a further extension of the doubling of this program to support pandemic recovery.

In fact, on April 27th of 2023, the Province announced that it's approved more than \$9.6 million in Urban and Hometown Green Team programs' grants to support 744 youth employment projects across the province; 2,500 youth are expected to be hired this summer.

Our government knows how important these program grants are to municipalities and how Green Team is vital to the importance to continue to support youth employment projects across the province. This year, we also continue to prioritize support for local efforts to strengthen downtown redevelopment and reinvestment.

Budget 2023 provides for four additional staff of the Office of the Fire Commissioner to ensure effective and efficient co-ordination of core emergency response programs, while maintaining a high standard of accredited training and education delivered by the Manitoba Emergency Services College and Manitoba fire service, and other emergency services.

Manitoba also remains committed to ensure strong, local fire-protection services are maintained, with the continuation of two Manitoba fire service grant programs totalling up to \$360,000 to improve access to training through reduction of financial barriers, and enhances the ability of community fire services to train closer to home.

When it comes to community planning, many of us know that effective and efficient land use and planning regulations can help boost economic competitiveness and promote sustainable growth among municipalities. After two years of consultation with stakeholders, the Capital Planning Region—or CPR—regulation has come into effect on January 1st of 2023. This builds on the legacy and history of municipal co-operation under the Winnipeg Metropolitan Region.

Not only will the renewed version of the Winnipeg Metropolitan Region enhance economic and social development and harness regional opportunities, but it will also improve pathways for investment and economic growth and put the region on the map as a great place to live, work and play.

Our government is dedicated to supporting municipalities across our province, and Municipal Relations and our government will continue to help build stronger communities through ongoing education and support for local elected officials, by providing funding to build and strengthen municipalities and by investing in programs that enrich the lives of all Manitobans.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Chairperson: We thank the minister for those comments.

Does the critic for the official opposition have an opening statement?

Ms. Lisa Naylor (Wolseley): Hello to the minister.

* (15:30)

I'm pleased to have this opportunity, as critic on Municipal Relations, to question the minister also on his first time up in Estimates in this role. I trust he's had enough time to familiarize himself with the department and will be able to speak accurately to the details of his department and its budget.

And I'm looking forward to learning more about the minister's thoughts on the Manitoba Municipal Board, how it's functioning, how long it's taking for permitting and the impact of the far-reaching powers of the board. We know that municipalities have opposed and continue to oppose the board, so I'll be interested in hearing how the minister is responding to this.

I'll be asking the minister to explain his government's six-year funding freeze to municipalities, and I look forward to learning more about the government position on the illegal goings-on with the building of the police headquarters.

The minister will have a chance to explain why they—why his party seems to be protecting criminals rather than calling for a public inquiry, as the City of Winnipeg has requested the Province to do.

And I'll also ask questions about infrastructure funding for water and roads. Municipalities are the heartbeat of our province. People live, work, play and raise their families in the cities, towns and rural communities across Manitoba, as municipalities struggle with increased costs—costs that have doubled, tripled, quadrupled, in some cases much more, during the six-year funding freeze.

This government has not been showing up for municipalities. Thawing a freeze in an election year is an obvious ploy, but also doesn't go far enough to help municipalities catch up. Having municipalities attract new businesses for economic development, or new family doctors if they're years behind in public transportation investments or infrastructure developments.

I look forward to hearing the minister's explanation and if he will be able to commit today to not freezing municipal funding in the future, if his party should have the chance to govern again.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I look forward to the interesting questions and answers to unfold in the rest of the afternoon.

Mr. Chairperson: We thank the member for her opening comments.

Under Manitoba practice, debate on the minister's salary is the last item considered for the department in the Committee of Supply. Accordingly, we shall now defer consideration of line item 13.1(a) contained in resolution 13.1.

And at this time, we invite the minister's staff to join us at the table, and we ask the minister to introduce the staff in attendance when he is ready.

Mr. Smith: I have with me, to my left, here: Bruce Gray, my deputy minister; I've got Anna Policar; Ryan Schenk; David Neufeld; Nick Kulyk; Don Hallett; and then got Graeme Rankin, my special assistant, at the very end.

Mr. Chairperson: Thank you for the introductions, and welcome, everybody.

According to our rule 78(16), during the consideration of departmental Estimates, questioning for each department shall proceed in a global manner, with questions put separately on all resolutions once the official opposition critic indicates that questioning has concluded.

The floor is now open for questions.

Ms. Naylor: Can the minister undertake to give a list of all technical appointments in his department, including names and titles?

Mr. Smith: Two technical staff would be Graeme Rankin, special assistant; and Sarah Janzen, the executive assistant.

Ms. Naylor: Can the minister undertake to give an organizational chart that lists all employees and program areas?

Mr. Smith: Just to clarify, we—organizational structure with name of staff, as well, or just an organizational structure, to clarify?

Ms. Naylor: Well, the roles and program areas of the employees.

Mr. Smith: Mr. Chair, I'll table this document and see if this is what the member is referring to. I will say it's page 14 of the document here as well. I don't know if that'll be helpful for member opposite here.

Ms. Naylor: Can the minister give a list of all current vacancies in the department, both as a number of vacancies and a percentage?

Mr. Smith: The vacancies, as requested, is 74 FTEs. And that's 22 per cent as a percentage.

* (15:40)

Ms. Naylor: And is the department planning on filling those vacancies this year? I noted that on page 10 of the budget, that the—it shows that the actual number of employees will fall this year. But what's happening with those vacancies?

Mr. Smith: Yes, of course, I know that our government is—intends to fill them on a priority basis. Of course, we know that government is not exempt from the labour shortage that has been experienced right across every aspect of the economy, so, of course, government is no exception to that.

We know that our government has been insistent on helping the economy in general with filling the labour gap. And I'm sure the member opposite is familiar with our plan on the Provincial Nominee Program to bring in and use immigration as one tool to help fill the labour gaps.

I know my colleague in charge of that is actually at the table here today, and we know that it's been a very good initiative to help fill those gaps in our labour pool. Whether it's in government or outside of government, we know there's a lot of folks outside the country that are very qualified for some of these positions, and the Provincial Nominee Program does prioritize people based on their ability and their assets they bring to the province and to the labour pool in general.

So, I know that, like I said, our government is insistent on filling these gaps on a priority basis.

And we do always appreciate, and I appreciate, all the good work that's done by the good folks sitting with me here today, and everyone in the department that works together to help serve the municipalities.

And I, of course, want to welcome my critic to the role. I know we, kind of, started around the same time and this is our first time in Estimates together. So, welcome to the role, and it's an exciting role to be in where we can work together to benefit of the municipalities right across the province.

Often Manitoba has one large community is my mind. You know, with 1.3 million people, we do have our unique challenges, but I think we have a lot of

unique opportunities to work together here and start by serving the communities that represent the people of Manitoba.

Ms. Naylor: So, I just want to clarify. With 74 FTE vacancies in the department, if—you know, I hear that labour shortage is an issue. So, I want to clarify if that is—if that would explain, let's say, the bulk or the majority of these vacant positions and if there is a plan to get these positions filled.

And, I guess, also, if the minister could speak to the impact on the work of the department to have such a large percentage of vacancies.

Mr. Smith: Of course, while a labour shortage often is seen as created by a demographic issue—a demographic issue we have in government as well. A lot of the baby boomer generation has retired out of the positions that they held prior to that.

So, of course, that's one of the reasons that we see a labour shortage and 'sortenly' a shortage in—of workers right across the economy, and it would explain some of our vacancies that are in our department and, of course, across government in general.

So, we find that the highest vacancy rate would be in the assessment services, but then a lot of that can be dealt with by improved technology. Satellite imagery, as I know members opposite are very aware of, have use for assessing properties. And, of course, use of tablets in the field instead of having a person go out into the field, and the notebook and pen and paper and that way and come back to the office; they can do things in real time.

So, there's always ways to create more efficiencies with the technology we have, and of course, like I said earlier, I mean, it's a priority to fill, on a priority basis, these FTEs.

We know, certainly, the demographic issue is not only specific to Manitoba. I think it's country-wide—probably continent-wide, in many cases probably worldwide, at least in some developed parts of the world where you have a demographic that's reached a certain age, and that's typically retirement age. And that's where a lot of folks have gone, and now we're starting to replace folks at the other end.

And, of course, we know that immigration will help us do just that. I know that we, as a province, we as a government, are very proud of the immigration reputation we have as a province, back to 1998 with the Provincial Nominee Program being created.

We know that now, most recently, being more modernized and being adapted to a more 21st century application, we're very, very excited to see that this will be an opportunity to bring folks in to the province, not only to fill a labour shortage, but then to add their contributions outside of work.

But, you know, in the community and through culture to the greater part of Manitoba, we see immigration coming not only to Winnipeg—the city of Winnipeg, but throughout parts of rural Manitoba that, traditionally, hasn't seen as much immigration—at least not in recent history.

That's really nice to see that ability to have that diversity, not only in the city of Winnipeg, but in communities as far south as the US border, all the way up to places like Thompson and other types of communities where immigration is not only welcome, but very much needed.

Ms. Naylor: So, the minister mentioned that the largest vacancy rate is in assessment services. Perhaps he could give us a breakdown of those 74 FTEs by department or by, kind of, service area. That would be helpful. So, perhaps how many are in the assessment area and how many are in the other departments?

* (15:50)

Mr. Smith: I do have a breakdown here for the member opposite. It's my only copy. If it's okay with the member opposite, we will get a copy for her, but endeavor to do that as—soon.

Ms. Naylor: I would love to get a copy of it and it's not urgent this moment. Thank you.

I'm going to ask some questions about the Municipal Board now. Does the minister and his government think the Manitoba Municipal Board is doing well? And are its expanded powers serving the best interests of municipalities and Manitobans?

Mr. Smith: I think that most of us know, and certainly the member opposite knows, that the Municipal Board's been in existence for decades. It's a quasi-judicial board that operates at arm's length of government so that government doesn't make the decisions, the board does.

And that's—you know, it's been an organization that has done this for some time. I think it's important to keep that, to ensure that a set of eyes that are allowed to see are—certainly adjudicate on these important matters—don't come necessarily right through the government but have a quasi-judicial board are able to oversee that and make decisions, certainly to

the best of their ability. I know that I can't imagine it being easy to be on that board, making decisions that are very important and certainly not only impact individuals but impact the greater communities that this individual lives in, or individuals live in.

So, I say that again: it's been in existence for decades; it's a board that's quasi-judicial and it's been—you know, operates at arm's-length from government so that it can give its own opinion on matters that affect the community. And I think that's a long-standing tradition here in the province.

Ms. Naylor: In 2019, the Province released the findings of a planning, zoning and permitting review and this report contained some numbers on approval times for occupancy building, permits and others.

Can the minister provide us with updated statistics?

Mr. Smith: I thank the member for the question here.

So, just a point of clarification. I know that the planning timelines and appeal processes fall under our Department of Municipal Relations, that's for Bill 37. The other permitting times would be through, I believe, the—Minister Teitsma's department.

But we do have—and I'm—understand that, as of recently, the Manitoba Home Builders' Association has a report out where they've seen an improved ranking for Winnipeg—the city of Winnipeg, where—most of the challenges we've seen in the past come from the city of Winnipeg. And that planning review has been made available, and if the member opposite is interested in it, we will certainly endeavour to get her a copy of that review.

Mr. Chairperson: Before proceeding, I would just remind members participating in the committee that we need to acknowledge people by their constituency or their department or the ministry.

* (16:00)

Ms. Naylor: I was so willing to be corrected.

I—so just—so I would appreciate getting a copy of that report.

Can the minister speak to, more generally, then, you know, how many permits were issued under 14 days? How many between 15 and 30 or how many took longer than that?

Mr. Smith: It's my understanding the Municipal Board will only hear about issues if there's an appeal made. So, municipalities wouldn't necessarily be reporting

every planning request, but they certainly would have a—the Municipal Board would certainly hear about any of the appeals related to those that are outside of the time frame that are considered acceptable.

So, I know municipalities have a lot of requests all the time, so the Municipal Board would be the one referring to the appeals coming from ones that are no longer in compliance with respect to the timelines.

Ms. Naylor: Before we continue, are we supposed to pause at 4? Is that the—*[interjection]* Okay, all right, thank you.

When the minister's government introduced Bill 37, we know it was universally opposed by municipalities, and Bill 37 expanded the hand-picked Municipal Board's powers and gave it the ability to overrule municipalities' land-use decisions. Municipalities continue to oppose the Municipal Board. They've called it anti-democratic, said that it's skewing the balance in favour of developers.

So, can the minister explain, has he considered listening to municipalities on this and stripping the additional powers from the Municipal Board?

Mr. Smith: You know, Bill 37 was certainly introduced to create clarity and certainty for development in our communities across the province. We know that, in order for communities to plan long-term, that they need the ability to have consistency and provide long-term planning through consistency to the communities and, of course, to all those who are interested in helping develop the communities.

Providing a standard right across the province, I think, was important. And let's be honest that—municipalities still have a great deal of autonomy. They can—as long as they're within the time frames that are allotted and they have up-to-date bylaws and up-to-date standards and processes, that's—it's not much of an issue. The only time any of these processes become an issue—or, at least sees with the Manitoba—or, the appeals board is when it's because it's no longer within the standard time that was set out by government.

So, really, municipalities have the ability to plan, they have the ability to do what's best for the community. But having some standards and consistency across the board is important, as well. I think we can find that delicate balance between those two.

I know I have greatest of respect for the association of municipalities and the work that they do, and, of course, the municipalities right across the province.

And I know—I'm sure my critic has met with a number of folks from municipalities, as I have. And we know that it's an incredibly challenging role, especially at that local level.

But, you know, we as a government want to make sure that there's consistency across the board and that Manitobans know that development can continue in their communities and that certain timelines are met, making sure that the communities can grow in a fashionable time and in a reasonable time frame.

Ms. Naylor: So, it sounds like the minister is kind of pleased with the direction of the Municipal Board and the additional abilities—the additional powers that the Municipal Board has now.

But, you know, there's very specific examples that are concerning, where we see that the far-reaching consequences of expanding the Municipal Board's power over land-use decisions has some negative impact.

So, I'm sure the minister is aware of a—the situation at Assiniboine Links, an assisted-living facility in west Winnipeg. It's being sold. The new owner is converting it to rental apartments. Residents there have been told they have three months to move out.

So, one of those residents is a man named Walter Kacsmar. He's 98 years old, he's lived at Assiniboine Links for seven years, and he's obviously upset because he thought, at his age, he'd found a place where he could stay and to live out his life, and now has to do something else.

* (16:10)

And—but what we know is that Assiniboine Links wouldn't have had to be sold if the original plan to build the 199-unit apartment complex beside it hadn't been nixed by the Manitoba Municipal Board after the City of Winnipeg approved the project. So, the intention was that revenue from the apartment building would've covered the costs of running the assisted-living facility but without that revenue, the owners had to sell the building.

So, can the minister explain this? Does he believe that the Manitoba Municipal Board acted in the best interests of Manitobans—Manitobans like Walter Kacsmar—in this instance, when they overrode the City of Winnipeg's approval of this project?

Mr. Smith: Yes, I think it would be inappropriate for me to comment on any decisions—individual decisions made by the Municipal Board, as it is a quasi-judicial board at arm's length from government.

But I know, as a government, we do encourage that all parties come together and work together to come to a solution that would benefit everybody, including folks in the community. Like I said, it's a quasi-judicial board, and I would be—hesitate to comment on any decisions that they've made with individual cases pertaining to the appeals made at the Municipal Board level.

Mr. Chairperson: The honourable member—or, Minister of Families.

Hon. Rochelle Squires (Minister of Families): On April 20th, 2023, during the Families Committee of Supply, the total monthly EIA benefits for the general assistance category was required as \$936. Please correct the record to reflect that it's \$857 as the total monthly EIA benefit for the general assistance category. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Chairperson: We thank the minister for those comments and clarifications.

Ms. Naylor: So, just to follow up on the question that I was asking about the Manitoba Municipal Board and overriding the decision by the City of Winnipeg: Can the minister provide us with a list of hearings that the Manitoba Municipal Board has undertaken since it was given expanded powers through Bill 37?

Mr. Smith: Given the fact that it's a quasi-judicial board, I would have to ask that board and request a list of that nature from the board. And if the member is okay, we would endeavour to get that to you. We will request on my critic's behalf.

Ms. Naylor: Yes, thank you, we would definitely—I would really like to see that list.

Does the minister know offhand how many times the Manitoba Municipal Board has overruled municipality decisions?

* (16:20)

Mr. Smith: You know, the Municipal Board has been around for decades, so it has adjudicated over a number, and quite a large number, of cases throughout its time. So, I mean, that would be a very large number.

I know often the municipalities—sometimes that the board will side with municipalities; sometimes they'll side with the other party; it really depends. The decisions that are made by the Municipal Board are made based on the evidence at that time and that particular location.

So, of course, municipalities are taken seriously and well-respected at the board level, of course,

knowing that their input is very important. But, again, it's based on evidence at that time and evidence of what is in the best interests at that particular time, given the evidence available to the board and to the members.

Ms. Naylor: So, I certainly hope to actually get a number of how often the board has overruled municipalities, particularly, as I said, since they were given extended powers through Bill 37. And it sounds like—I can appreciate that you—that the minister has said that he will get me that list. But I—and the list of hearings.

I guess my question is: Is this information publicly available? And if not, does the minister think that this, you know, would be in the public interest for everyone to be able to see where these projects have been overruled and how many of them, and what this impact is for municipalities across the province?

Mr. Smith: I appreciate the question from the—from my critic here.

A couple of things. First of all, with respect to the number of appeals since Bill 37 has come into force, I know that it's been only since 2021, so there hasn't been a whole lot of appeals, but I'm sure we can make sure that that information is reflected in the list that is provided to the member opposite, when that becomes available from the Municipal Board.

Also, as far as making the list more public, I know that right now there's a—trying to balance that with privacy issues and, of course, the wishes of the municipality, making sure that all those involved are respected while being transparent.

So, the intent is to have it more public facing but, in the meantime, making sure that the municipalities are okay with the information that is provided as, of course, respecting the privacy of all the parties involved. We know that, certainly, is an issue in this digital age of privacy versus transparency, and I think that's always an important debate to have, but it's also important we get it right.

So, making sure that those involved—their privacy is respected, as well.

Ms. Naylor: Okay, thank you for that, minister.

I imagine—and thank you, Mr. Chair—I imagine that municipalities, when they're making these decisions, that these often are on the record and that there would be a public record at individual municipalities when they have approved projects in their community.

And so, somewhere there—like, if that's no longer approved—I mean, I'm just curious about how private that actually is in those individual communities, but I look forward to seeing the list when it's available to me.

One thing I noted is the commitment of your department to reduce red tape. And so, you know, is there—looking at the—what's involved in overriding a municipality's judgment around projects seems to take time and money and, perhaps, be not in line with the idea of reducing red tape.

So, I wonder what the minister's thoughts are on that, just when you look at the redundancy and the time and cost involved in this.

Mr. Smith: A point of clarification for member opposite, referring to the Municipal Board's decision making, with respect to municipalities. Is that what the member is asking?

Ms. Naylor: Yes. What I'm asking about is the Municipal Board's ability to cancel a project that a municipality has approved. And so, going through that process takes more time; there's a redundant aspect to it, and how does that fit in with the—your department's goal of reducing red tape?

* (16:30)

Mr. Smith: With respect to Bill 37, certainly, Bill 37's idea was, of course, to give timelines to municipalities on these types of proposals to make sure that it's consistent across the province, of course, but also to make sure that the municipalities, then, are able to react accordingly to make sure that their internal processes are more efficient when a proposal comes across their desks. So that's really what Bill 37 is about.

But it also gave an opportunity for fairness for applicants who were, as in the past, if you couldn't—you—the buck stops with the municipality. At least now, you have an independent Municipal Board that they can take this to if there's an issue—I—you know that sometimes projects and municipal issues can be quite political, and it's nice to have an independent board that can then adjudicate on behalf of the—on behalf of that project.

So, again, there's two ways of looking at that. Bill 37 creates that standardized timelines, but it also gives fairness to the applicants and the communities who are looking at certain developments or certain types of projects that, quite likely, in the minds of the applicant anyways, are going to benefit the greater community, if not now, at some point in the future.

So that's really the underlining idea behind Bill 37.

Ms. Naylor: Can the minister just explain to me how the members of the independent board are selected and appointed to that board?

Mr. Smith: Of course, the applicants are—for the board are selected through the Agencies, Boards and Commissions, through an OIC process. So that process for this particular board has been consistent between now as it was in, say, the previous NDP government. So they'd be a similar process for assessing and hiring, I guess you could say, qualified applicants.

You know, ABCs are the—Agencies, Boards and Commissions go through the persons and the application—the applicants' qualifications; we know a lot of them have extensive municipal experience, some have legal experience, so it brings together a whole group of folks from different walks of life with excellent experience, which is very useful in this particular Municipal Board.

Ms. Naylor: Is there actually a public list or any list of what kinds of qualifications board members need to have, or the application process and what they should be showing?

Mr. Smith: Yes, that information is on the portal—the Agencies, Boards and Commissions portal—and if the member opposite would like, we can get you a copy of that link; take it to—and see what they're—what is requested of applicants before they apply.

So, anybody can apply, of course, assuming they meet some of the requirements, and I will endeavour to get that link to my critic.

Ms. Naylor: Minister's going to be very busy following up with me with this list of things, so, appreciate that.

I'm going to ask a few questions about municipal funding now. Can the minister explain why his government froze funding to municipalities for six years, and does he think this was a mistake?

Mr. Smith: I would correct the record. I mean, first of all, it was our government, when we formed government in 2016, that created predictable basket funding. I know that that's been something that municipalities have been asking for, for a long time.

Previous to our government, in the previous NDP government, it was my understanding that it wasn't a very simple process of funding municipalities, and project by project was decided on by the provincial government, or—largely because they're such an important partner in funding projects. It became very convoluted and very difficult to follow.

So—and as we came to power—came to government in 2016, one of the initiatives that my predecessor had, and I believe that would be minister of—who's now of Indigenous relations and Northern Relations was in that role, and she endeavoured to make sure that there was consistent, predictable funding.

As the member knows, and we've talked about this a little bit here, predictability's very important for long-term planning in any community, and, of course, that's why this past—this—earlier this year, we, as a government, in—provided \$47 million in increase in operational funding and—through Budget '23.

Now, that 40—that million dollars, that \$47 million is actually, to clarify, predictable ongoing funding. So, that's not just one time; that's going to be continuing on into the coming years. In addition to that, we've also created our—funding capital to municipalities at a tune of just under 23 and a half million dollars as an increase to municipalities.

So, again, we'd just correct the record.

* (16:40)

There is—this government has been very, very co-operative and worked very closely with municipalities right across Manitoba over the years, particularly after COVID.

We know the COVID pandemic has created a lot of additional pressures with that coming inflation and all kinds of other issues, supply chain issues, that have created economic challenges in our communities not only in Winnipeg but we see it outside the Perimeter, to communities right across the province. That's why that increased funding is so important to make sure that municipalities are able to meet the challenges of the post-pandemic world.

And that's really where we're at, and I know very proud to say that I worked very closely with the Association of Manitoba Municipalities on this. They were actually at the announcement: very, very supportive of all that we've done here to make sure and try and make our municipalities whole.

I know the member opposite would know that the City of Winnipeg received a bump-up of 7 and a half million dollars to address the pothole issue. And anyone who knows Manitoba in the spring, it's not spring season; it's pothole season. It is the nature that—of the beast, so to speak, that this is what Manitoba is, and this is a challenge that we face every single year.

So, hoping that that 7 and a half million extra dollars would give them—City of Winnipeg, or 'allee'

some pressure on them, as they endeavour to provide services to their citizens but also make sure they continue that important work of filling and fixing potholes that often traumatize all of our vehicles as we drive through not only Winnipeg roads but, of course, roads in and around the Perimeter as well.

Ms. Naylor: The minister's intent on defending his predecessor's record on this, but when the minister talks about predictable funding, I'd—I'm not sure, though, that what municipals had in mind was being frozen at 2016 levels, predictably, for the next six years. That's—that is what their experience is, and that's what they've been talking to me about.

So, predictable, yes, but also harmful and has led to, you know, many municipalities having to put a lot of projects on hold or delayed, things that now are just costing significantly more money when they—when they now are seeing an increase in funding for the first time.

So, I hear the minister doesn't think that was a mistake, how things were done, but this current funding increase that's just coming in an election year, does this make up for the six years of frozen funding? Can it make up for that?

Mr. Smith: I just remind member opposite that, you know, it was our government, like I said, that introduced the predictable funding.

And, of course, throughout COVID there was an increase in—almost doubling of the infrastructure funding going to municipalities, and included in that. We talk about some of the transit issues and we've advocated with the federal government and actually delivered, not only for provincial money, but federal money as well.

We want to make sure we're—understood that, you know, post-COVID, we experienced unprecedented inflation, and I think that's been the world over. I don't think anyone in any municipality in Canada or across most of the world would be in any different situation.

So, of course we want to make sure that \$47 million increase was given this year. I mean this is, you know, when we announced it, inflation still high, you know, inflation's still an impact on projects and municipalities and, of course, budgets right across the province.

Mr. Chair, \$47 million, just shy of 23 and a half million dollars, in terms of infrastructure funding, and remember these are permanent increases. These are not one-time, one-off increases. These are not, you know, pick and choose projects, as you wish. I know in the previous NDP government that did happen quite

often and there was no consistency. There was no rhyme or reason to funding. Perhaps some of it was politically motivated, I don't know.

But, in this case, I'm giving municipalities an increase so that they can use it however they see fit and however the municipality believes it will benefit their citizens and their residents. I think that's very important to remember that. That's what this is about: permanent increases to municipalities.

We're going to continue to work with municipalities. I know that the members opposite, we've—actually my colleague and I, the Minister of Justice (Mr. Goertzen) have written a letter to the federal Justice minister asking for the federal government to step in and help with back pay for the RCMP to our municipalities.

We know how important that policing is. As an example, in our communities we want to make sure that our communities are made whole. And, unfortunately, the federal government hasn't done that yet and we're hoping and very hopeful that they do.

Because we believe, as a government, that we want to make sure that of all the funding baskets available, or in this case, you know, operation and infrastructure, that policing—federal policing—in such an essential time when crime is at a fairly high rate compared to what it was just a few short years ago, making sure that Manitobans know that the federal government is able to have their back, and we don't think that's happening right now.

We, as a government, want to stand behind Manitobans and make sure that policing is covered in this province so that Manitoba municipalities can be safe and secure and they continue to grow and prosper, in addition to that \$47 million and a 23-and-a-half-million-dollar increase that they received just this year.

Ms. Naylor: And I'm glad the minister brought up RCMP funding. I am going to ask some questions about that in a little bit. But just to finish off here a little bit on the municipal funding.

The minister mentioned, kind of, politically motivated decision-making and that—I mean that's what stands out to me is that a freezing of funding to municipalities for six straight years, and then an increase in the budget just a few months before a provincial election seems pretty politically motivated to me.

So, I guess my question for the minister is if he can commit if, you know, his government—if his party forms government again after the provincial election,

can he commit to not freezing municipal funding in the future or cutting municipalities' funding in the future going forward?

Mr. Smith: And of course, look, and I said this before, that this increase in funding is made permanent and we're going to continue to work with municipalities on their needs and as they endeavour to serve their citizens in the best way possible.

We are very committed to making sure municipalities are made whole. Under previous NDP governments, let's face it: when we formed government, the NDP government at the time had racked up a considerable deficit in, well, good economic times. There was no COVID pandemic. There was no record inflation. In fact, I recall borrowing rates of—interest rates were at almost record time—record lows—rather than right now we're seeing increased pressures on everybody who borrows money.

And so, I think that it's important to remember that the previous NDP government was not at all a good partner to municipalities. Their motivation was more political.

We, in this case, want to make sure that after COVID, when record inflations hit—we've seen a record once-in-a-hundred-year pandemic—major disruptions because of these things, that municipalities were given an increase. And we, as a government, will endeavour to continue to work with them and advocate on their behalf.

* (16:50)

Gave money, \$47 million in operations, that's an increase; 23 and a half million dollars in capital increase and, of course, fighting to make sure that the federal government does what it's supposed to do to help make our municipalities whole with respect to back pay the RCMP.

Ms. Naylor: Think the minister forgets that the NDP also had 10 balanced budgets 10 years in a row—*[interjection]*—before experiencing—are we heckling in committee now? I'm not sure that he can point to the same for his government, but that's not what we're here to debate right now.

I hear the minister saying that the current money committed to municipalities in this budget is a permanent, which is good—really good news for municipalities. But I haven't heard a clear answer if there's commitment to not freezing that again in the future.

If they—if he is to be part of government in the future, can municipalities count on annual funding increases that are predictable and that they won't be facing another six-year freeze if the PCs form government again in the fall?

Mr. Smith: I just want to piggyback off the comments—the preamble by the member opposite.

You're right; our government—the current government and the previous NDP government were facing very different circumstances, absolutely. The NDP government had record-low interest rates, a good economy; there was no pandemic and no inflation, not to the rate we see today. So, absolutely—in fact, our government right now has a lower deficit than the NDP did when times were much, much better. So, that is the stark contrast between our two governments.

With respect to the municipal—municipalities. We've said, like we said before, we are going to make sure that we're going to work with them and—to address their financial needs. It's very important to continue that really good relationship. Myself and my predecessors have developed very strong working relationships with the AMM, as one example, and we know that we continue to work with them, as they're the largest advocacy group for municipalities in the province and continue to work with all municipalities.

Every municipality has its own unique set of circumstances, its own unique set of challenges, but we want to make sure we give them the flexibility with this funding model that is predictable; it's permanent and they know what they're going to get year by year.

Unfortunately, in the previous NDP government, they didn't have record inflation. They didn't have an unjust war in Ukraine which has wreaked havoc on a lot of our supply chains, and we're seeing this right around the world. The world that the NDP had was much more stable, and they still managed to rack up record deficits. It wasn't until we came to power that we were able to fix a lot of their problems.

And then we faced a serious issue; we all know that's called COVID-19, and then, of course, all the other issues that followed COVID-19 which made governing much more difficult and much more disruptive. And today, we still have a lower deficit than they did when they left government.

Ms. Naylor: I note that the funding freeze to municipalities started as soon as the PC government came into power and before the pandemic.

And so, you know, that freeze over six years was very dramatic for municipalities, and that's certainly—

as the minister noted earlier, as the new critic, I have been out in communities talking to mayors and reeves and council members and doing my best to network and make those connections.

And mostly I'm hearing a lot of concern that, you know, people are relieved right now because there's an immediate kind of fix to some of their issues, but it—but they can't make up for that deficit. Projects that were put on hold cost triple now because of, as you said, supplies—as the minister said, because of supply-chain issues, et cetera.

So, I guess my final question on funding right at the moment—on municipal funding is, the minister keeps referring to the funding model.

Is—has the department looked at a new model for funding municipalities?

Mr. Smith: Of course, in—when we formed government, in our early years, we did create this basket funding model and, most recently, we've further updated that model, simplified it even further so it's based on population and a needs-based funding. So, it's much more simplified than it has been in previous years, and I think that's important and predictable for the—for economic development in our communities right across the province.

And I'll let the member—the member knows full well that our government has taken a number of initiatives to make sure that life is more affordable for Manitobans right across the board. We've increased the basic personal amount to \$15,000. That's brought so many Manitobans off the tax roll, knowing that they can keep their money in their own pockets. Of course, saw a reduction in the retail sales tax, you know, a sales tax increase that was done by the previous government, I might add.

We made sure that that money goes back to the people in our municipalities and in our province in general. We know that Manitobans are—we trust Manitobans with their money. We know that Manitobans are the best folks to make the decisions in how their money is spent.

You know, the education property tax reduction, we know that that's been something giving a lot of money back to particularly rural municipalities, where you have a lot of farming activity. A lot of farmers have received a considerable amount of money back. That's putting money back in the people who feed us and feed the world.

So, I think that's important to remember, that that's where our government has been focusing on.

As well as—of course we know this increase to municipal funding, but we've also, in my previous department—I'll put on my new—my previous hat as the Sport, Culture, Heritage minister—created a \$100-million Arts, Culture and Sport in Community Fund.

And we know that \$100 million goes a long ways in helping these community groups. And a lot of these groups are scattered throughout the province, whether they're a sport group, some kind of cultural group or some other group that fit the parameters of that funding model, which, again, \$100 million of investment is tremendously important.

We know previous government, despite their tax increases, left tens of millions of dollars of deferred maintenance in that sector of Sport, Culture and Heritage. And, unfortunately, it's going to take some time for that industry to recover and—where \$100 million goes a long way into helping to do just that.

So, Mr. Chair, I think members opposite know that our government is committed to making life more affordable while putting money into municipalities and making sure they have the ability to be strategic and have predictable funding models that make it easier for them to plan out their future and do what's best for themselves and their residents and make sure that Manitobans are well served by the initiatives undertaken by our government.

Ms. Naylor: I see that—I mean, that was a lot of information not related to this department and a bit of a distraction, I think—

Mr. Chairperson: Order. Order.

The hour being 5 p.m., committee rise.

CHAMBER

INDIGENOUS RECONCILIATION AND NORTHERN RELATIONS

* (14:50)

The Acting Chairperson (Shannon Martin): 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 Indigenous Reconciliation and Northern Relations.

Does the honourable minister have an opening statement?

Hon. Eileen Clarke (Minister of Indigenous Reconciliation and Northern Relations): I do, and thank you, Mr. Chair.

And I'm pleased to be able to comment on our '23-24 Estimates and discuss some of the important activities that the department of Indigenous and reconciliation and northern relations has been doing.

But before I begin, I want to acknowledge proudly that we are gathered on Treaty 1 territory and that Manitoba is located on the treaty territories of ancestral lands of the Anishinaabeg, Anishinewuk, Dakota Oyate, 'desulenet'-'denesetline' and Nehethowuk nations. I want to further acknowledge that Manitoba is located on the Homeland of the Red River Métis and that northern Manitoba includes lands that are the ancestral lands of the Inuit.

I also want to today express my sincere thanks to all of our partners and the staff that I've had the opportunity to work with again in 2023. But I also want to acknowledge former minister Al Lagimodiere for the hard work that he did as well—*[interjection]*—oh, sorry, member from Selkirk, MLA for Selkirk—and it's through the hard work of a team that we have, and we will achieve many successes again in the future.

The department's '23-24 Estimates of Expenditure total \$38.4 million, and that shows an increase of \$2.3 million, or 6.3 per cent, from the previous level in '22-23, and it continues to provide the resources required to address the challenges and pressures of delivering on our department's far-reaching and increasingly complex mandate.

Of specific note, I am pleased to note that the Budget '23 provides the department with an enhanced capacity, through the allocation of funding, for up to 13 additional staff positions. This enhanced staffing capacity will be directed toward enhancing engagement and reconciliatory activities.

I'm also pleased to note that Budget '23 allocates a total of \$5 million through the Indigenous reconciliation initiatives fund to advance progress on reconciliation. Within the \$5-million allocation, \$1.3 million will be used to address salary costs of the 13 new full-time equivalent positions that will help to support the department's and the government's efforts in reconciliation.

Ongoing funding for the Indigenous reconciliation initiatives fund has been transferred from internal service adjustment to the department's budget for '23-24. The program supports projects related to reconciliation, as guided by the principles of respect, engagement, understanding and action in Manitoba's Path to Reconciliation Act.

One exciting example of the initiative funded through this allocation includes the provision of

over \$400,000 toward the Economic Development reconciliation-through-tourism initiative, which involves a provision of the financial resources to Indigenous Tourism Manitoba to support an advanced economic reconciliation through various tourism activities.

Budget '23 positions us to continue to advance our strategic priorities, and I want to take a moment to highlight some of our other significant activities.

Treaty land entitlement continues to be a priority of Manitoba, and it has been since I was appointed to this position in 2016. There are nine treaty land entitlement agreements in Manitoba covering 29 entitlement First Nations, for a total of approximately 1.423-million acres of Crown and acquisition land.

Continued progress on treaty land entitlement is one way in which we are pursuing reconciliation with Indigenous peoples. As of March 31st, 2023, Manitoba has transferred 705 and 91 acres to Canada under all treaty land entitlement agreements in Manitoba. Canada has set apart 678 and 63 acres as reserve land.

Manitoba Indigenous Reconciliation and Northern Relations has also allocated \$500,000 as part of a renewed approach to advancing treaty land entitlement in our province.

The government of Manitoba has committed to establishing a renewed framework for respectful and productive Crown-Indigenous consultations. Over the past year, we've engaged Indigenous communities on a draft of a renewed framework and welcomed proposals to work together on a renewed approach to the Crown's duty to consult and accommodate with Indigenous communities.

Indigenous Reconciliation and Northern Relations, in collaboration with other Manitoba departments, and through engagement with Indigenous communities, is now finalizing the renewed framework for respectful and productive Crown consultations with Indigenous communities.

A key outcome of the renewed framework will include improved understanding of the Crown-Indigenous consultation processes for all parties. Facilitating respectful and productive consultations and listening to the concerns of Indigenous people across our province is an important step towards reconciliation.

We remain committed to advancing reconciliation through concrete and tangible initiatives that build on meaningful engagement with Indigenous nations and the peoples, as we continue to carry out

work to advance the processes of reconciliation in Manitoba.

Our work continues to be guided by our engagement efforts with First Nations, Inuit and Métis people, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's Calls to Action, the calls for justice of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls and the principles outlined in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

The department remains committed to supporting efforts to enhance food security in northern Manitoba throughout our Northern Healthy Foods Initiative. In addition to maintaining our regular levels of funding support, I'm pleased to note that we have recently provided an allocation of \$364,000 to Northern Healthy Foods Initiative partners to supplement their existing activities and to help improve access to affordable healthy food in the North.

We have continued to maintain our annual funding commitments to 11 Indigenous organizations for their core operating grants. Of specific note, I'm happy to announce that the Manitoba Inuit Association will become a recipient of one of our core operating grants.

In addition to core operating grants, we've also continued to provide financial support for a wide variety of community-based initiatives, including healing, commemorative and educational initiatives, to name just a few.

Addressing violence against Indigenous women and girls, particularly incidences of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, is a very high priority for Manitoba. We are committed to working together to keep women, girls and 2SLGBTQQAI+ people safe and to support their families who have been impacted by these tragedies and continue to be impacted.

* (15:00)

We have taken a variety of steps to fulfill this commitment, including partnering with the Department of Families to provide financial support for the Manitoba MMIWG2S+ Partnership Implementation Plan, a grassroots, Indigenous-led effort that will implement the Calls for Justice in a culturally relevant way at the community level under a traditional matriarchal governing body; and addressing demand program, a community-led project aimed at addressing sexual exploitation and sex trafficking through education of men and boys.

We also continue our work with the federal government and other provinces and territories in relation to Canada's efforts to respond to the Calls for Justice.

The tragic identification of potential unmarked graves of children who died attending Indian residential schools across the country has sparked a nationwide conversation on the tragedy and the lasting impacts of Canada's residential school system. Addressing the tragic legacy of residential schools is a priority for Manitoba, especially with respect to supporting Indigenous-led searches to locate the missing children who attended these institutions.

We know that Indigenous communities must take the lead on this work, and we continue to meet with Indigenous leadership, knowledge keepers, elders and residential school survivors to work together on a framework and response that reflects and advances their priorities. To advance this work, we continue to work to support the identification, investigation, protection and commemoration of Indian residential school burial sites all across this province.

The First Nations, Inuit and Red River Métis Council on Residential Schools has also been established to support Indigenous-led searches for burial sites of children who attended these schools. The council is co-chaired by the Province and the Southern Chiefs Organization, and has representation from Indigenous organizations and governments including the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs, the Southern Chiefs Organization, Manitoba Keewatinowi Okimakanak and the Manitoba Métis Federation and the Manitoba Inuit Association.

The Legislative Building was formally opened in July 15th, 1920, on the 50th anniversary of Manitoba's entry into Confederation. The structure within which we are now sitting is Manitoba's third largest building, which serves as the seat of the Manitoba provincial government and the meeting place for the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba. Both the building and surrounding grounds serve as an important reflection of all those who have called Manitoba home, who continue to call it home and who will call it home in the future.

The Acting Chairperson (Shannon Martin): The honourable minister's time has expired. *[interjection]* Sorry; the honourable minister's time has expired. We thank the minister for those comments.

Does the official opposition critic have any opening comments?

Mr. Eric Redhead (Thompson): I'm going to keep my opening remarks very brief, as I'm eager to get to the question portion of this—the Estimates process.

You know, first of all, I'm very honoured to be the critic for Indigenous Reconciliation and Northern Relations, as a status-card-holding Indigenous person. And this critic role is very close to my heart, and as former chief—as a former grand chief, I hold this position in high regard.

So, with that, I'm eager just to get started with the question period.

Thanks.

The Acting Chairperson (Shannon Martin): I thank the honourable critic for those remarks.

Under Manitoba practice, debate on the minister's salary is the last item considered for a department. Accordingly, we shall now defer consideration of line item 19.1(a), contained in resolution 19.1.

At this time, we invite the ministerial and opposition staff to enter the Chamber, and I would ask the minister and critic to please introduce their staff in attendance when they arrive.

May the minister please introduce their staff.

Ms. Clarke: To my left, I'd like to introduce Ainsley Krone, deputy minister for our department. Next to her, Kevin McPike, who is the assistant deputy minister. Mike Sosiak, who is EFO and assistant deputy minister. And, on my right, Frankie Snider, assistant deputy minister.

The Acting Chairperson (Shannon Martin): I thank the minister.

Can the honourable opposition critic, MLA for Thompson, please introduce their staff.

Mr. Redhead: We have, to my left, Julia Antonyshyn, caucus assistant.

The Acting Chairperson (Shannon Martin): I thank the member for that.

In accordance with subrule 78.16, during the consideration of departmental Estimates, questioning for each department shall proceed in a global manner, with questions put on the resolutions once the official opposition critic indicates that questioning has concluded.

The floor is now open for questions.

Mr. Redhead: I'm wondering if the minister would be able to provide a list of all technical appointments to her department, including names and titles.

Ms. Clarke: I'm pleased to share with you I have special assistant Matthew Grivicic—that doesn't pronounce his name very well, I have to admit—and executive assistant Sarah McLachlan, and she's not the entertainer.

Mr. Redhead: I'll kind of clump these two into one there.

So, I wonder if you're able to provide—or the minister's able to provide—an organizational chart that lists all employees and programs within her department and also a list of all current vacancies within the department.

* (15:10)

Ms. Clarke: We have to do some calculations there because as you heard in my opening comments, we are—we've created 13 new positions. So right now, we have—it shows as a vacancy of 25 positions, but out of that, 10 are of the new positions where we're going through the hiring process. We're also going through a restructuring process.

So, some of these people I have worked with previously and some of them were new in our department. So we're getting all those slots filled and people in place.

Mr. Redhead: You know, I know the minister is not so new to the role, as she's held the position previously during her time in government.

But I'm wondering, since she's just recently taken over, could the minister explain whether the department has changed its approach since taking over from the previous minister?

Ms. Clarke: I'm just excited, I want to get going.

I appreciate your question, because when I think back to 2016, when I was first appointed Indigenous minister, it took a while for myself within our government to invite chiefs, councils and other organizations into government to come and meet with us. They were not accustomed to doing this. This was a new process for them.

I also had to work with my colleagues, other ministers, to encourage them to, you know, to meet, consult and communicate with First Nations leadership. And that was new to them, because we were a new government, after all, and so it was a new process for everybody.

And, I have to say, you know, the first few chiefs and councils that came in, it was very quiet, it was very subdued and I had to ask a lot of questions, you

know, for them to trust me, to talk to me. It was a very humbling time for me, as well.

But, anyways, we went through the process together. And, looking back on it, it's probably one of my most memorable times in government, because our government also was in a very serious deficit at that point. And their relationship with government had been, previous to that, you know, when they needed funding for something, they asked for funding and it—got it or they didn't. That was basically it.

So, we started conversation, and, you know, I explained to them that, as a government, we were, kind of, in third party management, you know, which they understood—you understand, as a chief—and that we needed to focus on what we could do without money. And that sounded a bit unorthodox, perhaps, but, you know, and so we started talking about the issues and what we could do.

I also explained to them that, you know, they represent, the same as I do. We talked about issues from the past, and the issues were extremely lengthy and very heartbreaking for them. And so it became clear to me that we had to learn from the past. We had to take the past and turn it into something positive, and I think we've done that.

I also explained to them—they knew where they wanted their future to be; they had a vision of where they wanted to take their communities and their families, which was really good. But I also explained to them it was up to us, you know, because, as leaders, we were—we're the present; we're here right now. And everything that we do will be important for the future of our families, but everything that we don't do, it's on us, you know. And we had a responsibility, and I certainly felt that responsibility, as well.

So now, after looking back seven years ago and just coming back into the department after having been there for about five years or so, I actually feel very proud of what we accomplished—not what I've accomplished, but we've accomplished—with First Nations leadership, the Métis Federation and even Inuit. The Inuit, nobody talked to previously. Nobody had ever met them. Nobody had been. And now we've got a significant working relationship with them, as well.

A relationship with the Métis Federation has always gone well from our department. It did not always go well, you know, with our leaders in the past, but I never let that get in my way, and I don't let any

of, you know, the political processes disrupt what my relationship is with these Indigenous leaders.

So, I think we've come a long ways when I—especially working on the budget in Treasury Board this past season, and I see the amount of funding that is going to Indigenous organizations across all departments. It was rather overwhelming, because I knew that funding didn't exist at that level previously. So that—it showed the working relationships that have really gone forward in Economic Development, in TLE; there's so many different areas all across government.

And I also noticed, very much so, that our ministers and our government and our Premier (Mrs. Stefanson) were—the doors were wide open to Indigenous leaders or organizations or communities. And, to me, that's the biggest change. It's about working collaboratively and with respect. And I also feel a great level of trust, and that, to me, was significantly important.

Thank you for that question.

Mr. Redhead: You know, I'd like to say that, despite the implied—what the minister implied about First Nations and Indigenous communities being very familiar with third party, I want to say that many of our First Nations are very well-managed and financially sound.

But, I'd also like to ask the question, you know, this is the Department of Indigenous Reconciliation and Northern Relations. How many of the minister's staff identify as Indigenous?

* (15:20)

Ms. Clarke: As of December 31st, 2022, 25 per cent of the positions were Indigenous. But we also have a preference when hiring. There is—that is a component of hiring.

And I would just like to add further to that, with not only my efforts but efforts of other—of my colleagues, the number of Indigenous people on government boards and committees has increased substantially.

And I don't have that number, but—which is really significant because they are now at the tables that are making decisions as boards. And that's another step forward that I think has been really positive.

Mr. Redhead: You know, I had to just—you know, 25 per cent is a relatively low number considering the population of Indigenous people in the province. And representation at this level of government should be higher.

But I'd like to ask, has she changed—has the minister changed courses on initiatives that her predecessor opposed, such as developing a reconciliation strategy—which, I may add, is required by law and very long overdue?

Ms. Clarke: One of the initial things that was implemented was convening a deputy minister table on reconciliation, and it co-ordinates with existing reconciliation efforts and it—also advancing additional initiatives, and I've got more information on that.

* (15:30)

So, it provides oversight. Like, our department provides oversight of that fund and it's being made accessible to all government departments. It's not just by IRNR; it's going to all departments. That will support innovative item initiatives that advance progress on reconciliation.

Indigenous reconciliation department implements, and we administer the fund, by identifying and supporting potential projects that include cross-departmental opportunities identified through the deputy minister's table that has been established to work on this.

It also—the table also enables advancement to major whole-of-government approaches to reconciliation-related initiatives such as economic reconciliation, reconciled justice and health transformation, and that is partially the 13 positions, you'll recall, that I had in my opening statements that was to work within this process.

I think probably the one that, to me, is the most familiar because I did work through it before, was within tourism and the opportunities there. And I was very proud to attend—we had the National Indigenous Tourism Conference here just a couple of months ago, and it was really interesting to see what other provinces are doing and some of the projects that were highlighted that they're doing through these types of funds to create tourism.

But tourism is also creating jobs. It's creating a lot of training for different persons, regardless whether they're on reserve or living in urban communities. So, you know, with the tourism it definitely supports and advances the economic part of reconciliation through the activities, but it was really a good opportunity for us, as policy makers, perhaps.

But we also showcased a lot of what's going on in Manitoba, and it's all across—some of the award winners were from northern Manitoba, which was really great

to see. But, when you look at it in the bigger picture all across Canada, it also, to me, brought the realization of how much more we could do.

Probably tourism was one of our most untapped opportunities, and actually when I last met with OCN up in the North, and that was the main issue that they brought forward, was tourism. You know, they wanted to build lodges and have people come. They obviously live in a very pristine area for hunting and fishing, and just the wilderness tourism that a lot of people are looking for.

I've had the opportunity in the last seven years—I've had visitors from Germany and—most specifically Germany. But they really encourage us to come to their trade shows in Germany because their people are specifically asking for opportunities to visit Indigenous communities. Spend a longer term with them to—not just see their lifestyle, but to partially live it.

You know, they're very interested in the conservation part, you know, when we're talking about hunting and fishing, et cetera. But they also want to know about the Indigenous foods; they want to eat those foods. They want to see the craft work that they do and the lifestyle.

And, the other opportunity, I've had discussions already with some of the grand chiefs, et cetera, is the possibility of something much grander in Winnipeg that—at the Forks, where they create a First Nations community with—where people can come, and there will be festivals and celebrations where they come and—with, you know, there will be permanent facilities there, and it would be a year-round experience.

So, that's only one portion, but it's one that I have a real passion for because I've had the opportunity to meet with people from other countries that are really wanting that experience in the most respectable way. They are so in awe of the First Nations people in Manitoba, so I think—*[interjection]*

The Acting Chairperson (Shannon Martin): The honourable minister's time has expired.

Mr. Redhead: I'm going to dive into a little bit about the Northern Healthy Foods Initiative, and I'm wondering if the minister believes that the demand for affordable, healthy food in the North is low, and what she's hearing from Indigenous leaders on this issue. *[interjection]*

The Acting Chairperson (Shannon Martin): The honourable member for Thompson.

Mr. Redhead: Does the minister believe that the demand for affordable, healthy foods in the North is low, and what are you hearing from Indigenous leaders on this issue?

* (15:40)

Ms. Clarke: I was trying to work through my memory bank here, trying to remember the First Nation that we were at several years ago to announce a new garden tractor for them, and when we met with all the kids and the elders. But for the lack of my memory, I can't remember which one it was.

Anyway, we currently provide \$150,000 towards special project proposals, which include, but aren't limited to, educational gatherings, creating and expanding garden activities including greenhouse developments—and I've heard more First Nations are actually getting into the greenhouses, which is really exciting.

And the ones that have them, when we've been there, they're very proud of what they've done, and we're very proud of them as well. Also, winter road co-ordination support, harvesting activities, poultry production, beekeeping and food preservation.

When I heard—this is a while back too—and I heard up in the farther, northern part of the province they actually had cows and pigs and chickens and turkeys and everything, it—that was really exciting. They were excited, we were excited for them.

So, in '22-23 we provided \$364,000 in one-time grants for the five partners that we have, to help offset increased costs of supplying and distributing healthy and culturally appropriate foods in communities in Northern Manitoba, which resulted, of course, of—from COVID.

And, those five partners are, just so you've got for your information, Bayline Regional Roundtable, the Four Arrows Regional Health Authority, the Frontier School Division, Food Matters Manitoba, and the Northern Association of Community Councils.

And we've had some really good success stories, and we always like meeting with them and hearing what they're doing, so we're very pleased to supply this funding. But, of course as we know, during COVID the supply chain interruptions led to increases in food prices, which—their food prices are already unbelievably high, and it's caused shortages of healthy food options, which is concerning, both of which are disproportionately impacted on northern communities because of their narrow chain supplies.

These pressures are expected to continue for the 'forebeseable' future and enhanced core program funding would help offset some of these impacts. In addition, reallocation of the core program would most directly support the department's bounce scorecard metric, that measures our success through a proxy of volume foods produced.

So, projects and workshops include indoor and outdoor gardens, greenhouses, nutrition awareness, beekeeping, poultry operations, fishing hunting food preservation, and traditional foods that are activated. So, it's a great funded project, and you asked about, you know, the chief's inquiries about this.

I don't remember any chief and council asking me about it, but it is also run by different groups, not directly by the community. So, perhaps they're not aware, but I've never had any one of the chiefs of the communities raise it to me.

There was also \$718,000 in core funding to the five partners and two other provincial organizations at the end of '22-23, and we're committed for a total of \$1.26 million for this fiscal year.

Mr. Redhead: I know the minister paints a very rosy picture when it comes to healthy foods initiatives, but, you know, for the past five years the Northern Healthy Foods Initiatives have been significantly underspent.

In 2016-2017, underspent by \$624,000; 2017-18, underspent by \$666,000; '18-19, mind you this is before the pandemic, underspent by \$659,000; 2019-2020, underspent by \$692,000; just in 2021 underspent by \$244,000 to the tune of \$2.85 million.

Will the minister explain why this initiative is being underspent despite the record inflation and high demands for this program?

Ms. Clarke: If it's okay with the member opposite, if we could get back a written response to you, our finance officer got called out—an emergency just now. So if we can get back, we'll give you a written response on that. He's not available.

Mr. Redhead: I look forward to that response.

You know, again though, despite high levels of inflation which have forced people into worse situations when it comes to food insecurity, but yet the budget for the Northern Healthy Foods Initiative has remained frozen yet again.

I'm wondering if the minister can explain why the program has—the funding has continued to be frozen.

* (15:50)

Ms. Clarke: I will share with the member opposite in regards to the inflation that we are discussing, that we did reallocate from internal dollars within our department, the amount of \$364,000 to offset inflation, and this is just year 1 of three years that we've dedicated for that reallocation.

Mr. Redhead: You know, a couple—or a question ago, I stated about the hundreds—or the millions of dollars that this program has been underspent by. I'm wondering if the minister will commit to spending the funds that are allocated for this initiative this fiscal year.

Ms. Clarke: Well, that certainly is the intention. I mean, we deal with everything as it comes along. I mean, there is no reason that it can't be spent. There's always the opportunity to do that. So, you know, the fact that we are reallocating from within \$364,000, I think speaks to our commitment to making sure that this fund is not only there but it is spent.

Mr. Redhead: I think, considering the past, I think that's hard to believe.

But I'm going to go into a little bit of a economic reconciliation. So, on page 19 of the Estimates books, it states that 2023-2024 IRNR will begin a formal engagement to co-develop a framework for economic reconciliation in Manitoba.

Can the minister explain whether this engagement has begun already and how much money is set aside for this engagement?

Mr. Len Isleifson, Acting Chairperson, in the Chair

Ms. Clarke: I will share with the member opposite that, in regards to the co-development process, we have just—letters have been sent out to MKO, SCO, AMC, MMF and MIA. And these letters are to be out right away and they're part of the larger reconciliation strategy. We'll be consulting with them to get their input as we move forward.

But I will share that \$5 million for that funding will be dealt with at the deputy minister's table that I spoke to you about earlier. Also, 1.2 will go to CCIER [*phonetic*], and that is the Canadian centre for Indigenous economic reconciliation, which is co-developing a water licensing strategy. Also, \$1.3 million of that is the 13 salaries, again, that we spoke about. Those salaries will be all across government departments. They will be legal consultation, all variety of different members that we need to work through this process.

And so, it's rolling out and we're very excited to wait and see what the grand chiefs bring to the table.

Mr. Redhead: I'm going to switch now to MMIWG2S a bit here.

So, earlier, the Premier (Mrs. Stefanson)—or, earlier this year, the Premier had spoken on CBC and, when asked, was unable to provide a single example of the calls to justice that the PC government will be implemented.

Can the minister tell us what Calls for Justice she is acting on and when they will be complete?

* (16:00)

Ms. Clarke: Before I answer your particular question on that, I do want to acknowledge—as we weren't sitting last week on Friday, May the 5th, Red Dress Day, and I do want to acknowledge families, victims and all those that are still looking for their family members.

A very solemn day, for sure, but I have had the opportunity in the past to sit with families, especially in Norway House. I got to know the Osborne family quite well. And so, on Friday, I remembered a lot of these families that I personally have gotten to know.

And I've brought their stories back to this government to share with my colleagues, because unless you've—I've never experienced what these families have experienced. And I think it's really important, when we're making decisions in our government, that we have a really solid understanding, to the best of our ability.

But, you'll see in the information I'm also going to give you that we have very good Indigenous partners that work with us and we're really appreciative of that.

And I'll start by saying in 2018 we established a new committee of Cabinet, gender-based violence. I was on that committee back at that time and I am now back on that committee. And we've done some really good work going forward with this Cabinet committee.

Our department, along with the Manitoba Status of Women with Minister Squires, we received a mandate from the committee of Cabinet to engage with key departments to conduct a detailed review of the calls to justice and to engage with Indigenous organizations, Indigenous leadership and community on their priorities with respect to the Calls for Justice. And we are working diligently to develop a concrete and effective response to the national inquiry that builds on the work that is underway.

And this is especially important to me because I was actually in Ottawa with Minister Bennett at the

time where the decision was made to—for the inquiry. And I was also there when the inquiry was presented to us. So, this is of significant importance and I feel like I have personally had a learning experience through it.

On February 14th, our government provided \$130,000 to Ma Mawi Centre to support the co-development of a provincial implementation plan informed by the federal government's national action plan on ending violence against Indigenous women, girls and other peoples.

And in March 2022, we amended our Path to Reconciliation Act to establish the Calls for Justice of the national inquiry as a key component of our government's approach to advancing truth and reconciliation in our province.

Each year, we conduct a detailed cross-department review of current and planned activities relating to missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls and actions that are related to the Calls for Justice. And the 'reults' of this review are published annually in The Path to Reconciliation Act.

* (16:10)

And, most recently, we provided support for two whole-of-government projects through our new Indigenous reconciliation initiatives fund that will work to break this cycle of violence, the first being the addressing demand program, which is innovative and proactive community lay 'pilot' project to reduce sexual exploitation and sex trafficking through the education of men and boys and also through a combination of workshops, online strategies, support traditional knowledge into modern foods—no, that's the wrong page.

Anyway, I'll go over to this. We're also investing \$126 million towards a collaborative whole-of-government strategy entitled, A Place for Everyone, to address chronic homelessness.

And we are investing, also, significant money into addictions medicine and Aboriginal health and wellness in the city and throughout the province. And, I think, going forward, the commitment's already made, but this is an ongoing process, and we continue to work with all departments as well as, I've indicated, other partners that are helping us guide the way on this.

There's a lot of work to be done, yet there's no doubt about it. And I think, as a government, and especially during the times that we're experiencing right now—

The Acting Chairperson (Len Isleifson): Minister's time has expired.

Just before I acknowledge the member from Thompson, just a reminder, when we're answering questions and even when we're asking them, if you are referring to another member of this House, it must be by title or position, not by name.

Okay, I thank you for that, and we'll turn it over, then, to the member from Thompson.

Mr. Redhead: You know, you mentioned that there's an engagement plan to prioritize the calls of justice. When do you expect that this engagement plan is going to be complete? And will you—are you fully committed to implementing all 231 Calls for Justice?

Ms. Clarke: Sorry, it's just when I read some information, it kind of takes me back to where I was before and I bounce from then and now. And this has some great information.

So, our department, we have a mandate from the Gender-Based Violence Committee of Cabinet. That mandate is to engage with key departments to conduct a detailed review and cross-department analysis of the calls for justice and to engage with Indigenous organizations, Indigenous leadership and community on their priorities with respect to the inquiry's final report. Internal work with key departments continues, and a steering committee was established under the gender-based violence committee in Cabinet. In partnership with Manitoba Status of Women, departments gathered information on current and planned activities and actions as related to the calls for justice.

Manitoba's engagement process is large and incomplete, and it will form a part of the basis of the Manitoba response to the national inquiry's calls for justice, specifically.

Now, engagement sessions occurred with approximately—and this is the part that I remember—we had engagement sessions with 42 individual community organizations that included both Indigenous and non-Indigenous organizations. We had engagement with Indigenous leadership that has been delayed, of course, as a result of COVID-19 pandemic, and we intend to re-establish work on this aspect of engagement in the coming months; and two further engagement sessions occurred with Manitoba families and survivors, and these were led by Indigenous organizations with funding from our department.

Mr. Redhead: Does the minister support making Orange Shirt Day a statutory holiday, yes or no?

Ms. Clarke: I—that's not a question for yes or no, in my opinion—in my respectful opinion.

We've had a lot of discussion, and that discussion has been with Indigenous leadership, Indigenous peoples, non-Indigenous, all across the line. And I guess the part that sits with me—and this is not my personal decision—but I respectfully want reconciliation 365 days a year. I go to schools—I travel all across this province, and that was one of the conditions I came back into Cabinet.

When the Premier (Mrs. Stefanson) asked me to come back into Cabinet, I said I would come on one provision, and that I would have no boundaries and no barriers; that if I was going to be municipal minister, that meant I could still stop—I could visit any First Nations, I could go to any Métis federation, organizations, groups, whatever; but I would not be stopped from working without boundaries.

And that was really important to me, because those—reconciliation, when I left this department, and it was very shortly after the bodies were found in—or the, identified in Kamloops. And I spent a lot of time with staff, I spent a lot of time with communities, discussing what this meant. And I have spent a lot of time since. It doesn't matter what department I'm in. If I'm not in a government department, and if I'm not in government at all, I will always continue to work on reconciliation.

And I'm really thrilled, even out in my constituency. I have one First Nation in my constituency. Many of my colleagues don't have any. But I've been to—I've been invited to a lot of schools. I've been invited to a lot of groups and organizations—not just in my constituency, well beyond—to talk about reconciliation, what it means. And I can't give all the answers because I haven't been directly affected.

But I have been learning, and I will continue to learn. And you know, I have the same commitment from people across Manitoba. They want to know more. The event held last year in Neepawa, Manitoba, which is part of my constituency, was overwhelming for me. I wasn't Indigenous minister at that time, but the discussions I had had with that community in regards to reconciliation, residential school survivors, the whole bit, they took it very seriously.

They invited Indigenous elders, grandmothers, leaders, drummers, singers, dancers and there—it was a huge, huge event. And I'm seeing this all across the province. I go—it doesn't matter what community I go to, whether it's in a restaurant or a business, it's like,

Every Child Matters. My sons, my grandsons play hockey with Indigenous teens, and my grandson said to me last night, he said, I—he's hoping to play with a school team next year, which will include Sandy Bay First Nation, and he said you know what, I think our shirts, sweaters—our jerseys are going to be orange, and they're going to say Every Child Matters. And he said, I want that on my back.

There is so much that can be done. And I'll tell you, in the world that I live in, in this province of Manitoba, you make it a stat holiday, you know what: everybody's going to be at the lake, they're going to be out golfing, they're going to do whatever they do, and they're going to think it's just a one-day thing. And you know what, it's not going to go.

Not my decision entirely to make, but I want to see reconciliation recognized 365 days a year. Not when we have to acknowledge it. You know what, it's just a part of the way we live. And that's the world I would like to live in, where we don't have to acknowledge it as a specific date; we just live a life that is very respectful, and recognizes the past. I think that's really important. And that's the way it is.

* (16:20)

Mr. Redhead: Wow, Minister Clarke, just wow. You know, as an Indigenous person—

The Acting Chairperson (Len Isleifson): Again, just because I've already mentioned it once, we need to refer to people by their position or their title, not their name.

Thank you.

Mr. Redhead: Minister, just wow.

As an Indigenous person, as a former chief, as a former grand chief that represents the majority of First Nations across this province, hearing from First Nations people every day that one of the biggest steps forward to reconciliation is having Orange Shirt Day made a statutory holiday—and I have to respectfully disagree that people would be at the lake, people would be on their boats.

This is an opportunity for all Manitobans to reflect on the horrific acts that colonization has had on the Indigenous population in Manitoba. I am definitely disappointed in that so-called answer.

Minister Clarke, I really—sorry, I'm—I apologize, Minister. It's—this is—it's very emotional for a lot of us, and very, very important.

So, I would assume that you've talked to all the chiefs and all the grand chiefs of the province, and they're telling you do not—they do not want Orange Shirt Day a statutory holiday. Is that what you are saying, Minister?

The Acting Chairperson (Len Isleifson): And, again, just a quick reminder that all comments should go through the Chair as well. So, thank you.

Ms. Clarke: Okay, I very respectfully respond to that. And as you know, I take my position in this government and working with and for Indigenous people of Manitoba, I take it very seriously and very respectfully.

And I don't mean any disrespect by this at all, but I have lived in this province, I have lived in Canada for a very long time, and I know how people respond. I know that most of our holidays other than Louis Riel Day—I guess, I think is the only one that is specifically to a culture. And I'm disappointed that on Louis Riel Day that, you know, most people don't even—they don't even think about it. And to me, that's sad.

And I think my commitment to residential school survivors, to this department, to the Indigenous people of this province speaks for itself. There is no disrespect there whatsoever: none. None whatsoever.

And, you know, we are not always going to agree on everything. And I will be honest with you: there is leadership that—there is leadership that doesn't want it as a national—or a, you know, a stat holiday. People keep a lot of their thoughts, you know, in regards to this type of thing, it's very personal. It is very, very personal, and I respect that.

But I would hope it would be so much more. I guess that's all I can say. I would want so much more from the people of our province. I want them to live this; I want them to know. I want them to know the past—my mom's 92 years old and she's in the care home, and I've got her reading books on residential school because you know what? She thought they were always meant to be there—it was good for them. She never knew any different.

So many people in this province don't know the truth; they don't know the history, they don't know the truth. I would rather be out there taking every opportunity and every breath I've got to ensure that people know the truth. To tell them it's a statutory holiday, well, yes, that's fine. And I'm not opposed to it. You're understanding that I'm opposed to it; I am not opposed to it. I never said that.

I am saying I want it to be more. Personally, I want it to be more because I have learned so much in the past seven years and I have learned so much in the past two and a half, three years, since those first gravesites were determined to be there. I have been in contact with Manny Jules and his wife in Kamloops on many occasions, and we've had long discussions.

And I have been—I think probably one of the most profound experiences I had was in Waywayseecappo, and it was back in 2016. And one of their councillors, an elderly man on council, proudly, and I asked him about his day. And he said he just got back from Brandon; he was at a school reunion. And I kind of giggled, and I said, a school reunion? Like, did you go to school in Brandon? He said, yes, I went to residential school. And he told me about—he had never talked about it up until two years prior to that day. It was not talked about; it was not discussed. It was—he couldn't talk about it. But he told me about it and I listened, and I listened intently because, you know what, his words were very, very sincere.

I've been at locations in Manitoba where the cairns are, and I read the names, and it's not the names, it's the number of names. People need that experience; they need to understand how many children. And unless you see them listed and on a cairn—that has to happen every day, and it has to happen for a long, long time 'til we get people of Manitoba and beyond—it's our kids who are actually educating the older adults.

And there's so much that we can do, and you know what, I want to be a part of that. And I'll continue be a part of that long after. Whether you respect me or not, that's your decision. But you know what, that's in my heart; it's not part of my job.

Mr. Redhead: The minister did indicate that they're not aware of any other stat holiday that revolves around a culture or a religion. I'd like to remind the minister of Christmas and the significance of that stat holiday and what happens on Christmas as we reflect on that special day and we come together as family. It's a really important day, and I just wanted to add that in there, Mr. Acting Chair.

But the minister did also indicate that there are leaders out in Manitoba who do not want Orange Shirt Day a stat holiday. I ask the minister to please provide those names of those leaders she is referring to, and if not, why?

Ms. Clarke: I definitely will not provide them. There's confidentiality, and I will not provide them.

I, respectfully, will not. And you can believe me or don't. It doesn't—it's—whichever.

Mr. Redhead: If there's no names provided, they don't exist. I understand that, in my consultations with Indigenous leaders, Indigenous populations, being an Indigenous person myself, I know the significance of making Orange Shirt Day a statutory holiday and I wish the minister would support this as well.

I would like to ask the minister: You know, did she take last September 30th to take part in Orange Shirt Day activities, and does she think Manitobans, all Manitobans, should have that same opportunity to do so?

Ms. Clarke: I was not able to participate. I would've been at the one in Neepawa if I had been able to participate, but I believe we were in session on that day, and consequently, my staff member did attend in our constituency.

But I have attended in the past, Long Plain. I have been at the Brandon Friendship Centre and participated in theirs, and it's something I will continue to do. As I said, this isn't a part of my job; it's a part of who I am.

Mr. Redhead: I'd like to correct the minister, if that's okay. We were not in session on September 30th. So they did have an opportunity to participate in activities.

Nonetheless, does the minister support implementing all of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action, including the Call to Action No. 80: We will call upon the federal government in collaboration with Indigenous people to establish a statutory holiday, a National Day for Truth and Reconciliation to honour the survivors and their families, communities, to ensure that the public have a commemoration day for history and legacy for residential school survivors.

Does she support that?

* (16:30)

Ms. Clarke: Okay, I'm going to share a message. It's from our government, and I can support this.

Our government will continue advancing reconciliation on September 30th and every other day of the year, as will I, whether I'm in government or not. The National Day for Truth and Reconciliation and Orange Shirt Day is an important part of this journey, and we value and honour this day. We will continue to support Indigenous-led events through

the province, through the provision of financial resources to ensure September 30th is observed 'appropriately' and to a very wide extent.

We encourage all Manitobans to continue to listen, to learn and reflect on the history and legacy of residential schools, honour the survivors and remember those who did not come home, as will I.

Mr. Redhead: This subject is close to a lot of people's hearts and can get very emotional. So, I just wanted to put that out there.

You know, has the department developed a reconciliation strategy, as required by law?

Ms. Clarke: I think we've gone through that fairly exclusively.

And when you talk about reconciliation and these—it's also emotional for me. I think you know me well enough to know that it is—I take this very seriously and I know the work that's being done, I know the work that has been done in this department even when I wasn't the head of it has been significant, and I very much appreciate that.

Because our governments change, our ministers change, and I think the message that I leave within this government is extremely important. And there's—everyone in this government, especially in our department, know how seriously I take this, and the work that I intend to get done and that I want to continue. This should not end, not ever. And I take it very seriously.

And you know, we've talked about many of the initiatives that we're working on, you know, in the path to reconciliation: respect, engagement, understanding, action. This is not one thing.

And you know, you talk about, you know, which boxes have we checked; I don't see it that way. It—I know that there's a guideline and a structure to follow, but there's so much more that can be done. And, you know, it's a guideline, but we have to advance it in ways and at levels that people can understand it and can learn and that goes forward.

And you know, just to use for an example here, we committed \$2.5 million to begin the work of supporting identification, investigation, protection and commemoration of Indian residential school burial sites across the province. And this work is ongoing. You know, it doesn't end there.

The partnership with Public Service Commission, we are developing our shared journey towards the

truth and reconciliation, a mandatory course that's offered through the online learning management system. This 'crouse' consists of four modules; they're built around the principles of reconciliation that I just explained. And the first module is expected to be ready in early summer 2023, and the remaining modules by the end of 2023 calendar year.

The development of this course directly responds to recommendations 2 to 4 of the '22 Office of the Auditor General's report entitled Manitoba's implementation of the Path to Reconciliation Act as well as the TRC Call to Action No. 57 regarding training of public servants, for instance.

And there's a lot of work being done and we're not stopping. We're not slowing down. We're going to continue to work.

Mr. Redhead: I didn't hear an answer from the minister about, specifically, a reconciliation strategy that is required by law.

I know she went into a lot of programs and initiatives that are being implemented. But I'd like to ask the question again: Has the department developed a reconciliation strategy, as required by law, yes or no?

Ms. Clarke: Again, I will say yes.

I have already explained to you—we stated earlier in one of your questions that invitations have been sent out—they're going out to invite leadership to the table to work on this.

The Acting Chairperson (Len Isleifson): Okay, and again, I'll just remind everyone to please direct your comments through the Chair, rather than directly at each other.

So, with that, to the member from Thompson.

Mr. Redhead: I'm wondering what took so long for those letters to go out and to implement this strategy, as required by law, again. Is it because there—it is an election year and they feel that this is a strategy—oh, am I tipping the tables? Okay, sorry.

I'm just—so, my question is: What—why did it take so long for the letters to go out and start this process when it's been required by law for quite some time?

Ms. Clarke: Took so long because this department has always had a relatively small staff.

We have added additional staff, and you'll see one of them sitting at this table here, that are working on

this. That is their sole mandate, is to work on this strategy.

Mr. Redhead: In 2021, the minister, in Estimates said the department was working on a First Nation consultation policy. This was October 8th, 2021, page 3981 in Hansard.

Was this policy ever developed, and can the minister share it, if it's a yes?

Thank you.

Ms. Clarke: I can't speak to a former minister's words, I was not in attendance and there's no—I don't have that documentation in front of me.

Mr. Redhead: It's difficult to get answers, if any, from this department.

So, I'll go into some general questions; hopefully, we can get some clear answers.

So, can the minister break down what the funds set aside for grant assistance, on page 35, are for, please?

* (16:40)

Ms. Clarke: I'll share with the member opposite that these grants—our department is not just a First Nations department, of course; we also have the northern affairs communities, which is approximately 52 communities which are also part of our budget.

So we have operations and maintenance grants and capital projects that goes out to them; they are a part of that. We have consultation agreements, which is part of that. We also give core funding to a variety of associations: the friendship centres, for instance: 11 friendship centres; AMC; Métis Federation; Northern Association of Community Councils. Through the Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs we give to the Eagle Urban Transition Centre, MKO, the Manitoba Inuit Association, Aboriginal Council of Winnipeg, Moon Voices, Aboriginal languages of Winnipeg, Southern Chiefs, just to name a few.

And also there's Aboriginal Economic Resource Development Fund, reconciliation strategy, of course, is part of that. Also Manitoba Lifesaving Society, we do a lot of swimming lessons, et cetera, and water safety in northern Manitoba. And then there's also the Northern Healthy Foods Initiative as part of that—is a grant. So it goes to a lot of different groups and organizations, some for core funding and some for specific programs.

Mr. Redhead: I know the minister doesn't want to talk about her predecessor or what they've said, but it's the same department, so I'm going to ask a question on the channels project.

Last year in Estimates, the minister's predecessor informed us that his department wasn't involved in the consultation process for Lake St. Martin and Manitoba channels project. Can the minister outline if this is still the case?

Ms. Clarke: Yes, that project falls within Manitoba Transportation and Infrastructure.

Mr. Redhead: I would imagine it also overlaps with Indigenous reconciliation.

But does the minister think that it's an important project to build the channels project, if you think it's important to move forward in terms of reconciliation.

Ms. Clarke: I think it's a very important project. I was a very big part of the 2011 flood in my capacity as municipal official.

I've also worked with a lot of the communities since that time, you know, getting them back to their homes, getting their communities rebuilt. So I was a big part of that.

Yes. We continue to support it. MTI is the lead, but I was also a part of working with the same—many of the same communities in 2019 when we had that huge storm in October. And for many of them it was kind of like déjà vu, they were going through the same thing where there was massive evacuations and, at that time, the MTI minister was away, so I covered his role as well as mine as Indigenous minister. And it was a real learning curve, because we had all those communities in Winnipeg.

And, you know, we talked about—extensively, I came—I was at their meetings every day of the week, the morning meetings with our EMO department as well as Red Cross and the chiefs and all the leadership that was involved in it. And we're still seeing the effects of the 2011 flood and, I mean, I've lived in this province all my life and I've lived through many, many floods in my own community. I know the effects of these floods; I know the long-lasting effects on these communities.

So, do I support it? I absolutely support it. And I have supported it throughout, you know, on behalf of those First Nations, and I have supported them all the way.

Mr. Redhead: Climate change is contributing to larger floods and more devastating fires. Many of these are 'disproportionately' affected First Nations communities.

Has the minister spoken with any First Nation communities on the impact they're feeling from climate change?

Ms. Clarke: Actually, I have; I've had some pretty extensive conversations. Not just fires and floods, but tornados even more so, because in one summer, we had two tornados that hit First Nations Waywayseecappo and Long Plain, and I'm very familiar with both of those communities and what they went through, as well as the areas surrounding them.

And yes, when we see what's happening in other provinces right now, too, we all need to be concerned. But our more important—I think more importantly, we need to make sure that we have proper responses ready.

The wildfire that I was most involved with was Sapotaweyak, and that was probably back in 2018 or 2019—I don't remember the exact year—where basically, their whole community has been evacuated.

And we see this almost every summer. Like, we've been seeing this consistently, where they have to be removed from their homes. And, unfortunately, most of them are in fly-in communities, which is even more severe and more critical to get people out.

So, we're very aware of it within our government, and we're certainly taking steps to prevent so that we don't have to be, you know, evacuating people out of their homes and starting all over again.

The fear alone is unbelievable. I've seen it, and yes, we—climate change is a reality. I don't think this government is very aware of that, and we've always been working towards that end.

Mr. Redhead: Has the minister spoken with Peguis First Nation residents affected by flooding, and have they provided her with any suggestions on what actions can be taken to reduce flooding in that area?

Ms. Clarke: I was not minister last year when Peguis went through the very, very serious flood, but I—in previous years with Fisher River and the issues that it caused—but I don't think any of them were nearly as serious as what we saw last year, and I was in contact with the former chief.

We did discuss work that has to be done. We have committed to a working partnership with the federal government, with Peguis, Fisher River, too. And again, this is led through MTI, but I have been in contact with the minister and, as I indicated, the former chief in regards to this issue.

Mr. Redhead: Peguis First Nation was forcibly displaced from their land in 1907 and moved to their current location which is located on a flood plain.

However, they still don't have a permanent—don't have permanent flood protection in place, despite experiencing major flooding in five of the last 16 years. Every time there is a flood, people are displaced, homes are ruined, lives are upended.

Does the minister believe that a permanent flood protection would be an act of reconciliation?

Ms. Clarke: It would definitely be an act of reconciliation. Those conversations are taking place.

Mr. Redhead: Those conversations are taking place.

May I ask the minister to provide a list of people she's consulted with and when? Would you be able to provide your calendar, specific to that—the consultations—that last question?

Ms. Clarke: Yes. It's not in my calendar; it's with MTI. I have not had those consultations since I have been in this ministry.

* (16:50)

Mr. Redhead: Yes, I don't know—anyway, last year was a devastating year for wildfires in Manitoba. This is undoubtedly caused in part by climate change. Climate change will continue to drive record wildfire years, so it's important that the Province prepares accordingly to prevent damage to our forests or communities.

Can the minister explain whether she's consulted with Indigenous and northern communities on fire emergency response planning, including a co-ordinated plan for evacuation?

Ms. Clarke: We do not co-ordinate with First Nations on those responses. It goes through the Red Cross. They are not part of our Emergency Measures Organization.

We work directly with Red Cross, but they are the agency that works with First Nations.

Mr. Redhead: Okay. I'm going to—Mr. Acting Chair, I met with Mayor McIvor of Wabowden. I'm sure the minister knows where that is and who the—who she is.

She submitted some questions for me to ask the minister directly, through the Acting Chair, of course. So I'm going to read the questions for the minister on behalf of Mayor McIvor.

So, one, she has some—I have some—sorry. When it comes to funding Wabowden receives through the department, does the minister have the ability to put a hold on those fundings—on that funding?

Ms. Clarke: I'm not sure what you mean. Like, put a hold on their funding? It's core funding. I'm not sure how that would happen.

Mr. Redhead: Again, these are questions that was submitted by the mayor. So I guess that's a no?

But, so the second question from Mayor McIvor is: Wabowden has a bylaw regarding sled dogs that have been in effect since 1985, and Wabowden bylaws have been ministerial approved. The council is currently in the process of updating the bylaws. Does the department have the ability to veto any changes to Wabowden's bylaws?

Ms. Clarke: I just want to clarify right off. Wabowden is a non-incorporated community so, therefore, their reporting is different than incorporated communities, in such that their bylaws do require minister approval. Incorporated communities do not.

And funding for the Northern Affairs communities can be held if their reporting is not provided.

Mr. Redhead: We know that clean drinking water is important to everyone's health, and we know that many communities in Manitoba are on boil-water advisories. I'm wondering if the minister can provide the information of how many Northern Affairs communities are currently on boil-water advisories.

Ms. Clarke: I'm not sure if the member was asking in regards to First Nations or just generally in the North or across the province.

But I am aware that there are six long-term boil-water advisories remaining within the Northern Affairs communities, and they are Moose Lake, Sherridon, Pelican Rapids, Berens River, Red Sucker Lake and Mactheson [*phonetic*] Island. And there are already plans in place to address them.

But I do want to point out that one of the bigger issues that I certainly hear about in our department here is about—is the certification and training and having people to run those water plants. And that is a problem all across our province, but we have

committed \$1.5 million for upgrading certification training for these specific places.

And I will add that, in September 2020, the Office of the Auditor General report on provincial oversight of drinking water safety identified long-term boil-water advisories as a concern, and it recommended that the Province develop a strategy to address them, which we have. And the report also noted that IRNR water systems had high levels of non-compliance with provincial operator certification requirements.

And that brings me back to my point because, most often, they train the staff and they just get them trained and then they move to a different facility or whatever.

So, we've talked about partnering, too, where you can get the certification and go, perhaps, and do a couple of different communities. But it's especially

difficult in the North because they are so far apart, so it's just not as assessible as whatever we would like it to be.

But there is a \$0.84-million increase of two FTEs and \$303,000 in salary and benefits, plus 540 in other expenditures that are intended to achieve higher compliance with provincial drinking water safety and environmental—

The Acting Chairperson (Len Isleifson): Order. Order.

The hour being 5 o'clock, committee rise.

Call in the Speaker.

IN SESSION

The Acting Speaker (Len Isleifson): The hour being 5 o'clock, this House is adjourned and stands adjourned until 10 a.m. tomorrow.

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF MANITOBA

Monday, May 8, 2023

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