

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

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Speaker*

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MANITOBA LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
Forty-Second Legislature

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

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF MANITOBA

Wednesday, November 4, 2020

The House met at 1:30 p.m.

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

Please be seated.

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS

INTRODUCTION OF BILLS

Bill 208—The Wildlife Amendment Act (Protecting Property from Water and Wildlife Damage)

Mr. Derek Johnson (Interlake-Gimli): I move, seconded by the member of—*from* Swan River, that Bill 208, The Wildlife Amendment Act (Protecting Property from Water and Wildlife Damage).

Madam Speaker: It has been moved by the honourable member for Interlake-Gimli, seconded by the honourable member for Swan River (Mr. Wowchuk), that Bill 208, The Wildlife Amendment Act (Protecting Property from Water and Wildlife Damage), be now read a first time.

Mr. Johnson: I want to thank everyone who is participating in green shirt today in support of 4-H, for those of us that have had the privilege of utilizing.

I'm pleased to introduce this bill. It will empower municipalities, towns and northern affairs districts to make decisions on their watersheds, while freeing up conservation officers to work on important duties such as enforcement.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

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

Bill 301—The Winnipeg Humane Society Foundation Incorporation Amendment Act

Ms. Nahanni Fontaine (St. Johns): I move, seconded by the member for Thompson (Ms. Adams), that Bill 301, The Winnipeg Humane Society

Foundation Incorporation Amendment Act, be now read a first time.

Motion presented.

Ms. Fontaine: As an animal welfare advocate, I was happy to be approached to bring forward this public Bill 301, The Winnipeg Humane Society Foundation Incorporation Amendment Act, which will change the composition of the foundation's board and facilitate the appointment of members, Madam Speaker.

This bill will also ensure the long-term success of the foundation's assets, which will make sure that all animals can find the care that they deserve well into the future.

I look forward to the House passing this bill.

Miigwech.

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

Committee reports? Tabling of reports?

MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS

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

Would the honourable minister please proceed with his statement.

4-H Month

Hon. Blaine Pedersen (Minister of Agriculture and Resource Development): I rise today to celebrate the 4-H program in Manitoba on show your colours day. November has been proclaimed 4-H month to recognize the program's long-standing success and its impact on youth and communities.

From the beginning of the Canadian 4-H movement in Roland, Manitoba, in 1913 to today, the 4-H program has helped young people develop their individual skills. Building skills that nurture leadership and service to community through collaboration, diversity and understanding is at the heart of the 4-H program.

It has evolved from a rural-based farm and home program to a wide-ranging selection of projects.

While beef and horse clubs still abound across Manitoba, there are now hands-on projects like food preservation, starting a business, small machines, fitness and so much more.

Of course, 4-H wouldn't be complete without the nerve-wracking communications competitions, but this is more than offset by honing critical public skill-speaking skills, not to mention the travel opportunities across Canada and around the world. This is just another example of the leadership qualities young people learn in the 4-H program.

Our government is investing \$1 million to establish a new 4-H Manitoba trust scholarship program that will provide post-secondary scholarships to current and former 4-H members, beginning in 2021.

On a personal note, my wife Dianne and I were both involved in 4-H clubs as youth and then spent more than 10 years as leaders, as our family was in a 4-H beef club. To watch young people grow and mature in the 4-H program is such a rewarding experience.

Just as 4-H started out 107 years ago in rural Manitoba, the sky is the limit for 4-H to continue expanding into urban and northern communities. The program fosters responsible, caring and contributing community leaders, and we need to keep encouraging that right across our great province.

Thank you to the 2,000-plus Manitoba 4-H members and the 600-plus volunteer leaders who pledge: my head to clearer thinking, my heart to greater loyalty, my hands to larger service, my health to better living for my club, my community, my country and my world.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Can somebody indicate to me who might be responding to this? The honourable member for Burrows? [*interjection*]

Mr. Diljeet Brar (Burrows): Today is 4-H show your colours day, and friends of 4-H across across the province will show their support for this life-changing organization.

In 1913, 4-H clubs have been a vibrant part of Manitoba's history. These groups provide young people with opportunities to learn and develop skills that are important to their professional and personal lives. They also encourage young people to explore the agricultural sector.

Madam Speaker, 4-H starts as young as six years old and gives children, youth and young adults a place to feel safe, welcomed and included while learning new skills and having fun. There are opportunities for every member to explore their passions, whatever they may be.

All members enroll in a 4-H project that suits their age and interests, and can choose from over 80 different options. These projects help 4-H members learn new skills, practise setting goals, make decisions, develop responsibility, experience teamwork and have fun.

* (13:40)

The 4-H motto is Learn To Do By Doing, which is the foundation of any 4-H club. Every project and activity comes with hands-on activities to help members develop their skills. 4-H also teaches members about public speaking and helps them become more confident in their abilities. 4-H offers amazing scholarships, internships and mentorship opportunities, helping all members become the best they can be.

During the pandemic, 4-H has continued to find innovative ways to support its members and create community. 4-H continues to change as Manitoba changes. However, there is still room for more ethnic diversity in 4-H clubs to truly represent all Manitobans. It would also be amazing to see more 4-H 'glubs'—4-H groups in cities in Manitoba expanding from their primarily rural base.

I am proud to celebrate 4-H month here in Manitoba and I hope to see 4-H clubs continue at least another 107 years into the future, promoting their valuable message of head, heart, hands and health to all Manitobans.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Jon Gerrard (River Heights): Madam Speaker, I ask leave to speak to the minister's statement.

Madam Speaker: Is there leave for the member to respond to the ministerial statement? [*Agreed*]

Mr. Gerrard: The 4-H movement is very close to my heart. It's an incredible movement. My daughter Pauline participated in a 4-H program when she was growing up, learning about a local dairy farm close to where we were living.

It's an amazing movement which helps young people to develop leadership skills, to learn by doing

and participate in activities. It has deep roots in our agricultural community.

Pauline and many others like her were involved with learning about community engagement and involvement, about sustainable agriculture and food security, about taking care of our environment, about healthy living; for example, preventing diabetes. And, incidentally, this month is also diabetes month.

She also learned about the science and technology of the dairy farm. It's not always appreciated that those involved in agriculture are often at the very forefront of technological change as they keep up with the science and technology in order to survive and to do well in agriculture.

And, particularly, 4-H is about developing leadership skills, and in this area my daughter Pauline has developed excellent skills that are helping her and IISD survive to do well and to contribute to Manitoba's efforts toward sustainable development.

I congratulate all those who are involved with 4-H. 4-H has contributed much to Manitoba and will continue to contribute much in the years ahead.

Thank you.

MEMBERS' STATEMENTS

Madam Speaker: The honourable member for Arthur-Virden.

Mr. Doyle Piwniuk (Turtle Mountain): Sorry, Madam Speaker, it's Turtle Mountain.

Madam Speaker, I come here today to congratulate a group of dedicated volunteers called moving Nellie home. This committee was made up of volunteers—

Madam Speaker: Order. Order, please.

Can I just indicate so that the record shows completely, and we'll start again.

The honourable member for Turtle Mountain.

Moving Nellie Home

Mr. Doyle Piwniuk (Turtle Mountain): I come to you today to congratulate a group of dedicated volunteers called moving Nellie home. This committee is made up of volunteers who are committed to safeguarding two of Nellie McClung's most important homes, offered in living classrooms to students as a fascinating tourist attraction for all.

Nellie is best known for her two major achievements: being one of the leading women who

helped get the vote for the most of Manitoban women in 1916 and as a member of the Famous Five. In 1970, two of Nellie's most important homes that originally stood near Manitou, Manitoba, were saved and relocated to Archibald historical museum, nine miles away.

Sadly, the museum had closed. However, the moving Nellie home volunteers have turned Nellie's homes into tourist attractions within the community of Manitou.

In 1880—in 1890, Nellie Mooney began her career as a teacher at Hazel School just north of Manitou at age 16. She boarded next door with the Hasselfield family in what is described as a warm, welcoming home.

Now called the Hazel Cottage, visiting at this home will take you back to Nellie's earliest days as a budding believer in equal rights. Nellie married Wes McClung, and they had four of their five children in Manitou and raised them in the McClung House, the first home that they purchased in 1899.

This is where she penned two of her 16 books, presentations for speaking tours and speeches to promote the suffragette movements and women's rights to vote.

While touring these two homes, there is also a rustic log house from 1884 which offers a gift shop, 'admits' desk and tourism centre. This past year the historical site received funding from the provincial government and from the personal donations to build a new public washroom.

Thanks to all the volunteers that made this site a fantastic tourist attraction in the constituency of Turtle Mountain, as well as for the province of Manitoba.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Muninder Sidhu

Mr. Wab Kinew (Leader of the Official Opposition): I rise to pay tribute to a great Manitoban. I would like my colleagues and the people of Manitoba to know the name Muninder Sidhu forevermore.

Now, Muninder was a generous, hard-working and super-fun family man and business owner. He brought people together. He loved to socialize.

People say he prepared 300 tax returns for community members every year, free of charge, just to help out. He also helped many people immigrate

here to Manitoba, helping them settle, but also helping them find work through his business.

Now, Muninder also had a sharp political mind, but, to be clear, he was not partisan. He worked with Terry Duguid; he worked with Markus Chambers, our colleague from St. Norbert and myself. He sold countless memberships. He organized many, many delegates and he worked tirelessly to help me in my leadership campaign.

He taught me about Sikhism along the way and he corrected my mispronunciations of Punjabi with a laugh and with a smile. Now, without his help and the help of many others, I would not be the leader of the Manitoba NDP today, and I can tell you that having the honour of sitting in this chair in this Chamber is the second highest honour of my life. The only honour higher than I can imagine is having earned the support of somebody like Muninder.

Sadly, we lost Mr. Sidhu to an unexpected illness just a few weeks ago. He leaves behind his legacy and his business to his wonderful wife, Meetu, and their great two school-aged children, who meant the world to him. Now we send our condolences and we support you as we make it through this most difficult year.

But Muninder Sidhu will live on in our hearts and in our minds and now in the permanent record of Manitoba.

Brandon General Hospital Foundation

Mr. Len Isleifson (Brandon East): Madam Speaker, the Brandon General Hospital Foundation was created in 1980 by a group of hospital board members who recognized the need to establish a non-profit registered charity whose purpose was to augment funding for quality health care that would benefit all who had served by the community hospital.

The current Brandon Regional Health Centre Foundation board has a mission, and I quote, to raise funds to support health-care needs in the regional community. End of quote.

The foundation gives back to the health centre in the form of equipment purchases, and just in the 2019-20 fiscal year, \$1.2 million of equipment and services have been procured.

In 1998, the foundation launched the Healthy Futures campaign to raise funds to make the BRHC a state-of-the-art health-care facility. The \$1.8-million goal was achieved and it helped support the clinical services redevelopment of the BRHC campus.

In the spring of 2004, A Bed for You, A Bed for Me campaign was launched and they raised \$1.5 million to replace 242 hospital in-patient beds.

Madam Speaker, 2008 saw the foundation embark on its most ambitious fundraising campaign, Westman Cares! for the western Manitoba CancerCare program. Westman Cares! evolved into the Sense of Home campaign targeted at building a residence for CancerCare programs.

The \$2.85-million goal was reached with the help of a leadership gift from the Murray Auto Group and the residence has fondly been named Murray House.

In September 2014, the foundation launched the Room for Renewal campaign and raised \$60,000 for the creation, renovation and rejuvenation of the Brandon Regional Health Centre.

Like everyone else, 2020 has been very difficult for the foundation due to COVID-19. Their 30th annual gala was cancelled and, unfortunately, the board has also made the decision to cancel their traditional festival kick-off to the Tree of Lights campaign.

Madam Speaker, I ask my colleagues to join me in thanking Kim Wallis, her staff, the BRHC Foundation board and all the volunteers for the work that they are doing in our community.

Thank you.

* (13:50)

Madam Speaker: The honourable member for The Pas-Kameesak (Ms. Lathlin)?

An Honourable Member: Madam Speaker, the member from Flin Flon will be taking the place of the member from The Pas-Kameesak.

Madam Speaker: All right.

Supports for the North During Pandemic

Mr. Tom Lindsey (Flin Flon): Thank you, Madam Speaker. It's my honour to rise on behalf of all of my northern caucus colleagues today.

With the arrival of the second wave of COVID-19, we've seen record numbers of cases in Manitoba, including in Northern Manitoba. This government had several months to prepare for the second wave, but they failed to deliver a back-to-school plan before schools open. They failed to increase COVID testing capacity. They failed to hire more contact tracers and instead of investing in health

care, they've continued their health-care cuts, particularly in the North.

That might explain why this government has also failed to protect northern Manitobans from the second wave. There are no advertisements or signage on the highway leading into northern Manitoba, nor is there anyone enforcing the northern travel ban. This lack of awareness has meant that First Nations communities have had to organize their own checkpoints in order to protect their people—something this government has failed to do.

Now more than ever, all northern Manitobans need supports from this government. Remote First Nations are especially susceptible to COVID outbreaks due to inadequate housing, lack of space to self isolate, not to mention that they along with us in the rest of the North are forced to go to Winnipeg for medical attention where there have been several outbreaks have been declared.

There has also outbreaks declared in Cross Lake, The Pas, Thompson and other places throughout the North, and now there's an alarming outbreak at Keeyask dam where 31 workers so far have tested positive. Many of the site's 760 workers live in surrounding First Nations communities, meaning that this outbreak could have significant reverberations. As of now, there has not been meaningful dialogue between the province, hydro and those First Nations communities who are calling on the government and Hydro to be part of the conversation.

I am calling on the government today to provide more supports for Manitoba's northerners, especially the communities most susceptible to the COVID outbreaks.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Chris Chipman

Ms. Audrey Gordon (Southdale): Madam Speaker, I am thrilled to have this opportunity to acknowledge the accomplishments of Chris Chipman, a dedicated community leader and former president of the Niakwa Park Residents' Association.

During his 27 years of service as president, Chris devoted countless hours to events designed to encourage community connections, as well as countless projects to improve the neighbourhood's esthetics. In his early years one of his most recognized undertakings as president was the historical restoration of the beautiful and unique street signs in the community. With Chris's leadership the association

was able to complete fundraising for the project through grant applications and the hosting of local barbeques and garage sales.

In addition to the street signs, in 2015 Chris collaborated with the City of Winnipeg to replace the missing macaw image on the street signs. To the delight of previous and new residents, Chris also organized a 55th and 60th anniversary event, updated the Papoose Park's old wooden play structure for the safety and enjoyment of the community's children and helped in the production of the book, Niakwa Park: 60 Years of History.

Annual events Chris spearheaded include the summer plant exchange for gardeners, fall movie night in the park and the Christmas sleigh ride for kids that gathers food donations for Winnipeg Harvest and toy donations for the Christmas Cheer Board.

An avid sports fan, Chris made sure to include events like bingo bowling, golf tournaments and an annual Grey Cup pool.

Please join me in paying tribute to Chris's many contributions and dedication to the Niakwa Park Residents' Association. His services deeply appreciated by all residents and has left an indelible mark on the entire community.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

ORAL QUESTIONS

COVID-19 Financial Assistance Support for Small Business

Mr. Wab Kinew (Leader of the Official Opposition): Madam Speaker, small businesses are suffering right across our province. They're running out of time, they're running out of money.

What they're asking for from this government is more direct financial assistance just to help them keep the lights on, to help them stay in operation. But this Premier and his Cabinet have not been listening. Instead, they've only been focused on putting out Cabinet ministers to spread false information.

What are the businesses saying? Well, they're saying—and this is—*[interjection]*

Madam Speaker: Order.

Mr. Kinew: —a direct quote here: It's simply not true based on the numbers and restrictions that we have. That was the CFIB.

They're saying: It's simply not true and there's—*[interjection]*

Madam Speaker: Order.

Mr. Kinew: –so much more that can be done. That was the Winnipeg Chamber of Commerce.

Local business owners are even clearer. Here's a quote: Not only has my business completely been unsupported by the Province, but my employees have yet to receive any help whatsoever.

When will the Premier stop with the falsehoods and instead start with helping small business?

Hon. Brian Pallister (Premier): Well, I can't stop, Madam Speaker, on the member's accusation, because I haven't begun. I simply tell the facts.

The facts are 10,000 businesses so far in this province have been advantaged by our gap program financing. And, Madam Speaker, no other province has a program like this, that works as well as this, to get money out to businesses when they need it, where they need it.

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

Mr. Kinew: Tepid applause from his colleagues because they know that that is not true.

Madam Speaker, what the Premier is saying is, quote—[*interjection*]

Madam Speaker: Order.

Mr. Kinew: –simply not true. End quote. That's from the CFIB. That's from the Winnipeg Chamber of Commerce. That's what they're saying about this Premier's failure to help small business.

Now, yesterday, we uncovered that they have—[*interjection*]

Madam Speaker: Order.

Mr. Kinew: –only spent 30 per cent of what has been allocated that was supposedly to go out the door to help small businesses. Well, back in my school days, Madam Speaker, 30 per cent—that meant that you were failing.

This government is failing to help small businesses. The time to act is now, before any more businesses have to go under.

Will the Premier please stand in the House today and announce new programs to help small business?

Mr. Pallister: I appreciate any question on small business and supporting small business from an NDP member. After years of raiding the coffers of small

businesses, it's pretty rich for the member to try to pretend he's a defender.

Madam Speaker, I've been a defender of small business—and a small-business person, as have many of the people on this side of the House—and I can tell the member that we are not just 30 per cent out, we're 62 per cent committed on our budgeted amount of a quarter of a billion dollars already.

And, Madam Speaker, we've helped 22,000 people get back to work, in partnership with small businesses, with our wage support programs, \$5,000 per person subsidy support to match their contribution up to 20 employees. That's \$100,000 per business, and thousands and thousands of Manitobans have jobs because of that program.

Madam Speaker, what the member has proposed, frankly, is shutting down small businesses. Now he's trying to say he's a defender of them. He's got a little bit of a cross to bear to explain that.

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

COVID-19—Education System Funding for Staffing and PPE

Mr. Wab Kinew (Leader of the Official Opposition): Madam Speaker, the only thing this Premier wants to spend money on is billboards with the failing tag line of ready, set, go.

We know that there is an urgent need to help—[*interjection*]

Madam Speaker: Order.

Mr. Kinew: –schools in Manitoba.

Madam Speaker, teachers are already burned out, and we're only two months into the school year. Teachers are resigning mid-year. Parents are worried about the safety of their kids. And the students themselves, we know that they are not getting the quality of education that they deserve. At the same time, there's \$85 million in federal funding that is still unspent on the part of this provincial government.

With that in mind, I would ask the Premier a few simple questions: What's wrong with hiring teachers? What's wrong with renting more classroom space? And what's wrong with spending a little money to keep kids in class safe in Manitoba?

Hon. Brian Pallister (Premier): On his few simple questions, Madam Speaker, the answer to all of them

is the same. There's nothing wrong with it. That's why we're doing it.

In respect of expenditures, the member should be aware of so far \$714 million in this fiscal year to help businesses: \$714 million through supports such as conditional non-repayable loans; working capital grants; targeted wage subsidies; student wage subsidies as well—a record number of students got jobs this year, this summer, because of our programs, Madam Speaker; deferred fees and interest; the MPI rebates; the MPI lowering of rates; the workers comp lowering of rates; the workers comp rebates; infrastructure spending. And, Madam Speaker, \$200 million of PPE came from Manitoba's small-business suppliers.

* (14:00)

We're supporting our small-business community. We're going to keep doing that, and we look forward to getting through this together with all our small businesses as well.

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

Front-Line Health Workers Request for Increase

Mr. Wab Kinew (Leader of the Official Opposition): Unfortunately, we've learned not to trust the things that the Premier says here in question period. He says that there are masks here in Manitoba, and yet nurses working at the bedside are still begging for access to an N95.

The Premier announces that he's hired millions of nurses. There's two nurses in Manitoba for every citizen, according to this Leader of the PC Party. In fact, Madam Speaker, according to the college of nurses, there were 13,617 registered nurses at the end of last year. Today, there are 13,444. During the pandemic, there are 150 fewer nurses today in Manitoba.

Will the Premier finally admit that his cuts are wrong and that it is high time for him to hire more nurses and health-care aides to work at the bedside?

Hon. Brian Pallister (Premier): Again, Madam Speaker, the member's record on truth tells us that if it were an island, it would be uninhabited by that member. And the fact is that we have hired significant numbers of nurses here over the last number of months and we'll continue to do that.

But the fact of the matter is, Madam Speaker, that the member departs, unfortunately, from the facts in his preamble, makes it difficult to give credence to his question. I can only say this: our capacity for ICU, for example, is expanding as a result of planning work that was done over a number of months. I can tell Manitobans that we have the capacity for an additional 100 ICU beds before the end of the month. We hope they're not needed but it's there.

So when the member foments fear, I remind him that fear is not a plan. We have a plan. He has fear.

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

Mr. Kinew: The question of how many nurses working at the bedside is a very important one. We may have the ability to scale up space for 100 additional ICU beds in Manitoba. However, the real 'bottleneck'—the real bottleneck that our system confronts is the requirement to have the nurses to be able to staff those spaces, and currently we do not.

And because of this government's cuts and under-investment in health care, it has exacerbated the situation. And that's why we need answers today, because we need to know if the government is going to continue with the same cut-first-and-dodge-questions-later approach, or will they finally start to hire new nurses in Manitoba?

It's a simple question: As we get deeper into the second wave, when will this government start to hire nurses, health-care aides and people to work at the bedside of our beloved seniors and vulnerable Manitobans?

Mr. Pallister: The member needs to remind himself, and in particular at this point in time, that the simple dull repetition of erroneous statements does not give them a single additional element of truth.

Madam Speaker, 600-plus million dollars more investing in health care than the NDP ever did. Just on the category of nurses, just on the contract—contact-tracing issue alone, we have more than double the number of nurses available to do that: 290 nurses we—60 now from the Red Cross in addition. StatsCan: I raised with the premier—the Prime Minister yesterday that they have made an offer to assist us in terms of people from StatsCan, and so those resources are coming in.

I think the challenge the member faces here is to make sure that he doesn't foment unnecessary fear

among people to try to gain partisan advantage at a time when people want hope, and they deserve to know, Madam Speaker, that we're acting and we are taking precautionary measures in terms of additional hiring to prepare capacity beyond present needs and beyond the needs we anticipate for some time.

That hope needs to be there for Manitobans now. Fear is not a plan. Panic is not a plan. We have a plan.

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

Physicians' Open Letter Regarding Pandemic Health Minister's Response

Mr. Wab Kinew (Leader of the Official Opposition): We have seen many attacks by this government on front-line health-care workers over the past four years, but perhaps none were as bad as the attack we saw yesterday from this Minister of Health on the doctors of Manitoba.

This Minister of Health, rather than accepting responsibility of the need to do better, decided to cast aspersions and question the motivation of physicians who are offering live-saving treatment in Manitoba.

These are people who took an oath to do no harm. These are people who sacrifice their own well-being to serve others. These are people who are speaking out at potentially grave professional risk in order to offer a public service for all Manitobans.

We need a clear statement from the Premier: Will the Premier apologize to the doctors of Manitoba, and will he tell his Health Minister to do the same?

Hon. Brian Pallister (Premier): For the member opposite, who has such a record of being unaccountable, to attack a minister who has dedicated himself so, so—in such a focused way for so long during a pandemic just clearly demonstrates his inability to understand that we're in a battle together and that we need to face up to the realities that Team Manitoba needs everyone on it, not an attempt to play word games and score partisan points.

The fact of the matter is we are increasing testing capacity. We quadrupled it over the last number of weeks. We've shortened wait times. We've got—we're building peace of mind for people by focusing on deterrent behaviours, reducing contact numbers. We're focusing on COVID, Madam Speaker. Let's focus on COVID.

There's room for fear; we accept that. We understand that. This is a stressful time for everyone.

We're addressing every one of the issues that the doctors raised. This minister is leading the way in doing that.

Madam Speaker, this isn't the time for partisan games. This is the time to focus on fighting COVID together.

Physicians' Open Letter Regarding Pandemic Health Minister's Response

MLA Uzoma Asagwara (Union Station): Yesterday, the Minister of the Health said that intensive-care doctors were causing chaos in the health system and that he questioned their motivations. Their motivations are this: to protect the public and to save lives.

Doctors have responded, calling the minister's words a profound insult to health-care teams, appalling and outrageous.

Madam Speaker, these are the people on the front lines of this fight.

Will the minister apologize to intensive-care doctors for questioning the motivations of our front-line health professionals?

Hon. Cameron Friesen (Minister of Health, Seniors and Active Living): The message of this government, the message of this minister to doctors is unchanged: thank you every day for continuing to show up, to be brave and enter the workplace, to serve your patients with courage, to put that care first. That's our message. That is unchanged.

We need our front-line workers right now more than ever, and I think what I reflect on in that letter is that some doctors are really acknowledging that they are scared. And there are many Manitobans that are scared, and that is why, as a government, it's our responsibility to take action to create that safety and communicate to people that we're working hard to keep them safe.

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

MLA Asagwara: The motivation of intensive-care doctors and the motivation of all health-care professionals is to save lives. They do not want ICU capacity to run out and they do not want to be forced to decide who lives and who dies.

Doctors have raised these concerns with the minister for over a year, but their concerns have been ignored. Now, in this crisis, the minister is questioning

the motives of those doctors who are struggling to save lives?

Madam Speaker, this minister is failing. He's failing Manitobans, he's failing our medical professionals who need his support.

Why won't the minister apologize for the harm he has caused our health-care professionals?

Mr. Friesen: To be clear, it's a broad array of doctors, just not intensive-care doctors.

In this letter, they do express concern about system capacity. We take that to heart. We have been working hard, we have confidence in our leadership, those senior leaders in our system whose responsibility it is to build and reconfigure our health-care system even as COVID numbers begin to climb.

We have confidence in these people. If these doctors are expressing they aren't having confidence, we need to change that. And that is why I committed—*[interjection]*

Madam Speaker: Order.

Mr. Friesen: That is why we've committed to provide a technical briefing at a level of detail that the doctors have not seen before, that we will give that to doctors—let them see that plan, let them have confidence in that plan. Because, Madam Speaker, now more than ever, Manitobans need to have confidence.

* (14:10)

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

MLA Asagwara: Madam Speaker, this government says Manitobans need to get on board with Team Manitoba. That's what we hear in this House every day.

But who are they pushing overboard? Businesses that are going under, nurses and aides that don't have access to PPE and intensive-care doctors who are begging this government to do what must be done to ensure ICU beds aren't overwhelmed.

Instead, the minister questions their motivations and says they're causing chaos? No, Madam Speaker. No.

This minister is failing and he is failing badly.

Instead of gaslighting our doctors, will he apologize to all of our health-care professionals that he is letting down? *[interjection]*

Madam Speaker: Order.

Mr. Friesen: Madam Speaker, our gratitude for our front-line workers, including doctors, is unchanged. We've expressed it every day. We need our health-care system now more than ever.

And we have expressed, as well, that while the opposition continues to try to make things partisan, we are expressing confidence in the senior leadership that is leading our pandemic response. We have great doctors, and no one reflects on the fact that they are showing up for work every day and working hard to keep their patients safe. We have other doctors whose responsibility it is to plan the system, to make it ready for pandemic response.

I assure those doctors that work is going on on their behalf and on behalf of all Manitobans.

PPE for Child-Care Centres Medical Grade Mask Availability

Ms. Malaya Marcelino (Notre Dame): Madam Speaker, quality masks will be critical for Manitobans as we head into winter months. That's the message from Canada's chief public health officer, Dr. Theresa Tam, yet, the Department of Families won't provide medical-grade masks for home care—for home daycare. And worse still, the masks that they are sending to centre-based child care aren't medical grade, despite the government's commitment to do so.

Child-care centres have told us that the masks that they are receiving aren't medical grade.

Why is the minister failing to protect our children?

Hon. Heather Stefanson (Minister of Families): I thank the member for the question.

Once again, she is putting false information on the record, Madam Speaker. I will say that we have provided nine—almost 1 million individual PPE items, including 906,700 masks, 7,580 pieces of eye protection. We are providing those masks to the centres for those who are working in the centres and for those children who don't come with their own masks as well.

We are continuing to work through this pandemic with the child-care sector. We have a tremendous amount of respect for all those who work in the system, and we will continue to do what's in the best interest of those children and the workers within the child-care system.

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

Ms. Marcelino: Madam Speaker, again, the government put out notice that they would be providing medical-grade masks to child-care centres, but child-care centres have told us that these masks are not up to grade.

It's a familiar problem with the Pallister government. They were unprepared and ordered \$16 million of masks for medical professionals that can't be used. Madam Speaker, 5 million N95 masks were ordered, but the Province failed to first ensure that the masks met medical standard. It's a failure of the Pallister government to properly prepare for this pandemic.

What is the minister going to do about \$16 million in improperly purchased masks and masks for child-care centres that aren't medical grade?

Mrs. Stefanson: Well, Madam Speaker, we take our advice in health care from the Chief Provincial Public Health Officer, and we are providing those masks and those PPEs to the child-care centres based on the—on his advice.

So I'm not sure what the member opposite is talking about. She's putting false information on the record once again.

What I will say, Madam Speaker, is that the important thing through all of this is that we are able to provide child care for those families who are working in our health system, those who are helping in—to work in the pandemic. We are helping to match those families with the child care that they need when they need it, Madam Speaker.

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

Ms. Marcelino: Madam Speaker, the Minister of Health in Estimates this week said that, in the first wave of the pandemic, the province was days away from running out of personal protective equipment.

The Pallister government was not prepared for this medical emergency, and the response has been a mess: \$16 million in N95 masks were purchased that can't be used as intended, and child-care centres aren't getting the medical-grade masks that they were promised. It's a failure of leadership and a failure of planning.

What is the minister going to do to fix this mess?

Hon. Brian Pallister (Premier): The world was caught unawares by the pandemic, Madam Speaker, but the efforts were made and they were critically

important to secure PPE for all our front-line workers. Those efforts were made and, if the member's position is they shouldn't have been made, then that's the position of the opposition.

We believe those efforts should have been made, and they were. And, Madam Speaker, I guarantee you that if we hadn't ordered that PPE it wouldn't have been here, and neither would a lot of other PPE. If we'd used the processes put in place by the previous government, we'd have been waiting months for PPE.

So, instead we went ahead and got the PPE, put it in place where it could be used. And if the NDP position is we shouldn't have ordered PPE, let them put it on the record.

Headingley Correctional Facility Mitigation of COVID-19 Outbreak

Ms. Nahanni Fontaine (St. Johns): As the minister continues to delay action on rising cases and outbreaks across the province, the situation in our correctional facilities, Madam Speaker, continues to be exacerbated.

There are now 112 confirmed cases of COVID-19 at Headingley correctional facility alone, Madam Speaker. A Manitoban currently housed there says that the minister's handling of the COVID-19 outbreak is, and I quote, like treating us like we're sick animals. They are just throwing us in a cell with nothing and not even trying to help us at all. End quote. This is simply shameful.

What is the minister's plan to immediately address the outbreak at Headingley correctional facility?

Miigwech.

Hon. Cliff Cullen (Minister of Justice and Attorney General): I thank the member for the question that gives me an opportunity to reiterate all the work that we've done over the past several months with our public health officials.

Even starting back as early as April the 8th, our corrections senior management team have been sending pandemic operational guidelines to staff on a weekly basis to ensure all involved understand the measures being taken to protect their safety and the inmates' safety.

These guidelines have been continually assessed and readjusted in consultation with public health and other health experts. Safety of inmates and staff is paramount and will continue to be paramount.

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

Correctional Facilities Testing and PPE

Ms. Nahanni Fontaine (St. Johns): And yet, the cases of COVID-19 continue to rise in Headingley and across all of our correctional facilities in the province.

Each and every person in facilities should have access to the appropriate medical masks to prevent further spread. Many folks are explaining situations of reusing cloth masks for days in these facilities where physically distancing is not an option, Madam Speaker. And also, because of delays in testing and inaction on testing all people within the facilities, entire cellblocks of people are getting infecting with COVID-19.

Will the minister begin testing each and every single person in our correctional facilities and will he provide appropriate PPE to everyone in correctional facilities?

Hon. Cliff Cullen (Minister of Justice and Attorney General): Madam Speaker, thanks for the opportunity to correct the record.

Obviously, testing has been done. We've completed over 850 tests of inmates to date. Testing will continue at the direction of our public health officials. I will say that individuals that are tested positive, those cohorts are placed together. Clearly, inmates that are not showing symptoms are housed in different areas of our facilities.

Manitoba has been a leader in obtaining PPE, and medical-grade PPE is available to our staff. We've been a leader when it comes to using technology and fogging equipment in our corrections facilities. Again, safety is paramount for both our inmates and our staff.

* (14:20)

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

Incarcerated Individuals Update for Families

Ms. Nahanni Fontaine (St. Johns): The falsities that the minister puts on the record day in and day out are so ridiculous for folks of—that are currently incarcerated that are at risk.

Madam Speaker, there's nowhere for folks to go to escape COVID, and the minister is literally doing

nothing to prevent the spread. Every day, we're hearing more and more about loved ones being increasingly more concerned about the mental health and physical well-being of their loved ones who are currently incarcerated. They have no information about how their loved ones are doing, and they are being left in the dark on how dire the situation actually is.

What is the minister doing to communicate the reality that's going on in correctional facilities across Manitoba to the families of individuals that are currently housed in correctional facilities?

Hon. Cliff Cullen (Minister of Justice and Attorney General): Well, Madam Speaker, the accusations the member are making are completely false. We have trained individuals, including public health officials and nurses, in each of our facilities that are dealing with these cases on an individual basis.

We're working very closely with our staff in there to make sure that both the staff and inmates are protected. Inmates have the ability to call and talk to their friends and relatives. And, certainly, everything we are doing is in terms of providing the best possible health for our inmates and our staff. We are not playing politics of fear, like the opposition; we are determined to make sure inmates stay safe and our staff stay safe.

COVID-19 Pandemic Survey Regarding Curfew

Mr. Mark Wasyliw (Fort Garry): Madam Speaker, after going into hiding on Friday, the Premier emerged to put out a sham survey on whether or not a curfew should happen in the city of Winnipeg. It asked questions like—and I'm not making this up—whether health workers heading into the hospital for an overnight shift should be exempt from a potential curfew.

Now, everybody knows the answer to that question, including our hapless Premier. This is more about PR spin from the Pallister government than any sincere attempt to keep Manitobans safe.

Why has this government deflected again from its responsibility to lead during this crisis?

Hon. Brian Pallister (Premier): Just yesterday the NDP took the position that volunteers were cheap and decided that they would oppose any request or ask for Manitobans to come forward and assist during this time of incredible need. This is incredible, but not without precedent. The member who just posed the

question said in the summer that charities are well-meaning, but oftentimes just trying to plug the holes, he said.

Yes, well, Madam Speaker, Manitobans have some values, and one of those is they step up when they're asked to help. And we've led the stat for years, since it was compiled for the first time, apparently, in leading the country in volunteerism.

So I'd just like—I just have to say to the member I don't think there's anything wrong with asking Manitobans to step up and help, and I don't think there's anything wrong with asking Manitobans for their opinion either.

Madam Speaker: Order, please.

And I would ask members that when somebody's speaking remotely, in order to be able to hear it properly for all members, I would ask for everybody's co-operation not to heckle.

The honourable member for Fort Garry, on a supplementary question.

Mr. Wasyliw: Manitobans' response to this crisis should be guided by public health not cynical PR surveys that ask whether health-care workers should be allowed to go to work at their own hospitals. You know, in normal times this could be dismissed as cynical politics. Obviously, these aren't normal times, and the Province is wasting precious time and even more precious resources while Manitobans continue to get ill and succumb to the virus.

I ask this Premier when he will start putting the health and safety of Manitobans over crass political interests of his government. Manitobans need action, not PR spin.

Mr. Pallister: Well, the member's right on one thing, and public health should take the lead on a public health issue. That's why we decry, on this side of the House, the members opposite criticizing our public health leaders day in and day out. That's why—the members can't—*[interjection]*

Madam Speaker: Order.

Mr. Pallister: —have it both ways on the other side of the House. They can't have it both ways.

Madam Speaker—*[interjection]*

Madam Speaker: Order.

Mr. Pallister: —they're praising those who would ask questions, Madam Speaker, and that's fine. That's

perfectly good. But not to the extent of attacking our health leaders, like Dr. Brent Roussin.

So what the members on the other side of the House are trying to do, Madam Speaker, is have it both ways. They say we should listen to everyone like, I don't know, 200 doctors—and I agree. But then they say we shouldn't listen to anyone when they have a view on a curfew.

It's a total contradiction. The member's caught in his own filibuster.

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

Mr. Wasyliw: Madam Speaker, the pandemic has certainly brought out the true colours of the PC caucus members.

For example, we have the member for Radisson (Mr. Teitsma), who firmly opposes any curfew and is encouraging people online to take his position—he's online right now liking and promoting the positions of those who say that they will not obey public health rules. And to quote just one of them: I'll take the risk and fight the fine in court. Now, the member for Radisson indicated on social media that he likes that position.

Will the Premier stand up today and absolutely confirm to this House that he will educate his caucus of anti-maskers and anti-vaxxers and ensure that they will start to listen and promote public health advice?

Mr. Pallister: Well, the NDP's where they are, and the little rump that they have, Madam Speaker, is evidence of the reason. And the reason is they stopped listening to Manitobans. They even stopped asking Manitobans for views.

Since we came in as a government we've had over 100,000 different instances of input by the citizens of Manitoba, and on very, very important public issues, Madam Speaker, and we will continue to consult with Manitobans and we will continue to respect their voice.

The members opposite even went so far, Madam Speaker, as to promise they wouldn't raise the PST and then to eliminate a referendum rule which would have required them to listen to Manitobans, and then they went further and stopped listening to each other and staged a rebellion.

So, I don't need any lecture from the NDP, and the people of Manitoba know they don't need one either

about listening to anybody. They don't even listen to each other over there.

Physicians' Open Letter Regarding Pandemic Health Minister's Response

Mr. Dougald Lamont (St. Boniface): On October 22nd, Manitoba Liberals called for the Health Minister to be replaced for a second-wave pandemic response that has been nothing less than a fiasco.

Every day since then, the minister has given us more and more reasons justifying our call. Yesterday, he attacked over 200 doctors for causing chaos when all they were doing was pleading with this minister to just do his job. They deserve praise for their courage in speaking up.

Is the Premier going to remove his Health Minister today for undermining public health, or will he continue defending and rewarding the incompetence that has put Manitobans' health and economy at risk?

Hon. Brian Pallister (Premier): Wilson-Raybould—I mean, the Liberals kicked out a minister for standing up and doing the right thing.

I don't need any arrogant advice from that member about how to respect people in a Cabinet, Madam Speaker. The Liberals know how to disrespect their own people well enough.

The fact of the matter is this minister has taken the lead on increasing testing capacity by quadrupling it. This minister's taken the lead on improving capacity throughout the summer months—149 new ventilators. This minister's taken the lead in shortening wait times, hiring nurses, increasing peace of mind for Manitobans by taking the necessary leadership steps, in partnership with the very health leaders the NDP and Liberals decry and criticize in this House, Madam Speaker.

That's what this minister has done and that's what he's going to darn well keep doing.

Madam Speaker: The honourable leader—or, pardon me, the honourable member for St. Boniface, on a supplementary question.

Small Business Support Government Record

Mr. Dougald Lamont (St. Boniface): I table an article from the Free Press in which the Winnipeg and Manitoba chambers of commerce—*[interjection]*

Madam Speaker: Order.

Mr. Lamont: —in which the Winnipeg and Manitoba chambers of commerce, entrepreneurs and Canadian federation of business confirmed what Manitoba Liberals have been saying for months: the Pallister government's business supports are some of the most useless in the country.

I've talked to small businesses who aren't eligible for a dime of provincial support and who are facing immediate insolvency because this government refused to act.

Now, the Premier has no problem running up Manitoba's debt when he personally benefits from a \$200 cheque or a home insurance tax cut.

* (14:30)

Is this Premier going to stand idly by and allow a small-business apocalypse in Manitoba, or will he step up now with supports to help them survive?

Hon. Brian Pallister (Premier): Well, I always appreciate and I'm filled with gratitude, Madam Speaker, when a Liberal stands up in this place and talks about supporting small businesses. I really appreciate that, and I thank the member for that.

Madam Speaker, we're covering up to 50 per cent of the wages for hires in our small-business sector. No other province is doing that. That allows 20 people to be hired, \$5,000 per—\$100,000; no other province is doing that, not one.

Madam Speaker, we're 60 per cent of the way there in our budgeted amounts, and we're prepared to go beyond them if need be because this pandemic isn't a sprint, it's a marathon. And the member can try to score points criticizing our programs all he wants, but over 20,000 Manitoba businesses have benefited from them, and that's a good deal for them.

Government's PPE Purchases Health Canada Guidelines

Ms. Cindy Lamoureux (Tyndall Park): When it comes to keeping Manitobans safe during the pandemic, this government has been far from helpful.

Back in August, this government spent \$1.2 million on hand sanitizer made from fuel-grade ethanol that did not meet safety regulations.

Today, we found out that the government spent 13 million US dollars on N95 masks that didn't meet regulations either.

What is the government going to do to ensure they're actually doing their homework on regulated

health items, and when is this government going to start investing in what Manitobans are calling for, like supports for our care homes and schools?

Hon. Brian Pallister (Premier): We are continuing to invest, and we will continue to invest, in purchasing PPE and other items that we need, including ventilators and the like, Madam Speaker.

But I would say, in terms of things like rapid testing and vaccines, we would like to be able to go over and above the federal government's order and secure additional supplies, but the federal government has blocked our ability to do this by placing a no-non-national-government requirement on our suppliers.

Madam Speaker, this is something the member might like to encourage her leader to take up with their friends in Ottawa. We'd appreciate that. We do appreciate the support we've gotten from Ottawa in terms of additional supplies. We'd like to be able to order even more.

Support for Homeless Shelters Government Initiatives

Mr. Alan Lagimodiere (Selkirk): Madam Speaker, our government is committed to protecting vulnerable Manitobans during this unprecedented public health emergency.

Can the Minister of Families update the House on how our government is helping homeless Manitobans during this difficult time?

Hon. Heather Stefanson (Minister of Families): I want to thank the member for that question.

Our government believes that all Manitobans should have access to shelter and affordable housing, and, Madam Speaker, since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have invested more than \$3.5 million more to support shelter operations in our province. We are providing isolation space for homeless Manitobans required to isolate due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and we are partnering with Resource Assistance for Youth to provide housing to at-risk youth in our community.

Since 2016, Madam Speaker, we have invested more than eight-\$108 million, providing more than 700 new affordable housing units.

Madam Speaker, unlike the NDP, we will always stand up for vulnerable Manitobans.

COVID-19 Case at Keeyask Generating Station Spread Prevention Across Northern Manitoba

Ms. Danielle Adams (Thompson): What we've continued to see from this government's response to Keeyask's outbreak is continued lack of communication and transparency to neighbouring communities on the extent of the situation.

Just yesterday, the minister inappropriately communicated through QP instead of a daily release that he finally decided to move it to code red. At the same time, public health officials aren't telling northern chiefs if the virus has spread into their communities.

The minister's handling of this situation is only causing panic in the North.

Will the minister provide clear information to communities immediately?

Hon. Jeff Wharton (Minister of Crown Services): Again, as I indicate every time I get the opportunity to rise in this House, that the health and safety of Manitobans, particularly at Keeyask and surrounding communities, is our No. 1 priority, Madam Speaker.

The first confirmed case of COVID-19 at Keeyask site was announced on October 25th. It was— it has been reported now, Madam Speaker, to update members in this House, that all 724 workers at the site have been tested for COVID-19 using a lab, of course. Manitoba Hydro to provide the initial screening. Any screening tests indicating a not clear will result in a second test. They're going above and beyond duty to ensure that Manitobans are kept safe.

And lastly, Madam Speaker, as a result of increased number of COVID testing, as I indicated yesterday, the site is now in code red. We continue to consult with members of—

Madam Speaker: The member's time has expired.

The time for oral questions has expired.

Speaker's Ruling

Madam Speaker: And I have a ruling for the House.

On March 12, 2020, the honourable member for St. James (Mr. Sala) raised a matter of privilege alleging that the government has been infringing upon the privileges of opposition members because they had not called a meeting of the Standing Committee on Crown Corporations to consider annual reports from Manitoba Hydro since June of 2018. The member stated that not referring Hydro reports to

committee has prevented the opposition from holding the government accountable on many serious issues affecting Manitoba Hydro. He concluded his remarks by moving, and I quote, that this issue be immediately referred to a committee of this House. End quote.

The honourable Government House Leader (Mr. Goertzen) and the honourable member for River Heights (Mr. Gerrard) also spoke to the matter of privilege before I took the matter under advisement. I thank all honourable members for their advice to the Chair.

There are two conditions that must be satisfied in order for the matter raised to be ruled in order as a prima facie case of privilege. First, was the issue raised at the earliest opportunity, and second, has sufficient evidence been provided to demonstrate that the privileges of the House have been breached in order to warrant putting the matter to the House.

On the issue of timeliness, the honourable member stated that he believed the phrase, and I quote, earliest opportunity should be understood in a reasonable sense, and that we cannot simply take earliest opportunity to mean that next moment in time in which a member has the ability to speak. End quote.

I disagree with the member on this point, as I do not find that argument convincing. The member indicated that the committee in question had not met since June of 2018 to consider Hydro reports, and this in itself makes it abundantly clear that the member, or any of his colleagues, could have raised this issue in the House many times in the previous 21 months. Accordingly, I am ruling that the test of timeliness was not met.

Regarding the second issue, I have stated on numerous occasions that a matter concerning the methods by which the House proceeds in the conduct of business is a matter of order, not privilege. Joseph Maingot, in the second edition of Parliamentary Privilege in Canada, states on page 14 that, and I quote, allegations of breach of privilege by a member in the House that amount to complaints about procedures and practices in the House are by their very nature matters of order. End quote. He also states on page 223 of the same edition, and I quote, a breach of the standing orders or a failure to follow an established practice would invoke a point of order rather than a question of privilege. End of quote.

It has also been ruled many times in this House that the opinion of the Speaker cannot be sought about matters arising concerning committees, and that it is

not competent for the Speaker to exercise procedural control over committees. Speaker Rocan made such a ruling in 1989, in 1993 and in 1994. Speaker Hickey also made five such rulings during his tenure, and as your current Speaker, I have also delivered this same ruling, including earlier this session.

Although the honourable member for St. James (Mr. Sala) may have a difference of opinion regarding the timing of calling Crown corporation meetings, this falls more into the category of a complaint against the government, and not a breach of parliamentary privilege.

With the greatest of respect then, I rule that the matter raised does not fulfill the criteria of a prima facie case of privilege.

Petitions? Grievances?

ORDERS OF THE DAY

GOVERNMENT BUSINESS

House Business

Hon. Kelvin Goertzen (Government House Leader): Madam Speaker, could you—I believe that the Opposition House Leader might have something to say.

* (14:40)

Ms. Nahanni Fontaine (Official Opposition House Leader): Madam Speaker, could you please canvass the House for leave to alter the Estimates sequence permanently so that the departments of Agriculture, Municipal Relations and Conservation and Climate will be considered in that order prior to consideration of the Department of Indigenous and Northern Relations in room 254.

Madam Speaker: Is there leave to alter the Estimates sequence permanently so that the departments of Agriculture, Municipal Relations and Conservation and Climate will be considered in that order prior to consideration of the Department of Indigenous and Northern Relations in room 254. Agreed? [*Agreed*]

* * *

Mr. Goertzen: Yes, Madam Speaker. Now, would you please resolve into Committee of Supply.

Madam Speaker: The House will now resolve into Committee of Supply to consider Estimates.

COMMITTEE OF SUPPLY
(Concurrent Sections)
EXECUTIVE COUNCIL

* (15:10)

Mr. Chairperson (Greg Nesbitt): Leader of the Official Opposition.

Mr. Wab Kinew (Leader of the Official Opposition): I understand that maybe there's some time constraints again this afternoon, so I'll just look for direction on that.

Maybe we could just start with that. Are we good 'til 3:50, 3:55, is that correct there? I'll ask the First Minister that.

Hon. Brian Pallister (Premier): –but right 'til 4. Let's use every bit we can. Over.

Mr. Kinew: Okay. We were talking yesterday a bit about vaccines. I understand that there is a vaccine planning committee and I'd just like the Premier to explain what that is and how does it relate to the other committees in Cabinet, the clerk's committee of Cabinet and who's the membership of that vaccine committee?

Mr. Pallister: Yes, the vaccine committee just feeds right into the command structure, so it's a sub-committee of a number of people and I can get the list and forward it to the member. I don't have it right with me right now, Mr. Chair, I'm sorry, but I can certainly get it to the Opposition Leader.

Mr. Kinew: Okay. So yes, no, I'd appreciate that as an undertaking so that we could follow up on that later, maybe. Perhaps then we can switch to Manitoba Hydro, I'd like to ask a bit about Manitoba Hydro this afternoon.

I want to begin by talking about a statement that the Premier's staff made, and I'm just going to read the statement and then just—I'll have some follow-up questions on it because, to me, it does sort of invite a little bit of more information sharing.

So this is a quote here, it's, quote: The reason for extending the Manitoba Network agreement was strictly due to timing and the fundamental change in what Manitoba may need from the Manitoba Network in the wake of the COVID pandemic.

And then I'm going to continue the quote here: Cabinet determined that government needed more time to rethink Manitoba's future needs with respect to the Manitoba Network and that issuing and

awarding an RFP in the middle of this pandemic would have resulted in not properly scoping our future needs. End quote.

So that was a statement made September 14th of this year, 2020, and so I just wanted to follow up on some of the, I guess, issues that are raised therein. One is that there's a reference to a Cabinet decision there.

So I'm just wondering if the Premier can provide that Cabinet decision and can he undertake to provide that to us here on the committee?

Mr. Pallister: Sorry, Mr. Chair, I'm not sure. Should I just keep doing that hitchhiking thing so that you know—is that—okay? We'll do that? Okay.

There's two—I think the confusion on this issue that exists is as a consequence of the fact there are two interlocking realities here. The first is that Manitoba Hydro is doing some type of internal review—that's a board deal—to refocus their organization. So that's in process.

And we've got—Crown Services Minister would be able, I expect, in Estimates, to provide more detail as to the nature of that review, but that's a review being undertaken entirely by the Manitoba Hydro board management. Recommendation of Manitoba Hydro executive undertaken by board and executive is under way at the present time.

The interlocking issue therefore is that Hydro—Manitoba Hydro, through Hydro International—has undertaken work that involves their fibre-optic network in the past and does some work for government.

Now I can only say that the issue which intertwines with that is that we are endeavouring, through—Minister of Central Services (Mr. Helwer) is co-ordinating this—a tendering process or RFP process followed by tender, I believe, to see if we can't do a better job of getting broadband access out to northern and rural communities.

And so, there is dark fibre, fibre that is currently not in use, Manitoba Hydro owns. It's a vast fibre-optic network lying unused presently. We're looking to make use of it, and so that is why Central Services has a process under way to solicit interest to see if there are companies who would like to partner in the use and expansion of this unused fibre network to get broadband out to rural and northern customers.

So the suspension, understandably—expanding use while also putting out an RFP puts you in a position where you're, essentially, you've advertised

your car on Kijiji and now you're looking to sell the tires to somebody else when the tires were supposed to go with the car. You can't do both at the same time. So I guess I'm trying to explain to the member that the goal here is to make sure that this network can be utilized as much as possible to expand broadband or, you know, Internet access, to people in the province.

And I guess I would just add, my preliminary information is that Manitoba, you know, west of the Maritimes, has the highest percentage of unserved households on Internet in the country. And so this is an issue that's sat around for a long time. I'm not pointing fingers. I'm just saying the way that this fibre has sat there unused for a long time that Hydro has, isn't helping us to get Internet access up north or to rural, you know, a lot of rural households, a lot of great people out there.

And the member knows full well and has emphasized this in some of his questions in the House and comments, how critically important it is to have, you know, Internet access in this day and age. And when our young people, for example, don't have access to it or when entrepreneurial people don't have access—can't have access in the community, it's far less likely that they're going to be inclined to either stay to take advantage of things like distance learning—

Mr. Chairperson: One minute remaining.

Mr. Pallister: Thanks, Mr. Chair—distance learning opportunities and that type of thing, or that communities and regions of our province wouldn't be able to attract, you know, new investment and jobs to their areas.

It's pretty clear that the absence of access is not a great thing, to put it mildly. So getting this access—there's been pickups on some of the Indigenous-led projects thus far; we know that. We had some setbacks, and we'd like to see that type of thing expanded and not shrunk.

So the idea here is to—was to get that dark fibre access, because it plays an absolute key role in expanding Internet access.

Mr. Kinew: I do believe that expanding broadband and access to high-speed Internet's important province-wide. Hear about it all the time in the Parkland and in the Interlake. And even in Winnipeg, really, people complain about their Internet speed at home so, of course, that won't necessarily be solved by this issue, but it's an important initiative.

* (15:20)

So when we just look at that, I guess, decision that was made by Cabinet on this issue—the decision about the Manitoba Network and, you know, just to go with extending the previous deal there.

Can the Premier (Mr. Pallister) tell us when that decision was made and can the Premier indicate, like, did that decision happen at the Cabinet table or was that at Treasury Board?

Mr. Pallister: Well, first I think it's important to understand, if we're talking about—I'll answer the question I think the member asked, and I'll ask his understanding if I'm answering a question he didn't and then he can ask that one again.

But I think he's asking about the service data network needs of the government of Manitoba, as contracted with Manitoba Hydro International and the renewal of a contract with them, which was done with Bell MTS. And I think—I'll just—I want to be sure I'm answering the member's question and not going down a side road on him.

So maybe I'll just leave it at that and say is that what the member is asking me about right now, just to be clear because there's several issues here, and I don't want to go down the issue that he isn't interested in.

Mr. Kinew: You know, my indication is to say, you know, let's just hear all of it, but I do want to indicate that, yes, that's the network that I'm talking about, the Manitoba Network. So again, I'm trying to wrap my head around the statement that the government issued on this respect. It says that there was a determination made, a decision made.

So I'd like to know, just for clarity, for the Premier's sake, you know, when was the decision taken and what table did that happen at? Was that the Cabinet table? What that the Treasury Board? If the Premier could shed some light, that would be great.

Mr. Pallister: Okay. Thanks for that clarification, Mr. Chair, through you. So it's important to understand the set-up here. It's, of course, a Cabinet decision to renew a contract and direction then given to administer that decision.

So Manitoba had a—has a contracted service provider for its data network needs and that current provider is Bell MTS. Now it should be understood that that contract was signed in 2010 June, so by a previous government. It was a 10-year contract. It was an untendered 10-year contract, by the way, Mr. Chair. I should mention that.

The reality of the previous situation I described to the member, that being that at this point in time, Hydro is doing an internal review of its own operations meant that, combined with the realities of COVID, we felt it wise to extend the contract rather than to go to tender in the middle of COVID.

I think this is pretty common sense. Our tech needs are always subject to analysis and evaluation but at no other time I would argue perhaps, in since modern history, has it been more dynamic time to—and so it's critical that you don't go out to a—ask for a tender to a contract when you're not able to evaluate what your long-term and mid-term needs are going to be.

For example, and we've got people working from home like never before, so that's going—clearly just that example tells you that in terms of tech availability and so on and so forth, it's a really difficult time to evaluate what our tech needs would be. So the decision was taken not to go to tender right now because we didn't really have as much ability as we might have had in a more stable time to evaluate those needs.

Another example, I think, of a dynamic that's at play right now is distance learning. Our distance learning environment has never been more dynamic, and so a decision was taken to renew the contract and then, you know, for a period of time to allow things, hopefully, to stabilize with respect to these types of issues and others.

It wouldn't be in our best interests, I would submit, to go out to an RFP, get a new 10-year agreement as was the previous agreement under the previous government for network services. This didn't make sense. So government accepted this. We renewed the contract for a 30-month period. We used exactly the same rates as were negotiated prior, so we didn't pay more. The total bill may be more because they use may be more, but that's a unit-use issue, that's not a unit-cost issue.

So the reports in one of the daily newspapers that isn't the Winnipeg Sun featured a story which was erroneous. Unfortunately for the paper, they didn't avail themselves of briefing offerings that were given to them by the department and by our media services guys.

And so they printed a erroneous report that created the impression both that the contract that we had entered to—into was an untendered contact—contract negotiated by the government, which was not

the case. It was an untendered contract negotiated by the previous government. Secondly, that the contract was somehow fattened up to help the provider. Such is not the case.

So the facts are those which I've outlined to my colleagues. The continuation of the service clauses in the—

Mr. Chairperson: One minute remaining.

Mr. Pallister: —current agreement give us—thanks, Mr. Chair—current rates. There'll be no increase in the unit cost, but it's a consumption-based contract. So I would hope everybody would understand that when you got more people working from home, for example, and other factors that are real right now—distance learning needs are—well, I've got some former trustees, I know, that are on this call who would understand that distance education needs are dynamic at the best of times and really dynamic right now.

So that the overall contract might consume more network capacity. That's pretty understandable. But the fact of the matter is there's the rationale for the decision that we took as a government, and I hope that addresses what the member was wanting. Wants me to elaborate further, I'd be happy to.

Mr. Kinew: So it sounds like we're—we are talking about the same contract. I'm wondering, in addition to telling us, you know, when the decision on that contract was—extension was arrived at, that decision at Cabinet, if the Premier (Mr. Pallister) could share when that decision was taken, if he might also undertake to provide a copy of that agreement to the committee.

Mr. Pallister: Sure. That's a—seems like a reasonable request. The only thing—I'd ask the member's indulgence in this. I don't know the terms under which the contract was entered into by the previous government. I don't know if there are requirements within the current legal—a legal agreement that would refute my ability or, you know, that would block my ability to respond to his ask.

If I find there are not, then I will make—I undertake to get the member that information. I think it's something I normally have tried to do, as the member knows, get all information he asked for to him. I just—I hope he'd understand, I just can't—I can't undertake today to do that if I'm in violation of a previously negotiated contract. So I just would make that clear to the member but, yes, I'll undertake to get whatever information he might need in that respect.

But I want to be clear on this. Of course, if Hydro tried to sell used hydro poles, I understand that the NDP would say that's part of a privatization agenda, and so does the leader. So we'll leave it at that. I just don't think that equating renewing a 10-year contract signed by the previous government is evidence of privatization. So I'll just put that on the record.

* (15:30)

Mr. Kinew: I appreciate the minister's—the First Minister's, I guess, offer there.

Maybe could we agree that the First Minister would undertake to provide the contract to the committee or, you know, update the committee if he's not able to, you know, that the undertaking would be sort of like a either/or kind of proposition there?

Mr. Pallister: The member knows my approach has always been to just provide the information directly to him—

An Honourable Member: We lost him. Can you hear us?

Mr. Chairperson: The honourable First Minister?

Mr. Pallister: —Estimates in respect to an issue. I would also provide the information directly to them. And if the other opposition party wants to take advantage of piggybacking on the reasonable questions the member is asking, all they have to do is let me know.

But I've taken this approach as Premier because—and I've shared this with my honourable colleague, the Leader of the Opposition—of my frustration with not being able to get information when I was Opposition Leader, of having it—these requests not met. I have taken it upon myself personally to deliver the information personally to the Opposition Leader who makes the request, and that's what I've done for four years now.

So I would propose to the Opposition Leader, I'll hand-deliver whatever he's asking for if I can, and if I'm not available because I've got COVID or something, God forbid, I'll make sure that the information gets to him as soon as I can obtain it.

Mr. Kinew: I thank the First Minister, so we'll just follow up on that point there later.

Maybe we can return to the decision-making process, and then we could review the contract details, whatever that time comes. But when we get back to the decision-making process, were there any recusals when it came to that decision-making process? Did

any one of the Cabinet ministers recuse themselves from that conversation?

Mr. Pallister: I think what the member—well, there may be some confusion here, okay? So I'm going to—I'll endeavour to clarify it. The RFP that we're talking about on analysis to expand broadband was back a while ago; I think it was towards the end of '19. The delay in the process, like the RFP process, was undertaken as a consequence of COVID. Otherwise we might have had the thing concluded, but it wasn't designed to be concluded that early in the year, you know, pre-COVID.

So when COVID hit, that caused the process to be delayed further. That's the point, I guess, that the member—there may be some confusion here in the sense that—and I take this also from an Estimates question I've been made aware of that the member for St. James (Mr. Sala) is asking about timing. I wouldn't want the opposition to go down a blind alley here and start equating the beginning of this process happening last year.

The process which I'm talking about is the broadband expansion of services issue. That process began late last year. The delay in that project and the necessity because of delay occurring because of COVID is pretty much common sense, I think, to anyone, given the changing dynamic and the need, for example, as a reference, to distance education and so on.

So the delay and the renewal of the other contract, the tech provision contract with Bell MTS, was necessitated as a consequence of that. So just to be clear on the sequence there.

As far as recusal, Cabinet proceedings are Cabinet proceedings. I can say only that we, our Cabinet, always recuses when there is any decision which would require them to, and that will be the way it continues.

Mr. Kinew: Yes, no—so I was talking about the decision about extending the Manitoba Network contract and just whether there had been any recusals at the Cabinet table where—which is where the Premier (Mr. Pallister) indicated that decision was taken.

The other process, the ongoing process with the RFQ, RFP, RFSA, you know, separate issue. I am interested in that, I would like to ask about that, but just when it came to the Manitoba Network thing, just—were there any recusals at that time?

Mr. Pallister: I'll just repeat what I said to the member before. When there is a need for recusal, recusal is always undertaken.

Mr. Kinew: So we want to explore at this time, I guess, the other deal that is unfolding with respect to Hydro. It's the other one that the Premier (Mr. Pallister) alluded to here.

So I'm just going to read an excerpt from a media report which is a characterization of some of the Premier's comments, and I am going to ask the Premier to comment on it. So just if he's wondering where I'm going with this, I'm going to read him something and just ask for some clarification on what he shared with the journalist. And this one is with the Winnipeg Sun. It's not the other one that's not the Winnipeg Sun that he made reference to earlier.

So this is from the Winnipeg Sun newspaper, it says, quote—reference to us—meaning the party that I'm a part of: have also called foul in Pallister's interference with Manitoba Hydro International in the request for proposals in seeking a provider for broadband access to Hydro's network to deliver better cell and Internet coverage in rural and remote areas of the province. To that end, Pallister told me—sorry, I apologize.

I'm going to just deviate from the quote so that I don't actually say the name of the member, but in all material respects the quote is the same. So I just retract what I immediately just said and I would put this on the record instead: to that end, the First Minister—now returning to the exact wording—the First Minister told me on Thursday it is one of two times he has ever interfered with Hydro operations.

So I just want to gain clarity on that, and just ask the Premier, did he in fact interfere with the operations of Manitoba Hydro International?

Mr. Pallister: Yes, of course, Mr. Chair, in quoting a journalist's work, one must always consider the possibility of inaccuracies. They may occur inadvertently. We all make mistakes. Of course, I would never categorize my responsibilities as Premier being undertaken with sincerity as interference, rather, I'm exercising the duties that the Manitoba people have entrusted in me.

So, for example, in this case we're trying to get more Internet in the North and rural, and that is an initiative we're undertaking, and we expect Hydro to help and accommodate us in that effort. The previous one was I didn't want to pay David Chartrand \$70 million so he wouldn't sue the government of

Manitoba. And I know the member and I disagree on this—but this is an approach which was—would have been unprecedented.

* (15:40)

And so under our legislation it is, of course, important for us to understand that as a government, we have an obligation where we see unprecedented undertakings by Crown corporations, for example, that we make sure we exercise our legislative oversight, and we have that in law. I won't cite chapter and verse. I'll just say it's important for us to not just stand back and, for example, as the previous government, sadly, did.

They never even reviewed the capital proposals of Crown corporations at Treasury Board—is unbelievable, right? Hundreds of millions of dollars of spending and never came to Treasury Board. That's just unheard of. Don't know of another government that had that lax an approach.

So this would mean, for example, that things like a Hydro proposal to build a giant dam that might, along with a giant transmission line, have the effect of multiplying the debt of Manitoba's Crown corporation, Manitoba Hydro, wasn't even brought forward to Treasury Board for them to look at.

It's quite an astounding thing to realize that when a government is in power and they don't exercise their legislative oversight responsibilities effectively and they allow Manitoba Hydro to quintuple their debt at the expense of Manitobans—who are the real owners—on the one hand. When they do that—quintupling of the debt, no oversight—and on the other hand say that they're standing up for Manitobans for lower rates, it just doesn't work.

And, you know, so I have difficulty with the member and his party claiming they're defending Manitoba Hydro when they didn't even know what they were defending because their own Treasury Board process didn't allow them to undertake the work necessary to even review capital proposals in the billions and billions of dollars under a Crown corporation.

We've changed that, and our government does review capital proposals of our Crown corporations, of course, of our own government. The previous administration didn't even do that. The Treasury Board was, for all intents and purposes, according to their own former members of Treasury Board, dysfunctional.

This was to the extent that others have spoken to this such as Andrew Swan, Theresa Oswald, Jennifer Howard, a dysfunctional Treasury Board. And so even when they did look at issues and made recommendations, they weren't followed, they weren't respected, in some cases by others higher up and in some cases by some of their own colleagues.

So, for example, the Treasury Board under the previous government not only didn't look at billions of dollars of Hydro contracts but, on a smaller issue, say, untendered contracts by Steve Ashton, which were repeatedly given to a friend of his, they didn't look at those either. Now, Treasury Board learned of these contracts, which were done outside of their perusal—

Mr. Chairperson: One minute remaining.

Mr. Pallister: —and then issued concerns, spoke against further—thanks, Mr. Chair—but this is interesting history because this is the kind of thing we had to clean up. I mean, you talk about fixing the finances. A monumental undertaking to fix the finances when the mismanagement level was this high.

So I guess what I'm saying is that, you know, our legislative authority is to oversee our Crown corps to make sure things like a bipole line to nowhere that cost billions of dollars doesn't happen again unless it's the right thing to do, unless the public gets to see what's going on and most certainly Treasury Board gets to see what's going on. This wasn't the case under the previous government. It is the case now.

Mr. Kinew: Just—I'll just advise the First Minister that I am going to turn things over to member for St. Boniface (Mr. Lamont) after this final question on my behalf.

There was a remarkable scene at the end of September where Manitoba Hydro introduced their report for the year, and it said Manitoba Hydro owns Teshmont. And then two days later, we saw in the financial news that a private company had acquired Teshmont. And so we saw the privatization of a subsidiary which Manitoba Hydro owned.

So I'd like to ask the Premier (Mr. Pallister): Did he approve of the sale of the Manitoba Hydro subsidiary Teshmont?

Mr. Pallister: Well, I think the member's a little bit confused, and I'll invite him to become more informed on the issue of Teshmont, if he wouldn't mind, just by simply reviewing the legislation his government

developed and brought forward in respect of referenda.

If he would read that legislation—which was crafted, drafted and passed by an NDP government with, in fact, opposition support—he would realize that Teshmont is excluded from referenda requirement. That would be the first thing to understand. Because it's not an essential part of Hydro.

It was purchased as Hydro having a minority share in it, and the fact of the matter is, Hydro decided themselves that they didn't want to continue on it after Keyask was built. The reason they got into the deal with Teshmont was to get some additional inside advice and have the upper hand on obtaining it when they built a dam which nobody wanted or needed except the NDP.

Then, under current management at Hydro, they realized they didn't need to continue to own it because there was no particular big dam coming forward to multiply the debt of Hydro even further if Hydro could even access more money in and borrow it.

And so the reality of the situation is not as the member described. It was the bipole assistance, not Keyask—I'd better clarify, but the bipole project and Keyask were essentially one—they were interrelated—and they effectively caused a quintupling at the end of the day of the debt of Manitoba Hydro.

Now, just that little history lesson for the member, I hope, would motivate him to read the legislation around referenda. Now, I know the NDP doesn't like referenda when they don't like referenda. For example, they promised that there'd be a referendum on this tax thing, you know, if they were going to raise the PST, for example, and that they would go to the people and ask for permission.

But, you know, their own legislation was an inconvenient obstacle to them raising the PST, so they decided to ignore it entirely, and they actually went to court to defend their ability to do that. They said—they actually went to court to defend their right to lie to Manitobans. They did that, you know?

They went to the doors, knocked, and they said we're promising we're not going to raise your taxes. Previous premier of Manitoba actually said it was nonsense to even suggest it. Hugh McFadyen went out and said, I think you're going to raise the PST there, Mr. Selinger. Mr. Selinger said it was nonsense.

But the actual reality is, it wasn't nonsense—well, it was, that he'd do it, but it wasn't nonsense to

speculate that he might. Because he actually ended up doing it, you know? And this was after he raised taxes on the 10 other things the year before.

So here you go, the NDP. They talk about defending people's rights lots, but do they? Not much. And here is the perfect example of it: raising the PST while promising at the doors in an election a year and half before that they wouldn't. Holy smoke. Ignoring The Referendum Act, that's one thing. Going to court to fight so you have the right to ignore your own legislation, that defies logic.

So on this Teshmont thing, I'd just point out to the member: the previous NDP government did privatize 25 per cent of *[inaudible]* by giving it away. Privatized 30 per cent, approximately, of Keeyask, by doing the same thing. So don't be talking to me about not privatizing. We have no plans of doing that. None. But the NDP actually did that.

So the next time Hydro goes to sell off hydro poles and we listen to the NDP talk about how the government's going to privatize Hydro, everybody can have a good laugh about it if they understand the history of the situation as I do.

And I would just say to the member, read your own legislation. Doesn't require Teshmont to go to a referendum. A sale of Teshmont, minority shareholder, part benefit for the construction period only. He is basically saying that Hydro's management doesn't have the right to do what Hydro's management does have the right to do.

Now, I guarantee the member, if Hydro tries to sell something bigger than that, and it's in the referendum rules they can, we'll have a darn good referendum on it. I give him my personal guarantee on that. But on the Teshmont thing, he's barking up the wrong tree. Because that tree—

Mr. Chairperson: One minute remaining.

Mr. Pallister: —was planted by the NDP. And so he wants to criticize—

Mr. Chairperson: One minute remaining.

Mr. Pallister: Thank you, Mr. Chair—he wants to criticize the previous government, have at 'er. I haven't seen that enough. I'd like to see more of that on the part of the NDP, because there's lots to criticize.

Mr. Dougald Lamont (St. Boniface): Yes, I just had a quick question for the First Minister.

When his government was first elected in 2016, one of the first decisions to be made was whether to

support the merger of Bell MTS at the time. I understand the Premier (Mr. Pallister) said, you know, there were people concerned about prices going up, and the Premier said, you know, it's okay if prices go up providing service is improved as well. Now, I was just wondering if the Premier was aware of anyone involved in that merger who was working at the time for fundraising with the PC Party?

* (15:50)

Mr. Pallister: I apologize to the member, Mr. Chair. I didn't get all of that. It clicked in and out at this end, but I'd like him to just go back to the essence of the question. I got that he was asking about a merger of Bell with MTS and—but then I lost him for a second. I'd lost the gist of what he was asking.

Could you—and I'm sorry about that, but I can't defend the tech here, so just please have him go again.

Mr. Lamont: I was just wondering if the Premier was aware of anyone involved in fundraising for the PC Party at the time who may have benefitted financially from the merger of Bell and MTS.

Mr. Pallister: Give me all the Liberal scandal stuff. All I can tell the member on that is that it's an interesting question and I can only say that the assertion he, I think, is trying to make, is that the Manitoba government—which is not in a position to approve the merger of two significant companies, that really falls more under federal rules—he might want to talk to Justin Trudeau about if there were any Liberal donors who might benefit from the merger of the two companies. That might be a better question.

Mr. Lamont: Well, I'm also—yes, because I also know that there are some questions outside from the Bell MTS that is, you know, the competition approval is federal, but I also know that the Province has been selling off a number of airline assets as well.

Again, is the Premier aware of anybody who is currently or formerly involved in fundraising for the PC Party who may have benefitted financially, say as a client who worked on any of those deals in the privatizations?

Mr. Pallister: Tell the member that, as opposed to the previous administration, we actually utilize tender processes significantly, and so when people participate in the tender process with properly structured rules, there is ultimately going to be a beneficiary of that process. Our goal is to make sure the process is fair and transparent, so the beneficiary of such

processes tends to be those who value fairness and transparency.

Also, an additional beneficiary of such processes is, of course, the taxpayer, because what we don't have happen with this process is that we don't give to the degree that the previous government did; most certainly we don't give untendered contracts out, and those untendered contracts given out by the previous government became the stuff of Auditor Generals' comments for years. In fact, one former Auditor General said to me that it's becoming an epidemic.

And so we've addressed the epidemic by moving our contracting processes out of the dark and into the light, and by using competitive tendering processes when assets are purchased, when services are procured, when assets are sold as well, as the member has referenced in terms of—I believe he was talking about things like water bombers in planes.

Mr. Lamont: You know, I—as per my agreement, and I will cede the rest of my time and return it to the Leader of the Opposition to finish up.

Thank you very much, everyone.

Mr. Kinew: I appreciate the interjections there.

When we're talking about Manitoba Hydro, can the Premier (Mr. Pallister) inform us whether he's received a copy of the 20-year strategic plan that Manitoba Hydro's developed and if he'd share that with the committee?

Mr. Pallister:—member that the—Hydro, I understand, used to do a 10-year strategic plan, which is available for review and I think is in the midst. I can—I'll get verification and get the information back to the member.

I believe they're in the midst of such a review, as we speak, part of which, of course, is how they're going to focus their enterprises going forward, and we know it's well understood that they're looking at Manitoba Hydro International as part of that review, as they should, but I can't share details of a plan I have not yet reviewed. And I would apologize to the member in advance if that plan is finalized but I don't believe it is finalized. So we'll endeavour to get clarification on that.

I know there is a review under way, headed up by former Saskatchewan Premier Wall, that is a review but it is not a broad-based review of Hydro's operations. It is strictly confined to the issues around the 10-billion-plus invested badly in Keeyask and also the related—excuse me—bipole line. That report, I

think, is nearing completion. It should be ready in the not too distant future, as well.

Mr. Kinew: Okay, so, yes, the report that cost \$2.5 million that the premiers are referring to, is that going to be released this month? Is it going to be released this year?

Can the Premier tell us when we're going to see that report?

Mr. Pallister: Maybe the member could do it for me instead. I just don't—can't get my pen to work right now. I'm—it would be this—I'm just joking.

He alludes to a report as a \$2.5-million report. This presages something I would encourage him not to do: \$2.5-million investigation into a \$10-billion boondoggle is pretty defensible, and I would encourage the member not to try belittling this work because it's pretty important. And if he takes ownership of it, I remind him he's going to take ownership of the previous decision-making processes of the previous government. I know he wouldn't want to do that. He's been trying not to on various files.

So, with all due respect, and not for me to give political advice to the member that would be advantageous to him but I have to say in this case, I would strongly suggest to him not to take ownership of the processes that the previous NDP government used to enter into the Keeyask dam mistake or the bipole waste line error-laden process.

It is not something he's going to want to own, and so he'd better be careful because if he starts to belittle Premier Brad Wall, who is a man who is very notably respected in many corners of our country by people as far-reaching as the former—as present premier, British Columbian, Premier John Horgan, who I just spoke to recently today, he would be making a big mistake.

I would say also to him—and Premier Horgan obviously has his hands full with an inherited hydro mistake in British Columbia, that being the Site C dam, and also in Newfoundland, where the present premier, new to his office, is dealing with the fallout from the dreaded Muskrat Falls debacle.

These massive hydro projects undertaken in—by various governments at various times and so deeply misguided are not something that the member should rise up and try to defend. I would urge him to fight on other ground that is less fragile.

This is not an area that we should dodge. This is an area we should dive into and learn from. The mistakes that were made are clearer, in my estimation,

but I would trust to former Premier Wall's abilities to undertake a review that is fulsome and that we can all benefit from, so that this type of thing never, ever happens again.

* (16:00)

We all know, certainly those who have followed these issues, that the former government acted less as an analytical agency, less as an evaluative agency and more as a—I'll just go with cheerleading as perhaps the best way to describe it. That they pushed the Hydro management team to do the west-side line is clear and their reasons for doing so have never been adequately explained.

Now, when we talk about this being a billions-of-dollars thing, we are dead on. This is massive. These two projects, the most significant undertaking is arguably Keeyask, it's right up there as one of the biggest undertakings in the history of the province of Manitoba—not done yet, not in service yet and way over budget.

So, an analysis of how we got to where we got is really important. If you want—are interested in defending Manitoba Hydro ratepayers, as this government is, then you will want to get to the bottom of what happened with these projects and you will not want to be part of blocking it by trying to discredit former Premier Brad Wall in any way, shape or form. That would not be a smart thing to do. That's my suggestion to the honourable colleagues on the other side of the House.

Mr. Chairperson: One minute remaining.

Mr. Pallister: If they decide to go there, that's fine, it just wouldn't be very smart. But that'd be their call.

Mr. Chairperson: The last item to be considered for these Estimates is item 1.(a), the First Minister's salary, contained in resolution 2.1.

The floor is now open for questions.

Mr. Kinew: Typically, it's been a tradition of the House to have a motion and to reduce—to attempt to reduce the minister's salary to \$1. As much as I am a fan of the traditions of this House, I do want to, you know, ensure that my colleagues and subsequent departments have adequate time.

However, I do just want to point out that, over the past number of weeks and months, we have seen numerous failings from this government to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, most notably that their cuts to health care over the past few years have left us with

insufficient ICU capacity, according to the medical experts, to deal with what they expect to be coming down the pipe in the next few weeks.

On top of that, we have many small-business owners who are saying that they need new direct financial assistance in order to be able to make it through this period of heightened COVID-19 restrictions. And, of course, there are seniors in personal-care homes who demand better, and the students, parents and teachers who need more investment to ensure that the safe return to schools lives up to the overheated rhetoric that the government offers and instead sees us investing in teachers, staff and increased classroom space.

So I do very much support in principle the idea of reducing the First Minister's salary to \$1, but in light of time and the undemocratic nature by which this government has tried to evade Estimates, I am going to yield the floor at that, so that we can move on to other departments.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Chairperson: Hearing no further questions at this point, we will allow virtual members to unmute their mics so they can respond to the question.

Resolution 2.1: RESOLVED that there be granted to Her Majesty a sum not exceeding \$4,225,000 for Executive Council, General Administration, for the fiscal year ending March 31st, 2021.

Resolution agreed to.

This completes the Estimates for Executive Council.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND TRAINING

Mr. Chairperson (Greg Nesbitt): This section of the Committee of Supply will now resume consideration of the Estimates for the Department of Economic Development and Training. As previously agreed, questioning for this department will proceed in a global manner.

The floor is now open for questions.

Mr. Jamie Moses (St. Vital): Thanks to the minister for coming today and continue our conversation.

I want to just kick off with some questions that were relevant in the news today. It was, you know, recorded—reported that \$73.5 million was the spent amount from the #RestartMB programs out of a

possible \$240 million. It's less than a third of the possible available funds for Manitoba businesses.

You know, with that—you know, is that 30 per cent effectiveness level? Now, is that effectiveness level only 30 per cent because the programs were designed poorly or was it because the minister really intended for small businesses to only get about 30 per cent of the provincial dollars for their small businesses in Manitoba?

Hon. Ralph Eichler (Minister of Economic Development and Training): I thank the member from St. Vital for his question.

The \$240 million was from various departments: Department of Finance and the Department of Economic Development and Training. I'll talk about the programs that are under my particular portfolio.

Some of the 'wages'—wage subsidies: this summer we received 3,026 applicants over—to the summer wage subsidy program was 2,347; and Back To Work This Summer was 715. These employers requested 7,160 wage subsidies when they submitted their application. Approximately 58 per cent of the applications were from Winnipeg and 42 per cent from rural and northern areas.

Accommodation and food services, retail trade and construction were the three sectors with the highest demand. The deadline for employers to submit their claim for reimbursement was October the 1st, so we don't have all the numbers in on that, but be happy to share with him at a later date if they so wish.

On the Back to Work Manitoba—the Back to Work Manitoba program is ongoing and employers have until December 1st to apply under the current program. It covers wages from July to December 31st, 2020. Employers can receive funding for additional 20 employees—employees under this program.

* (16:10)

To date, 179 employers have requested the maximum number of hires under this program, which is up to 20 and up to \$100,000 for each employer. So it's quite substantial. As of November the 2nd, we received 1,732 applications requesting support to hire 9,318 employees for a total of \$46.59 million in support, and employers have until February 2021 to request reimbursement of wages.

So we've flowed quite a bit of money—I'm—to what the member opposite says. But we want to ensure that these programs—as we know, Christmas is right around the corner. Hopefully, we get this COVID

under control and they can take advantage of these programs to ensure that they get the staff they need to meet the needs of their customer base and have the confidence as they go forward and to ensure that they have the employees there in a safe and environmental—atmosphere that's going to make them feel safe.

So critically important that we get these programs right.

Mr. Moses: Thanks for providing that. I think, without directly answering the question, it sounds like the minister is fairly satisfied with the level of support, which to me indicates that, you know, 30 per cent success rate is somewhere what the minister was actually hoping for in these programs, which is—I think is disappointing for Manitoba businesses to hear.

You know, the government often talks about the all-hands-on-deck approach, and I wouldn't consider 30 per cent level of support, falling hundreds of millions of dollars short of the goal, to be an all-hands-on-deck-on approach from the government.

I do want to move on to some comments that were made in—today by Jonathan Alward of Canadian Federation of Independent Business. You know, clearly, the comments by this government had the most generous supports for business aren't true, and certainly, he agrees with that.

He's quoted as saying, regarding the comments about most generous, as saying: I've certainly talked to dozens, if not hundreds of business owners that would disagree with that. Many other businesses—business organizations here in the province that would disagree with that. End quote from Mr. Alward.

Now, with that said, does the minister agree with business leaders like Jon Alward that they're not the most generous and most effective programs or is the minister kind of thinking that he could actually announce programs that would truly make the supports for businesses in Manitoba more generous?

Mr. Eichler: Just to correct the record so my good friend from St. Vital can get this right: most of the information he put on the record was wrong. I want to reassure the member that the numbers I put on the record was from my department.

There's Finance in that as well, so when you use the number of 30 per cent, I'd like you to understand very clearly that that's not the real number. The number is between Finance and EDT, so when you put

that stuff on the record, it puts false information on the record. I'd suggest the member don't do that. He's just wrong.

Now, in regards to the calls and the stakeholders that I talked about yesterday, we have 37 stakeholder participants that represents numerous sectors including the aerospace, agriculture, construction, manufacturing, retail, wholesale, tourism as well as transportation and warehousing.

Forty-eight calls have been held from March the 13th to October 30th; stakeholder participants represent 75 per cent of Manitoba's economy; 25,000 businesses across Manitoba; ten thousands of employees; a snapshot of stakeholders' reach in Manitoba businesses and members of multiple organizations and associations. So the Manitoba chamber is 10,000 businesses across all of Manitoba; Canadian manufacturers, 1,200 businesses each, representing \$8 billion in GDP; Business Council of Manitoba, representing 55,000 employees each, \$45 billion in GDP; Canadian Federation of Independent Businesses 4,800 businesses there; Keystone Ag Producers 4,000 businesses that they reach out to; Manitoba Trucking Association, 475 businesses, \$2 billion in GDP; bioscience of Manitoba 108 businesses, \$2.1 billion in GDP; new media tech Manitoba 320 businesses, \$1.6 billion in GDP; Retail Council of Canada 4,755 businesses representing \$12.757 billion in GDP.

So it's significant when we talk about investments that we want to ensure that stay whole. We know that—and it's unfortunate that when members opposite talk about—even yesterday—in regards to education, they seem—they want to spend all the money in the one month that the money's announced. That's not how education works. They need money for 10 months. You don't just spend the whole hundred million that's been allocated for education.

It's the same as any other. You've got to do it in a timely manner that's sustainable. This COVID thing is not over: not over for a long time yet. We have no idea when it's going to last. Another funding is going to have to be called on. It's going to have to be done in a timely manner, in consultation with business, in order to ensure that they remain whole and they're going to be remained open when businesses are allowed to reopen.

So those are my comments in regards to the member's questions.

Mr. Moses: Thank you for that.

I would—I do have to move on to some other topics, but the business community has been overwhelmingly clear with the lack of support from this provincial government, and if the minister is suggesting that other funding is going to be available down the road, small-business community needs to know that. They need to know the plan moving forward, and they need to be—have some assurance that this government is going to have their back because to this point, they have not.

I do want to move on quickly over to some post-secondary questions for the minister. You know, obviously we're in a pandemic, and the pandemic has caused a recession in our province, downturn in our economy. You know, it's been—study after study has shown that investments in post-secondary education has consistently helped economies grow. For every dollar put into post-secondaries, more than a dollar has been returned back to our economy.

So why is the minister proposing cuts to our post-secondary institutions for the upcoming school years of 0.5 per cent in some cases? Does the minister not see this as a way to grow our economy, or is there another reason why he's not willing to invest in our post-secondary that would actually help to help students and actually help to grow our economy?

* (16:20)

Mr. Eichler: The Province invests over \$1 billion annually in our post-secondary education system. We are the major funder for the public universities and colleges.

This year, because of the pandemic, we created a transitional support fund of \$25.6 million to ensure our universities and colleges can respond effectively to the new realities. Enrolment of students has not increased significantly. In fact, our colleges and universities are—reported moderate decreases. Only a couple of universities are on—seen slight increases.

So when we're looking at funding for post-secondary and making sure that we make sure they stay home, even though there's no courses being taught on site, online learning continues to be a challenge. We know it's hard on the students, it's hard on the professors and, certainly, we're hoping that the sooner we can get them back in the classrooms the better. But, certainly, we have to make sure that the safety of our students and our teaching staff are paramount in order to ensure that they stay safe as we go forward.

Mr. Moses: Speaking of that fund that the minister mentioned, can he provide the information as to how many proposals from post-secondary institutions have been received and approved, and how many have been rejected and why they have been rejected? If you could provide a list for each that would be appreciated.

Mr. Eichler: Transition funding is being evaluated to distribute those funds based on the institutional need. It's really important that we are protecting Manitoba's future by addressing today's priorities. A strong and responsible post-secondary system is essential to our recovery, which is why we established the \$25.6 million transitional support fund, reverting away from the planned budgetary 1 per cent reduction.

The fund will help post-secondary institutions respond to the challenges and opportunities that have come from the pandemic, including developing new online materials and tools, shifting programs from where there are available jobs to help deal with their unanticipated challenges. We are working closely with our post-secondary institutions to make sure they have the funds to adapt to the new ways of learning for students and to adjust to labour market needs.

So in our consultations when we started talking about this, it's really critically important for the member opposite to understand really how important post-secondary is and the lack of students that actually have the opportunity to attend post-secondary. We are not where we'd like to be. We'd like to see more students getting post-secondary education.

And I would like to just put on the record that our scholarships and bursaries are at record high. Every dollar raised, we have matched those dollars. We're looking at about \$30 million in scholarships and bursaries, and very proud of where we are as a government; trying to ensure that we get as many students going forward in post-secondary to ensure they have those skillsets and the talent they need to get those good jobs—good-paying jobs now and into the future.

Mr. Moses: The minister didn't mention any numbers or about the—about any proposals or institutions that had approved proposals to—from the fund or rejected or why they were rejected.

So I'm wondering if perhaps the minister can provide a list in that regard for us to have. If it's—can't be available now, maybe the minister can endeavour to provide us a full complete list of institutions that

had funds approved and anything that was rejected or perhaps—and why—also why it was rejected.

But further to that, I think it's clear that this fund is a one-year transitional fund, as you mentioned. It's not a sustaining, ongoing fund for institutions. As a result, it's clear that institutions are going to see a drop in their funding in future years after this school year.

Obviously, the institutions are going to be making that up and it's going to be on the backs of students by raised tuitions. Minister said it's important to allow students to attend universities, but that's going to be harder when tuition is raised.

How is the minister going to reconcile that where—and allow students to have availability to attend universities affordably? The only way I can see doing that is to provide additional funding for universities, and if the minister is not prepared to do that, I'd like to know what the reason is, and I'm sure post-secondary students in Manitoba would like to know the reason for that.

Mr. Eichler: The deadline that we had and submissions that were sent in to the department had a date of September the 15th. So those requests are under review. Once we have a review of those we can certainly share them with my critic; happy to do that. Some of them are really thinking outside the box and I'm sure he'll be interested in the read on them.

In regards to the member's comments about tuition, we have the lowest tuition in western Canada. So when it comes to post-secondary, we're very competitive in that aspect. We are protecting access and affordability for students. In respect to institutional autonomy regarding academic matters, the government spends over \$1 billion annually on our post-secondary system in direct and indirect funding.

Also, we are taking steps to protect Manitoba's financial future by ensuring predictability and stability and funding for our post-secondary institutions as well. And also, just for the record, we're protecting access to post-secondary education by helping students get student loans and bursaries.

*(16:30)

This is especially important for those experiencing financial hardship due to COVID-19 pandemic. Throughout the pandemic, we are protecting students by implementing interest-free student loans, a six-month pause on repayment, increasing funding through bursary and scholarship programs to

help people manage their finances and further, get their career goals.

The Province has made significant investments in support students during the pandemic, including providing wage subsidy programs, incentives, and online job-matching website that connects them to employers.

I just also want to put on the record that this summer we had record student jobs through our department as well. We had upward of 24,000 applicants. We didn't get that many jobs for them, but certainly we did real good in that respect.

So students went off into the fall, into post-secondary, with actually some money in their pockets. So I know that was a good thing, and plus it give them that sense of belonging to the community and getting that wonderful skill set that they get by actually working in the fields that they want to and get that work experience that's so critically important for them as they go forward.

Mr. Moses: Yes. I'll just put into context; the minister's last comment was though student–summer student numbers were also in a year where there was record high unemployment for young people, so that—just to put that into context.

And additionally, in terms of low tuition across the Prairies, it is not often what the students look at. Students look at their tuition this year versus what they're going to pay next year, and if their tuition next year is going to be higher, it's going to be more difficult for them. So I'd like the minister to keep that in mind as he makes his decisions towards funding for university and the impact it will have on their students.

I do want to just ask before I pass some time off to other departments, is regarding the letter that was sent by the Minister of Finance (Mr. Fielding) to the University of Manitoba regarding the wage freeze. It is important to note that that is in the midst of a negotiation between the faculty and the administration, and while I realize that this is another department that has sent this letter, it is directly under—the university is directly under the responsibility of this minister.

So I put to him: Is this the type of letter that directly impacts the negotiations of the faculty appropriate? You know, will the minister be willing to take that wage freeze off the table so that there can be a fair negotiation between the faculty and the administration at U of M?

Mr. Eichler: I think it's really important, Mr. Chair, that just on the youth employment numbers, we had an increase of 4,400 students, youth employment, over a period of time, so certainly we see youth employment as a critical step in order to ensure that they have not too much debt as they get out of post-secondary as well.

In regards to the letter the member refers to, that's under Finance. I know he had a number of questions yesterday that fell under Finance. Our department don't get involved in negotiations. We hope that they find a settlement soon. That's up to them to do. It's not my role. So if he wants to ask Finance or have his critic ask Finance and—that's more than fine.

Mr. Chairperson: Hearing no further questions, we will now proceed to consideration of the resolutions.

At this point, we will allow virtual members to unmute their mics so they can respond to the questions I will now call.

Resolution 10.2: RESOLVED that there be granted to Her Majesty a sum not exceeding \$48,938,000 for Economic Development and Training, Industry Growth and Innovation, for the fiscal year ending March 31st, 2021.

Resolution agreed to.

Resolution 10.3: RESOLVED that there be granted to Her Majesty a sum not exceeding \$909,609,000 for Economic Development and Training, Advanced Education and Skills, for the fiscal year ending March 31st, 2021.

Resolution agreed to.

Resolution 10.4: RESOLVED that there be granted to Her Majesty a sum not exceeding \$5,617,000 for Economic Development and Training, Immigration Manitoba, for the fiscal year ending March 31st, 2021.

Resolution agreed to.

Resolution 10.5: RESOLVED that there be granted to Her Majesty a sum not exceeding \$73,940,000 for Economic Development and Training, Loans and Guarantees Programs, for the fiscal year ending March 31st, 2021.

Resolution agreed to.

Resolution 10.6: RESOLVED that there be granted to Her Majesty a sum not exceeding \$22,900,000 for Economic Development and Training, Other Reporting Entities Capital Investment, for the fiscal year ending March 31st, 2021.

Resolution agreed to.

The last item to be considered for these Estimates is item 1.(a), the minister's salary, contained in resolution 10.1.

The floor is now open for questions.

Hearing no questions, resolution 10.1: RESOLVED that there be granted to Her Majesty a sum not exceeding \$3,749,000 for Economic Development and Training, Administration and Finance, for the fiscal year ending March 31st, 2021.

Resolution agreed to.

This concludes the Estimates of the Department of Economic Development and Training.

**AGRICULTURE AND
RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT**

Mr. Chairperson (Greg Nesbitt): The next set of Estimates to be considered by this section of the Committee of Supply is for the Department of Agriculture and Resource Development.

I would now ask the honourable minister and critic from the official opposition to turn on their video to indicate that they are ready to proceed. And they're on.

Will the Committee of Supply please come—does the honourable member have an opening statement—the honourable minister have an opening statement?

Hon. Blaine Pedersen (Minister of Agriculture and Resource Development): Yes, I do.

Certainly look forward to our time in Estimates here.

There's a number of programs we have going on in this department. It's a very wide-ranging department now. All natural resources are under this department, so we've had a very busy year. I'm just over a year in this department and I'll just touch on a few of the things that we've had going on in this past year. And, certainly, in no particular order, I'm just going to run through them.

* (16:40)

E-licensing: on April 8th, the Manitoba government launched a new e-licensing online service for the sale of Manitoba hunting and fishing licences and park vehicle permits.

MASC forage review: we reached out to—we have a very low uptake on forage insurance from producers. You know, approximately 18 per cent of Manitoba's forage land is insured so—compared to 90 per cent of the annual crop acreage. So we did a review, we had a person out there doing the review and then now we have—bringing in some changes to the forage program, and I can get into that if the critic wants to ask about those. Certainly, the idea is to make it more attractive and work better for the producers.

The emergency operations centre is our central command and control facility responsible for carrying out the principles of emergency preparedness and emergency management, in terms of livestock. And we activated our EOC, our emergency operations centre, when COVID became a factor in Manitoba.

There was—and we were on at least weekly calls with our major hog-processing facilities as there was concern about what would happen if COVID was to get in the plants, which it never did. To date, we are very happy with that.

And certainly I want to give a shout-out to highlight Maple Leaf Foods and the pork producer in Winkler—sorry, I just can't remember their name right now—that they've done just a tremendous job in preventing, to date, of COVID coming into their plants. They set up protocols which Manitoba Health was picking up on after—when COVID became more entrenched in Manitoba, so certainly shout-out to them.

Food safety training: we've—we are working with Health, Seniors and Active Living to introduce amendments to the public safety act, and we'll provide to the critic there. We're going to be reaching out to do a bill briefing on that bill coming up very shortly.

Our Manitoba protein advantage is certainly being recognized around the world for not only the attract—investments that we have seen happen here in Manitoba, but just the food products that these companies are developing and that we'll be producing is certainly—the world is picking up on this, and we're also supporting a sustainable protein challenge dialogue in February of this coming year. Of course, we'd like to have it in-person, but by the looks of—we're also setting it up to be virtual if we are still in the middle of COVID.

Ag Crown lands: our auctions—there was a lot of concern about setting up the auctions last fall. They turned out very well, and it's something we want to continue to pursue. It's something how we can get more land back into the hands of ranchers at a price that they feel is affordable.

We've developed a mining development fund—sorry, Mineral Development Fund administered by the Chamber of Commerce, and we've seen—we funded this with \$20 million and as of—an infusion and up to 6 per cent of the annual royalties from the mine—under The Mining Tax Act. And so we're going to see some really good investments. We've already seen some investments happening in there and we'll see more.

Our quarry rehabilitation fund: we had to shut down the Quarry Rehabilitation Program in—when I was in Growth, Enterprise and Trade in early 2018 because of some real concerns about how it was being operated. It obviously had been neglected under the previous government, and so we had to shut down.

We did get it going this year. We put \$6.7 million—or, sorry, the operators had \$6.7 million—what they paid in levies. We put that back in. And I've actually been out to some of the sites where they have rehabbed and it—that program is working well and hope to continue it in the next year.

Food Development Centre continues to operate in Portage la Prairie. We continue to have protein—sorry, companies coming in line to work with Food Development Centre, which is in conjunction, again, with our food—with our protein strategy. And so that's working very well.

Our CAP, Canadian agricultural products, Ag Action; we've got funding going on providing funding into organizational developments and enhanced sustainability, security, profitability, innovation, competitiveness of the agriculture and agrifood sector, and we've approved 1,207 CAP-Ag Action applications across 16 activity areas for a total of \$74.2 million, and this is going into the ag industry, so this is good stuff.

GROW Trust and the Conservation Trust have been—we seeded \$20 million into the Winnipeg Foundation for the GROW Trust, and then a further—sorry, that's \$52-million endowment fund called the GROW Trust for incentive programs, and this is working really well.

We've had our—with—in together with our watershed districts, they are on the ground level, working with the agricultural producers and others to

do sustainable work for our water quality and water management within the province. And I know I just had a meeting the other day with the watershed association, and they're really excited about this program, and we'll continue to do more.

As announced today, our 4-H scholarship, we're seeding \$1 million into the Brandon Area Community Foundation to—as a trust fund and the Manitoba 4-H Council will do the bursaries and scholarships out of there, and we just really want to—and I thank the—my critic for his comments today too in the ministerial statement today because we see tremendous growth for 4-H in urban and northern communities. It's such a great program, and I could elaborate more on there, but I see that Mr. Chair is getting itchy there on his time.

How much time have I got left, Mr. Chair?

Mr. Chairperson: Two minutes.

Mr. Pedersen: I'll take a couple of minutes to tell you that my son started a 4-H club in Edmonton a couple of years ago. They've got 22 kids in the club, and my two grandsons are in archery and food—cooking, food preparation, and they've got a very active club there. So that's a potential we see.

Fish and Wildlife Enhancement Fund, again, we've put money into a \$20-million trust in there, and it's managed by the Winnipeg Foundation. This is for fish and wildlife projects all across the province, and we are certainly excited about this. We've heard back from the various groups just how excited they are to finally see some consistent funding going into fish and wildlife projects, big and small, across the province, and whether it's in the south and the North or wherever it is, they're working very well.

And so just so that, Mr. Chair, there—you can see there's a lot going on in this department, and we continue to move forward.

Thank you.

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

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

Mr. Diljeet Brar (Burrows): No, I don't have any opening statement.

Mr. Chairperson: Under Manitoba practice, debate on the minister's salary is the last item considered for a department in the Committee of Supply.

Accordingly, we shall now defer consideration of line item 3.1.(a), contained in resolution 3.1.

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

Mr. Brar: Mr. Chair, global discussion.

Mr. Chairperson: Thank you. It is agreed, then, that questioning for this department will proceed in a global manner with all resolutions to be passed once questioning has concluded.

The floor is now open for questions.

Mr. Brar: I would like to share this information from the media coverage this summer from Winnipeg Free Press on July 22nd, 2020.

Back in December, Ottawa asked Agriculture ministers from the Prairie provinces to tally how much the federal carbon tax added to farmers' costs that year, specifically for drying grain, so the Liberals could consider compensation. Yet records released Tuesday show that Manitoba declined an offer by the province's biggest farm group, Keystone Ag Producers, to conduct a survey, and didn't compile its own data until it was too late.

* (16:50)

Why didn't the minister compile this information? Why didn't the minister do what was a necessity to address the grain drying tax?

Mr. Pedersen: Well, first of all, using the Free Press as your source of reference is not exactly very credible way of doing your homework on this; and second of all, we did talk to Keystone Agricultural Producers.

The federal Liberals—and if the member wants to defend the federal Liberals, well, you know, that's his prerogative, you can do that. The information was sent in to the federal minister. In fact, I had a conversation with her much earlier than that about this and she was adamant that costs—in fact, the federal minister came out and said that costs were miniscule to the farm community, and so she had no intention at all of ever exempting farmers.

And it's not just dryer fuel. Let's talk about barn fuel, too, because in poultry barns, in hog barns, they're using either propane or natural gas—most of it's propane—and the federal minister says, no, we're not going to.

And now the NDP talks about carbon tax. They're the ones who want a \$300 carbon tax with no

exemptions. So when the member tries to pretend to support farmers, they better be careful because we have them on record as supporting a \$300 carbon tax with no exemptions.

Mr. Brar: Thank you, minister, for the information, but for your kind information, I am here to support the farmers, not to support the Liberals—federal Liberals here.

So it's also on record that you got late sending that information to the concerned department. That's why our producers suffered and they're upset about it.

My next question relates to the program AgriRecovery. While our neighbouring provinces, they participated in the AgriRecovery program, why the minister decided not to contribute the Province's part to the AgriRecovery program? Can the minister explain why he chose not to?

Mr. Pedersen: So when the federal government came out with AgriRecovery on the—*[interjection]*

Mr. Chairperson: Order. I'd just like to remind honourable members that are attending virtually that they cannot be on their phone while on virtual, so I'd ask them to turn off their camera or move out of view.

Thank you.

Mr. Pedersen: Okay. When the federal government announced their AgriRecovery program for the beef set-aside, we had many discussions with the Manitoba Beef Producers, Keystone Agricultural Producers, and others in the ag industry. It was under consideration.

Now the Business Risk Management suite—there's only so many dollars in this program, and what I offered them was a solution within the Business Risk Management suite of dollars, as a one-time basis, COVID-related. Considering that we're in the middle of COVID, the demands on the health system, which I don't know, unless the member thinks that we shouldn't have been spending money on the health care, there's only so many dollars to go around. And there was money available to move around in the Business Risk Management suite of programs. However, the two organizations which I mentioned flatly said no, can't do that.

I had reached out to my colleagues across the country about a possible solution for us to do this. I had support from many provinces and tacit approval from the federal government to do this because, remember, we have to stay within the suite of programs. You—there's an agreement on these

Business Risk Management suites. You cannot just necessarily go out of those programs or you have to stay within the parameters of the programs.

So when this was the challenge that we had here, there was a solution and the organizations flatly said no. So for them to come out and, you know—or for the member to say that we didn't—we weren't supporting them, that's just not true. We were supporting them.

We've also brought out a suite of programs here just lately and which we were—a package of programs for the beef industry which, as I mentioned before, included upgrades to the forage insurance. We've given a 20 per cent credit on Crown land leases in those hardest hit municipalities—18 municipalities that had—that declared a disaster area. We've got a predation program that we're putting money in to help producers come up with better methods of avoiding predation on their cattle and sheep herds.

And, you know, there—there's a—so there's a suite of programs there to help the beef industry. So we've done this and we'll continue to help them. So there, you know, there's a suite of programs that we've used in order to give some assistance to the beef industry.

Plus, we're doing the administration on this federal money that's there, and we've developed a very, very simple application form so that the money can—when the producers put their application in, we can turn it quickly—

Mr. Chairperson: Order.

The hour being 5 o'clock, committee rise.

CROWN SERVICES

* (14:50)

Mr. Chairperson (Andrew Micklefield): 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 Crown Services. As previously agreed, questioning for this department will proceed in a global manner.

The floor is now open for questions.

Mr. Adrien Sala (St. James): Just one quick question for the minister relating to the review—the Hydro review.

Will systemic racism be considered as part of the review—systemic racism and its impact on Keeyask development be considered as part of the Hydro review, which is forthcoming?

Hon. Jeff Wharton (Minister of Crown Services):

For some reason, we're getting every second word on our audio. I'm not sure why. Everything else seems to be working and 'functioning' perfectly. However, the audio doesn't seem to be quite right yet.

So I heard the words systemic racism. I didn't hear anything else from the member. If he could repeat it again, but hopefully we're going to get past this shortly. Sounds like a connectivity thing.

Mr. Chairperson: Okay, just a moment. I'm just going to check with our tech people. Hang on.

Can you hear me clearly, Minister? If I'm talking, am I comprehensible? As in, audibly comprehensible?

Mr. Wharton: No, you are coming through very choppy. Half words.

You know what, maybe I'll dial back in. Maybe that'll be helpful.

Mr. Chairperson: Let's try that. Why don't you dial back in. *[interjection]*

Yes, Minister. Can you hear me clearly? Am I—nope. Can other members in the committee hear me clearly? Or am I—*[interjection]* Am I comprehensible, Cindy? I'm not chopping up?

An Honourable Member: You're coming in very clear on my end.

Mr. Chairperson: Okay, we've sent an email to tech and we'll see if that improves things.

Minister, am I still chopping up? Minister, can you hear me?

Mr. Wharton: Yes, I can hear you. Very choppy.

* (15:00)

Mr. Chairperson: Okay. *[interjection]* Okay, we're going to take a—is it the will of the committee to take a five-minute recess while tech support attempts to work out these issues? *[Agreed]*

The committee recessed at 3:00 p.m.

The committee resumed at 3:01 p.m.

Mr. Chairperson: Okay, the problem seems to be resolved.

The member for St. James, with a question for the Minister of Crown Services.

Mr. Sala: One quick question, Minister, relating to the Hydro review.

Will the impacts of systemic racism during the development of Keeyask and those projects be considered as part of the Hydro review?

Mr. Wharton: I don't want to assume—the member's talking about a review. Would that—would he be 'reverting'—'refewing'—pardon me, referring to the economic review of Keeyask and bipole?

Mr. Sala: Yes, the forthcoming Manitoba Hydro review being led by Mr. Brad Wall.

Mr. Wharton: Again, we're certainly looking forward to the R-K-B report coming soon, and I know that in the report, there's a number of areas that were mandated. And, again, one of them is, again, in capital projects, project management, partnerships that Manitoba Hydro has with, for instance, First Nations communities and other folks as well.

So, you know, directly to the member's question, it will be a fully encompassing report; and specifically to his question, I can only suggest that we're—that Mr. Wall's report will include a number of areas which will include partnerships, which I would assume might touch on that area.

Mr. Sala: I'd like to pass the floor to the member for Tyndall Park for a grand total of 10 minutes, so, limiting that 'til 3:15.

Mr. Chairperson: The member for Tyndall Park, you have the floor.

Ms. Cindy Lamoureux (Tyndall Park): I have a briefing note on the subject of strategy 2040 and life cycle business model implementation, and I was hoping that the minister could explain to us a little bit about what the strategy is and the business model itself.

Mr. Wharton: Certainly, welcome the member from Tyndall Park to Estimates, and I hope you and your family are staying well, and certainly are surviving these very challenging times, and thank you, thank you so much for the question.

Strategy—Manitoba Hydro strategy plan 2040, essentially, can give the member a quick overview and certainly would be willing to provide more details. I know that she has limited time and I would assume she would have further questions, but what I can tell the member is Manitoba Hydro is developing a strategic plan that is intended to provide long-term direction for Manitoba Hydro and the corporation for the next 20 years, and can translate into short-term operational work plans.

So the strategy will confirm the organizational mandate and goals, identify priority areas based on customer needs, consider the organizational structure and address how to make existing business units more effective, and also establish a roadmap of implementing key initiatives. Manitoba Hydro expects that, of course, we'll work with government and provide direction to ensure the strategy aligns with the energy policy, and, again, corporation's mandate is understood that strategies impacts rates, debt and provincial economic development, of course, and the strategy is fair for all Manitobans who are the owners of Manitoba Hydro.

I hope that is a quick overview. Again, if the member wanted more, I'm certainly happy to take that offline.

Ms. Lamoureux: I'd like to thank the minister for his answer, and I am curious just about a few more details as to how those are actually going to be implemented, as well as what brought on the need for this strategy. Who brought it forward? What parties were consulted?

Mr. Wharton: Again, I thank the member from Tyndall Park for the question.

Yesterday we had some discussion regarding exactly this area that the member touches on, and I just related it to the business sector at large, or even public sector, in particular to Crowns where each business or Crown will undergo essentially a review of the business, their model, is it adapting well to change, to changing environment, you know, is it adapting well to—oh, issues like COVID. I mean, COVID has shown us and shown Manitobans some areas that we are—we need to improve on and one of them is connectivity, for instance. And the member will know that that's an area that our government's focusing in on.

* (15:10)

But, again, Hydro has taken on this initiative to ensure that they're aligned in their core mandate of supplying electricity at a—at low rates for all Manitobans. And that is their core business and that is what they'll continue to focus on during this review.

And we certainly commend them for taking the initiative to move forward with this review because, as I said yesterday, and I'll repeat it again for Hansard and for the member from Tyndall Park, this is a necessary part of operating a corporation/business. These are areas that, if you don't look at your model and evolve, you will fall behind and, eventually, it'll end up costing you money.

So, you know, this is a very good move by the leadership team of Manitoba Hydro and board—and the board's blessing as well and they understand that this is a very necessary area for them to move forward. In light of what has happened over the last 20 years, with respect to the former NDP government, of course, leaving generations of Manitobans with Visa cards that are already maxed out and interest rates that—thank the Lord—are low right now, but go up by one point, Mr. Chair, and Manitobans are going to feel the pinch of what the NDP provided, as far as the mess that we continue to clean up in collaboration with our stakeholders.

So I hope—that was a long-winded answer, the member from Tyndall Park, but certainly willing to take another question.

Ms. Lamoureux: The minister mentions a strategy—that the strategy's going to be a roadmap to implement key initiatives. What initiatives does the minister expect to see?

Mr. Wharton: And, again, as I mentioned earlier, you know, Manitoba Hydro is—understands and is aware that they need to, again, stick with their core mandate of providing good, clean, renewable energy to Manitobans for generations to come, to supply their homes and businesses.

Of course, the strategic model or plan will include things like customer-centric, so the days of, you know, recognizing or not recognizing that, you know, we do have customers and Manitoba Hydro staff understand that and they know that. So putting in a model that recognizes that every time that phone rings or they get an email, that's a customer. And they're going to move forward with that in a, again, working in collaboration with ratepayers and Manitobans to ensure that their needs are looked after for generations to come.

Again, this is a very evolving energy landscape that we're in right now. Well, Manitoba Hydro has to position themselves to ensure that they're ready for that evolving landscape, and that's exactly what this strategic plan will focus on so that they're ready to confirm—or to—ready to ensure that they can supply their core mandated electrical—green, clean electric power to Manitobans in their homes and businesses for generations to come.

Ms. Lamoureux: If the MLA for St. James permits it, I'll ask one more question.

Mr. Chairperson: So the rules actually do specify that the Chair has the call. And I was seeking to operate in good faith on the understanding, by my

watch, there was a minute and a half or so left. So I'll give the floor to the member for Tyndall Park (Ms. Lamoureux) one final time, and this will be the final question.

Ms. Lamoureux: Just with respect to the strategy, when is it going to be made available for the public?

Mr. Wharton: I thank the member from Tyndall Park for that question. And certainly, we know that Manitoba Hydro, over the last several months, have had to shift a little bit with COVID, and of course that that is going to cause some issues, obviously, with moving certain projects forward.

But I can tell the member that, you know, they have an aggressive timeline because they know this is an area that's going to have a very positive benefit for Manitobans. So, you know, at this point, you know, I could say to the member, certainly, they're motivated to get this report done and completed so that Manitobans who take part in this process will have the ability to benefit from its findings and its outcome for the next 20 years.

Mr. Chairperson: Are there any further questions?

Hearing no further questions, we will now proceed to consideration of the resolutions relevant to this department. At this time, I invite virtual members to unmute themselves so they can respond to the question.

I will now call resolution 5.2.

Resolution 5.2: RESOLVED that there be granted to Her Majesty a sum not exceeding \$1,170,000 for Crown Services, Crown Services, for the fiscal year ending March 31st, 2021.

Resolution agreed to.

Resolution 5.3: RESOLVED that there be granted to Her Majesty a sum not exceeding \$1,605,334,000 for Crown Services, Other Reporting Entities Capital Investment, for the fiscal year ending March 31st, 2021.

Resolution agreed to.

* (15:20)

The last item to be considered in the Estimates of this department is item 5.1.(a), the minister's salary, contained in resolution 5.1.

The floor is open for questions.

We now move to the resolution.

Resolution 5.1: RESOLVED that there be granted to Her Majesty a sum not exceeding \$662,000 for Crown Services, Administration, for the fiscal year ending March 31st, 2021.

Resolution agreed to.

This completes the Estimates of the Department of Crown Services.

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

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

Okay. In my judgment we will have a minimal recess to get the Minister of Finance communicated with and dialed in and then we'll proceed as soon as is possible.

So, committee, recess, stretch your legs, but stay close to your computers; we'll get this up and running just as soon as we can.

The committee recessed at 3:22 p.m.

The committee resumed at 3:39 p.m.

FINANCE

Mr. Chairperson (Andrew Micklefield): 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 Finance.

Does the honourable minister have an opening statement?

Hon. Scott Fielding (Minister of Finance): I do.

I'm pleased to be here to consider the Estimates of the Department of Finance for 2020-21. Manitoba Finance has shown outstanding financial and service leadership over the last few years and will continue to do so in 2021.

Finance has led government in important public sector initiatives to cut red tape and invest in transformational change. As a department, we have taken on our own projects to save money and give government procurement, cut the PST, reduce unnecessary regulation and, of course, do our part to reduce the deficit.

* (15:40)

In terms about Finance: As a central agency, Finance has a responsibility for fiscal issues under the direction of Treasury Board and Cabinet. Briefly, I will introduce you with the appropriations within the department for which I am responsible.

Just to go through certain areas: Communication Services Manitoba leads the government communications in Manitoba's public service, supporting the work of all government departments and Crown corporations, agencies and public bodies to provide helpful information to Manitobans in the most cost-effective manner possible. As the Queen's Printer of Manitoba, CSM publishes the Manitoba Gazette—the Gazette and other statutory publications, leads the co-ordination—leads and co-ordinates Manitoba style and visual identity, oversees use of our symbols and ensures effective administration and oversight of Crown copyright.

In terms of fiscal and financial management, that's part of one of the departments. There's a variety of various essential finance, provides central processing, accounting and control over all government receipts and distributions that are processed through the central finance and accounting system; prepares interim finance management supports, administration insurance, self-insurance and claims processing, and supports Manitoba's departments, agencies, Crown corporations by minimizing the adverse impacts of losses, provides executive planning, management, financial, administration and supports the finances of Executive Council, Crown Services and Civil Service Commission.

There's a Treasury division, which manages the borrowing programs, cash resources and investment and debt activities of the government and government agencies.

There's a Taxation division, which administers provincial tax statutes for Manitoba, including retail sales tax, taxation, collection, revenues, in accordance with the statutes and administers the collection, processing and reporting of tax revenues.

Tenancies Commission—sorry—processes and reports tax revenues. Tenancies Commission, Office of Public Guardian and Trustee, Automobile Injury Compensation Appeal Commission, Claimant Adviser Office and Office of Registrar-General.

Most of these branches, agencies and commissions provide direct public service, with many performing decision-making functions.

Last, but not least, Finance includes two separate operating entities. The first is the Manitoba Financial Services Agency, which includes the Manitoba Securities Commission, Real Estate Branch and Financial Institutions Regulation Branch; the agency oversees regulations, licences or delegates their duties as required.

The Manitoba capital market: security dealers, real estate agents, mortgage brokers, provincial insurance and credit unions and *caisse populaires*.

Entrepreneurship Manitoba, also another essential operating agency, provides an integrated suite of programs and innovative services and improvements for entrepreneurs and businesses aimed at supporting and enhancing growth of Manitoba entrepreneurship and business communities.

Highlights of Public Accounts: I'd like to touch on something from—over the last year. As you may be aware, I recently tabled the Manitoba Public Accounts for the last fiscal year. Year-end financial results show a modest balance of \$5 million, which reflects extraordinary amounts of hard work and planning focused since 2016. With prudence, determination and foresight, the Province was able to achieve balance while strongly increasing spending on Health, Education and Families by \$2.4 billion. Nearly \$700 million was put back into the kitchen tables of Manitoban households and businesses through lower taxes and fees.

As committed in Budget 2019, the Province reduced the retail sales tax to 7 per cent from 8 per cent as of July 1st, 2019 and replenished the rainy day fund close to \$800 million.

Manitoba's economy performed strong in 2019 and continues to be among the leading provinces in private sector investment. Private sector capital increased by over 26 per cent in the last two years, the second highest amongst provinces.

Income tax growth exceeded the Province's expectations by \$265 million with what's been a strong local economy and growth—job growth.

The Province saved over \$10 million—\$10 billion in incremental debt and associated \$200 million in debt-servicing costs, preparing Manitobans well to meet the public health needs. More work to do. We must maintain our commitments.

COVID-19 has significantly impacted our fiscal outlook, and the government will focus on returning to balance over time while budgeting prudently,

improving front-line services and implementing ongoing tax savings for all Manitobans.

Because of Manitoba's strong position entering COVID-19, the Province was able to devote \$2.3 billion to the pandemic response, 3.2 per cent in gross 'domestic'—domestic product, GDP, which is the third highest pandemic spending in Canada after Quebec and Ontario, the two hardest-hit provinces.

The Manitoba government created a robust set of spending programs and made significant investments in the health-care system including large procurement of personal protection equipment, and medical equipment, and expanded testing capacity. Other investments include in public health preparedness, job supports and economic stimulus to provide Manitobans with their livelihood.

Finance will be—Finance will lead to maintaining a lower 7 per cent provincial sales tax—PST—and the indexation of personal income brackets and the basic personal exemption. Continuing 2020 tax rollback guarantee by limiting probate fees on approximately 3,500 estates each year and removing PST from income tax preparation.

Prepare for phase out of education property tax and ensure Manitobans see those savings on the kitchen table, which is so important for Manitobans.

Also introduction of the budget implementation procedural legislation to allow for raising the threshold of the health and post-secondary education commonly referred to as the payroll tax, which will benefit approximately 1,000 businesses in Manitoba—medium-sized businesses—and exempt over 220 employers from the payroll tax altogether.

We're also going to formulize—formalize the Senior Economic Recovery Credit—was advanced to Manitobans to a tune of 226,000 Manitobans this spring, in advance of the COVID-19.

Also energizing the front sector by increasing the film tax—protection tax credit to 38 per cent of eligible producers and using Manitoba production corporations and increasing the number of child-care spaces eligible for the child-care development tax credit to 682 spots.

Maintaining our annual investment in infrastructure of no less than \$1.2 billion as we've committed to while developing a larger commitment that includes capital investments across some budgeting—summary budget—pardon me—ensuring our budget has significant resiliency to help protect

Manitobans from the effects of possible flooding and other emergencies by increasing the rainy day fund to its highest level ever.

Taking more steps to improve the transparency of our summary budget, Estimates of expenditure and Public Accounts and integrate the reporting entities that add to this complexity.

We also want to expand the scope of the Auditor General's investigation power to hold accountable public bodies that receive taxpayer funds, review our balance sheet to address liabilities that were previously ignored and assets that were without value, continuing to reduce the volatility and risk in government finances, capitalizing on millions of fake funds and capitalize on—sorry—millions of fake funds that were left unfunded by previous governments.

Introduction—or reintroduction of legislation to streamline the process for the Public Utilities Board, enabling it to make decisions sooner and in a least cost-benefitting taxpayers and ratepayers.

Continuing our efforts to reduce obsolete agencies, boards and commissions, implementing balanced score-card measures, including development of the development-level measures, improved performance accountable in taxpayers, and working with Manitoba Securities Commission to perform real estate services at—by January 1st, 2021, which will update and enhance the industry's regulatory framework.

We also want to encourage better co-ordination of the fragmented Manitoba pension investment model to reduce our management fees, improve disclosure, enhance returns for the pensioners.

We also want to accelerate the development of thirteen additional schools to minimize administrative complexity by dissolving the Public Schools Finance Board and transferring the management of the schools and capital projects to Department of Central Services in co-ordination with Department of Education with manages capital investments on behalf of the Province.

We also want to leverage open Manitoba portal to increase engagement of Manitobans, increase the amount of information on engage Manitoba, data Manitoba and info Manitoba, enhance the co-ordination of communications, exports across summary budgeting including major Crown corporations; MASC; Efficiency Manitoba; liquor, cannabis and gaming authority; Shared Health and the regional health authorities to reduce spending,

ensure the value for money, as well as developing a single pool of government service, focused on using—
* (15:50)

Mr. Chairperson: The minister's time has expired. We thank the minister for those comments.

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

Mr. Mark Wasyliw (Fort Garry): No, we don't have an opening statement.

I just want to put it on the record though, we were supposed to start this hearing at 3:15. The minister arrived late. It's—it was 3:39 when we started this hearing. I'd like to canvass leave of the committee to add 25 minutes and sit 'til 5:25, so the minister has enough time to answer these questions.

Mr. Chairperson: Okay, it's actually not the purview of the committee to make those decisions. That is only allowable when the government and official opposition House leaders come to such an agreement.

Mr. Wasyliw: Well, we're prepared to commence questioning.

Mr. Chairperson: Okay.

Under Manitoba practice, debate on the minister's salary is the last item considered for a department in the Committee of Supply. Accordingly, we shall now defer consideration of line item 7.1.(a), contained in resolution 7.1.

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

An Honourable Member: Global.

Mr. Chairperson: Thank you. It is agreed, then, that questioning for this department will proceed in a global manner with all resolutions to be passed once questioning has concluded.

The floor is now open for questions.

Mr. Wasyliw: I'm sorry. Should I speak or raise my hand; how do you want a—me to get your attention?

Mr. Chairperson: I was just figuring out who I needed to look at on the screen.

So, the member for Fort Garry, go ahead.

Mr. Wasyliw: I'm wondering if the minister can tell the committee how many Manitoba businesses have closed since the pandemic?

Mr. Chairperson: Minister, were you raising your hand? Sorry, honourable minister, I need to acknowledge you before you speak.

So, honourable minister.

Mr. Fielding: Well, what I would say is that we can take that question on notice and get back to the member. What I can tell you is the government is very proud of the fact that when you look at all the bond rating agencies and the credit rating agencies, what they suggest is that the rebound, in terms of the economy—now that's changed a little bit with the recent re-spike of cases that have happened, so there has been some public health directions to close different businesses.

But what our government is very proud of the fact is that we are leading the nation, leading Canada when it—when you look at the rebound, I guess, if you will, in terms of the jobs markets that are there.

So in terms of the specific number, we can take that as notice and we can get back to the committee.

Mr. Wasyliw: I'm wondering if the minister can tell us what plans he has to support businesses in the second wave. And how are the supports in the second wave going to be different than the supports his government put in for the first wave? *[interjection]*

Mr. Chairperson: The honourable minister.

Mr. Fielding: Sorry about that, Mr. Chair, and I'll make sure that you provide notice. This is a new virtual thing for all of us here.

So, our government is very proud of the fact that we made important investments to support not only individuals but businesses during the pandemic. The Parliamentary Budget Office has indicated that we're amongst the highest of all governments in Canada in terms of our supports for individuals as well as businesses. We—our supports represent about 3.2 per cent of GDP, which is one of the highest in the nation. I believe Quebec is the highest right now.

What we have put together is a number of programs. The first, I guess, I would talk about is the Gap Protection Program. And so far we've had close to 10,000 businesses—just under 10,000 businesses that have been supported by the Gap Protection Program. We truly think that that is one of the best business support programs in the country.

We have a wage subsidy program where we had supports of close to 8,650 different businesses. We supported the Risk Recognition Program with a

sponsorship with the federal government; that was a \$120-million program. What's important about this—it's a very broad-based program, and that supports close to 80,000 Manitobans, which makes—represents about 12 per cent of the labour force overall.

In terms of youth employment, our government has, through a variety of the different programs that we've had, is the highest level of hiring of youth in respect to itself. Our government has also committed close to \$47 million in workforce development. That was something that was passed in the budget, so I thank all the members in opposition for supporting that as well.

But really, at the end of the day, we want to listen to the business communities and make sure we have the supports in place. We truly think that our programs are broad-based programs. They're easy to access. Again, the—with the Gap Protection Program, once you apply and you get approved, you get the money within two business days. There's some flexibility. We've shown some flexibility to change the parameters of the program, extending programs out that are there.

And we consulted with Manitobans, and we think that's important. We've had hundreds of meetings with business communities, and we're going to continue to do that as needs of businesses come up. We'll be supporting them. One thing that we're very proud of the fact, since coming to government, is we've provided about \$700 million of tax relief to Manitobans and businesses. And that's going to help business grow and thrive, whether we're in the pandemic or after the fact.

So, as you can see from the robust programs that we have introduced, we're one amongst the top of the nation in terms of our supports for businesses and individuals.

Mr. Wasyliw: Wondering if the minister can outline where he sees gaps in the current support programs and where he thinks the government needs to put more supports that are currently missing.

Mr. Fielding: I'd refer you to the Parliamentary Budget Office that suggests that Manitoba is second or third highest in terms of investments for businesses and individuals.

I think the fact that we've invested and over 10,000 businesses have been supported through the wage subsidy program, the fact that there's a broad-based nature to the—all of these programs, with things like the Risk Recognition Program, where you have

close to 80,000—just under 80,000 individuals that were supported. We're very proud of the fact that when the program was first announced through the federal government, they had a cap of about 2,500; we moved that up to 5,000 per month. And that represents about 12 per cent of our labour force overall. So, very proud of that.

I would also point to some of the wage subsidy programs to get people back to work as well as some of the youth programming and the fact that we just invested close to \$47 million in the workforce development that was passed in our budget. We have invested about \$2.4 billion in supports for people and businesses during the COVID period. Some are in this year's budget; about \$1.1 billion and 2.3 when you measure out the fact that there is some capital-related projects, strategic infrastructure that will flow over two different years, as well as 'avertization.'

We have also supported things like municipalities to the tune of about \$106 million. We think that's important investments for them and we've made some important investments with businesses.

So to directly answer your question, we're going to continue to consult with businesses, and we have done that through the pandemic. We'll continue to do that. And if there—if we believe that there's a need to make some changes, have some flexibility to the programs, we're always going to listen to the business community. We're always going to listen to individuals to make sure that the supports are in place to make sure Manitobans and Manitoba businesses are growing and thriving.

*(16:00)

And the fact that we are No. 1 in the nation in terms of rebounding—not my numbers, the Stats Canada numbers that have come out, as well as the bond-rating agencies as well as the banks—I think represents the fact that we've gotten a lot of the programming right. But, again, we're not—I'd like to say we're close to the end of the pandemic; I don't think that is the case. There's going to be needs for supports for businesses and individuals well past the point of when there's a vaccine.

Mr. Wasyliw: Listening to the minister, I take it that there was no plan in place for the second wave. There was no consideration for new business supports for businesses that are now being asked to shut down a second time. And, if I'm hearing you correctly, you may contemplate something in the future, but nothing

was prepared or planned or in the process being rolled out before today.

Is that a fair statement?

Mr. Fielding: Absolutely not. That's completely inaccurate. I would suggest to you that the plan that we put together over the eight months of the pandemic so far has been one of the highest supports for individuals as well as businesses in the country. Don't believe me; believe what the Parliamentary Budget Office is suggesting. When you do have investments of \$2.3 billion to support individuals and families, we think that is an important marker. We're—always want to listen to Manitobans and individuals in terms of better supports or how you can have more flexibility with existing programs.

So we're always going to listen to Manitobans and business community. That engagement will continue to happen. This was a long-term plan that the programs that are in place. I'll give you an example of that. The Gap Protection Program—we have millions of dollars that we can continue to support Manitobans well past the timelines. We changed the deadlines for that. It wouldn't surprise me if you saw that the deadlines for a program like that may change again.

So we think that having a good amount of money to support Manitobans—we're not going to apologize for having over \$120 million in programs like the Gap Protection Program to support Manitobans. That will be ongoing, and we think, knowing the fact that just in the last 10 days alone we've added or got the supports just in the Gap Protection Program, over \$642,000 more supports for individuals, know the fact that some of the programming we think is working very effectively.

But, again, we're going to listen to the business community, individuals, and make decisions that are going to support Manitobans.

Mr. Wasyliw: Now, the Gap Protection Program, you've set aside \$120 million for that.

Also the other various back-to-work programs, there's another \$120 million set aside. I think your comments in the media the other day is out of that \$240 million, \$73.5 million has been spent, so the vast majority of that money has not been spent and the gap program is repayable loans.

I'm wondering, given that businesses are complaining that they are being dragged down by debt, and given that you haven't touched most of that money, would the government consider just forgiving

those loans and turning them into grants so that the businesses don't have to be saddled with more debt?

Mr. Fielding: No. The member's completely confused on that. We have invested substantial amounts of money to support individuals and business. We'll continue to have flexibility. We truly think, and the Parliamentary Budget Office, a third party, is suggesting that we are amongst some of the highest supports for individuals and business throughout the country. In fact, 3.2 per cent of our GDP is there.

Quite frankly, I'm not going to apologize to the member in having appropriated a good amount of money that we're still using, and knowing the fact that we had over \$642,000 just over the last week and a half alone going out from the Gap Protection Program tells me that I think the program has been effective and will continue to be effective.

But we're not going to stop there. We've had supports for things like the wage subsidy program, where you've had over 8,600 businesses that have been supported. The Risk Recognition Program—that's for lower—I'd say lower wage earners in our economy, upwards of 80,000. We have about six hundred and fifty-five-fifty-four thousand people working—for the most part, somewhere around that amount—in our provincial economy which represents about 12 per cent of our labour force. Again, we've—and all members voted on additional \$47 million of work-force development dollars that will go to support. We haven't made announcements of what that money will go towards, minister—the Minister of Economic Development and Training (Mr. Eichler) will be forthcoming with those types of items.

There is also an important federal program, the wage—or, rather, the commercial rent assistance program. We were the first in the country to partner with the federal government. The problem—and what we really lobby for at the finance ministers' table—is to make important changes to that program to ensure that tenants can apply for this program. Before, businesses—you'd have to have your landlord to apply for that program. So, because of that lobbying effort that Premier Pallister did and others—other premiers and I would say other finance ministers at our weekly or biweekly meeting with the Minister of Finance, important changes have been made with that. So the federal government is supporting that.

So now, for instance, if you have a business that is shut down—so let's use the example here in Manitoba because it's in the health restrictions: if you

completely shut down, you would be eligible to get about 90 per cent of your rent paid for by the federal government. That's—kind of goes on a sliding scale down to support your rent that would be there. And I believe the federal government has extended that program out until well into next year, I believe it is next summer. We're hopeful that they'll continue to look at those types of things.

But to directly answer your question, we're always going to be supportive of business communities and individuals to make sure the supports are in place for Manitobans.

Mr. Wasyliw: The question is: Will this government consider grants and—not loans—to businesses and, if not, why not?

Mr. Fielding: Yes, I just want to correct the record for the member, he's putting wrong information on the record.

That isn't a loan program. The gap is made up of two different things: (1) the premise of the program was that there was a lot of businesses that fell between the gap, hence the name the Gap Protection Program. And so, if you did, then you could apply for the \$6,000 grant that would be made available to businesses. Now you have to attest to this, that you didn't receive any federal supports.

Now if you did, let's say you decide to apply for the program, you receive the program and then you—there's some other better program that you apply for later on down the line, then what—the grant would change into a loan that would be repayable. So to somehow suggest that it's just a grant program is just not accurate.

Mr. Wasyliw: Yes, no, I agree, it's not a grant program.

And the question was: Will this government commit to actually bringing in a grant program because businesses do not need any more debt.

Mr. Fielding: No, the member's completely wrong again.

It is a grant program. There is an ability for the loan component. I won't go through the explanation of the program again.

So it is a grant program that is in place, and we would argue that it's one of the most generous programs in the country.

Mr. Wasyliw: The business community has been complaining that the program's too restrictive and

they—one of the disqualifying provisions is whether a business qualifies for federal support, which is a lot more significant than what Manitoba's offering.

Would you remove that criteria and allow businesses to access the program, in addition to any federal support. And if not, why not?

Mr. Fielding: Just—I'm going to refer you back to my previous comment.

The gap program is not the only business support program that we have in place. The gap program is one program that was allocated \$120 million. There is other programs that the government has offered, and I'm going to repeat them.

Some would be the wage subsidy program; we know that over 8,600 businesses have been supported by this. We know that there's supports for programs like the Risk Recognition Program, where we've actually, with partnership with the federal government, have supported 12—like, literally 12 per cent of our—of the Manitoba workforce as you know, that represents somewhere 650,000 people.

*(16:10)

We have youth unemployment rates. So it's the highest amount of youth employment that we've generated. That's through some of the government programs, or allowing businesses that would be going there. There's \$47 million that's allocated for the Workforce Development Program that was passed in the last budget bill, as well as there's over 130-some-odd million dollars allocated for contingency for support programs that would be in place.

There is, obviously, important programs the federal government has that our government, Premier Pallister as well as at the finance ministers' table we pushed for to make important changes to support businesses that are there.

The end of the day, I guess what I'd say is the gap program is not the only program that is there. It's an important one and it's been an important tool for businesses, but the reality is our programs have been broad-based programs that support a lot of people, just as I mentioned. Again, an example of that is the Risk Recognition Program—80,000 people have been supported by this.

They're easy to access—gap program. Once you're—once you apply for this and you gain access to the program, you get the money within 48 hours. That was one of the criticisms initially of the federal programs, that it would take too long to get the money

in your pocket. Our program got the money within 48 hours.

We provided some flexibility of programs. So there's—could be some changes that have happened. We've made those important changes. We're always going to look at reforming our programs to make it more efficient and effective, and that's really based on consultations with the business community, as well as individuals.

So we're going to continue to do that and we'll listen to what not only the business community but individuals have to say about this. That's kind of in stark contrast to the former government that decided to tax a lot of individuals and businesses. We've taken the direct opposite approach where we provided over \$700 million of tax relief to individuals as well as businesses, including things like the payroll tax that we added into the mix as well as other, smaller tax measures that will save individuals and businesses multi-thousands of dollars depending on how big the businesses or individual is.

Mr. Wasyliv: During the first wave, your government allowed for tax deferrals. You didn't charge interest on Manitoba Liquor & Lotteries receivables. You didn't charge interest or penalties on utilities in WCB and MPI contributions, and we applaud you for that. We certainly supported the government decision on that.

Now that we're in a second wave, those things have expired. Would this government support reinstating those policies and, if not, why wouldn't you do it for the second wave but you would do it for the first wave?

Mr. Fielding: I'd just give you some stats.

So approximately 17,500—

Mr. Chairperson: Minister.

Mr. Fielding: Yes?

Mr. Chairperson: The reverse side of your page is right in front of the camera. If you want to just hold it below the lens, then maybe we can see you and not your notes.

Mr. Fielding: There's a lot of people, Mr. Chair, that have said I got a face for radio, so that's probably in line with a lot of thoughts of—some of my constituents think.

Mr. Chairperson: That's not the purview of this discussion, minister. Let's stick with the topic at hand.

Anyway, honourable minister, you do have the floor.

Mr. Fielding: Okay. Approximately 17,500 people took advantage of some of the payroll PST remittance piece, and over 3,100 businesses took advantage of the payroll tax.

To answer the member's question, no, I don't think anything's off the table. We would—you know, we'll take ideas. Anything we can do to support Manitobans we're going to review. If it makes sense from a business case point of view and if we think that it's something that will help businesses survive during this time period when there's been health orders, we would consider all these things. And so that's something that we'll continue to work with the business community and individuals, and we're going to continue to do that.

Mr. Wasyliv: That's comforting to hear. Problem is, minister, we're in a code red, partial shutdown, so when are these decisions going to be made and why aren't these deferrals being placed back into, you know, use?

Mr. Fielding: Our government has made a whole bunch of broad-based programs. Some programs that provide easy access to businesses and flexibility with them.

So, I guess what I would say is, all things are there. We want to look at a whole bunch of tools to make life easier for businesses, especially when they're struggling with COVID.

And we're very proud of the fact that things like the Parliamentary Budget Office is suggesting that we're amongst the highest of the nation in terms of our supports for businesses and individuals.

So, my point is that we want to make sure that there's a whole bunch of tools that are in there, and we think that there is a whole bunch of business support that is one tool, you're absolutely right and we think that the fact that over 17,000 people were supported for those deferrals on the PST and, I believe, over 3,500 in terms of the payroll tax deferrals is one of the tools that's there.

So, nothing's off the table, nothing's on the table.

Mr. Wasyliv: On October 1st, the moratorium on rental evictions was relaxed.

Given that we're now in a second lockdown and there's going to be job losses, would this government

commit to reimposing the eviction moratorium for rental housing?

Mr. Fielding: Our government was actually one of the first to offer a rent freeze and as well as an eviction moratorium. In fact, that lasted longer than other provinces like Ontario, like Alberta and like Saskatchewan. So we think that was an appropriate amount of time.

We want to make sure there's enough tools in the toolbox for businesses and individuals. The thing for individuals that we're most proud of—and, you know, let's say you're a senior that's on a fixed income, for instance—we made a seniors economic recovery tax credit of upwards of \$200 available for individuals.

We've also made a number of other different tax measures, not just the term of our office, which we've given about \$700 million of tax breaks back to individuals so they can make life more affordable, but even during this pandemic we're done things like reducing the PST on things like home insurance, which the vast majority of people use. The same thing with things such as will preparations and probate fees and all those sorts of things. So those are one of the elements that are there.

But we were one of the last jurisdictions to lift the rent freeze component that's there. So we're very proud of the fact that we provided some flexibility for individuals as well as businesses.

One thing that we have done for businesses: a part of our agreement with the federal government and the commercial-rent program, was an eviction moratorium on commercial properties.

Mr. Chairperson: There's a disturbance. Please bear with us for a moment. Just bear with us folks. A brief disruption; I think we can resume in about 20 seconds.

Forgive me, who had the floor at the time of the disruption?

* (16:20)

An Honourable Member: I did.

Mr. Chairperson: Who said that?

An Honourable Member: It's the member from Fort Garry.

Mr. Chairperson: Yes, okay, that's what I thought.

The member for Fort Garry (Mr. Wasyliv), you have the floor again.

Mr. Wasyliv: Minister, you had indicated that now is not an appropriate time for a eviction moratorium. And I'm wondering, why is that? Why is the second wave not an appropriate time for a—more rental eviction moratorium but the first wave was? What's changed that it's no longer needed?

Mr. Fielding: That's not at all what I said. That was your words, not mine.

What I said is, nothing's off the table when you look at supports for individuals and businesses. Our government is very proud of the fact that we've had flexibility in a variety of our programs.

Our concern, when you do homework, I know when you were actually on the Residential Tenancies Commission from 2010 through 2016, I noted that every single above-rent guideline applications—there was actually 200—or, sorry, 2,079 above-guideline applications were approved during the time where you're the commissioner, which is one of the chief decision makers that's a part of it. And so my concern is that past track record. That's not something that our government is going to follow.

What we want to do is make sure that individuals are supported in Manitoba, that there's supports in place. And that's why our government is so proud of the fact that we've invested close to \$2.3 billion in supports for individuals as well as businesses.

Mr. Wasyliv: You might want to update your opposition research. There's at no time did I ever approve a rental increase, above guideline or otherwise, so you might want to take a note of that.

Now, the business community says, and it's quite obvious, that some sectors are being hit harder than others. Other jurisdictions that have more engaged and involved governments actually have specific programs designed for tourism, hospitality, that are targeted for these hardest hit industries.

Would this government commit to specific sectoral programs in Manitoba? And if not, why not?

Mr. Chairperson: The honourable minister—and minister, I apologize for the delay; I can't always see you. You're on the small screen, and so I'm trying to get that right. But just acknowledge me and I'll acknowledge you right back. And same with anyone else wanting to ask a question.

But, minister, you do have the floor.

Mr. Fielding: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'll raise my hand, I guess, if—when I'm ready to respond and make it easier on you and the rest of the committee.

So, our government will continue to consult with business, the business community, for supports that are in place. We truly think that the supports that the Parliamentary Budget Office is suggesting, second or third highest in the country, knowing the fact that we're investing 3.2 per cent of our GDP, the fact that it's \$2.3 billion support through things like the Gap Protection Program, things like the wage subsidy program, other important programs are supportive.

We're always going to listen to the people in the business community, we're going to continue to do that. And if we need to make—have some more flexibility with some of the programs that we have in place, we're going to listen to that. So there's absolutely nothing off the table.

Mr. Wasyliv: But I take if from your comments that nothing's in the works, nothing is planned. At this point, you're still consulting with the business community.

Mr. Fielding: We want to consult with the business community to make sure it's right. And that's how we've come up with our support program of close to \$2.3 billion in supports for individuals and businesses. If you look at our program, in the first eight months of the pandemic, that Manitoba was actually the highest in terms of the rebound, I guess I'll call it, from COVID.

Now the situation with businesses, because some of the closures are there, we've seen an uptick of some of our programs. So, for instance, an example of that is our wage—or rather, our Gap Protection Program. There is a lot of people in the accommodations and retail sector that have taken advantage of the Gap Protection Program. And knowing the fact that we've flowed or had applications and supported close to \$642,000 just in the last 10 days alone, we think that the programs are appropriate.

But again, we're going to listen to the business community. Absolutely nothing is off the table.

Mr. Wasyliv: Now, I'm wondering if the minister would commit to disclose the state of spending on COVID-related programs voluntarily at the Public Accounts Committee without an audit forcing the government to do so and be completely transparent with the money that has been set aside for this and the progress that we're making, and give regular updates to the Public Accounts Committee.

I'm wondering if he would commit to that very reasonable suggestion today.

Mr. Fielding: I'm going to refer the member to our Q1 report that identified our spending. That was a comprehensive report of the expenditures, and so we'll refer him to the Q1 report.

Mr. Wasyliv: In the media recently you're quoted as saying that you expect the various programs to spend their allotted budgets before the fiscal year is through.

If that is an accurate statement, can you confirm that and can you confirm which programs you expect will have been completely spent by the time fiscal year ends?

Mr. Fielding: We put together one of the most comprehensive programs for businesses and individuals across the country.

We don't know how long the pandemic's going to last. We do know that we're halfway through the year in terms of our expenditures. I can't tell you—it really depends on the protections of Manitobans; is there going to require restrictions, how many would be in place, what other programs are available. So it's hard for me to tell you how much we're going to spend when we're halfway through the year.

I—certainly not going to apologize for having appropriated for things like the Gap Protection Program \$160 million—or, \$120 million. There's an appropriate amount of money that is left. We're not through the year. We think that there is an appropriate amount of money that's appropriated for these things.

I hear the member somehow suggest in some respects that we're not spending all the money but, on the same, you know, the same angle he's somehow suggesting that we've got too much allocated. And so I guess the question really to the member is, you know, which is it?

Mr. Wasyliv: Now, you had indicated that the government's set aside \$2.4 billion for COVID supports, and I'm wondering, is that in one fiscal year or is that 'breaken'—broken down over several fiscal years?

Mr. Fielding: I'm going to refer you back to the Q1 report, but just to give you an analysis of it, it's about \$1.1 billion in this fiscal year. The other monies is related to capital projects that are related over a two-year period.

Mr. Wasyliv: Now, this \$1.1 billion for this fiscal year, is that over and above what you originally

budgeted in the spring? And this is new, borrowed money on top of what you budgeted, not internal adjustments?

Mr. Fielding: We had two budget appropriation bills. The one—the first one was for \$1 billion and—which was made up for the most part about \$500 million of health-related expenditures, \$400 million what we put in an account called ISA, and that's to have programs and policies in place, and the final was for a \$100-million appropriation.

The second budgetary bill, which we passed last week, identified about \$577 million. So what I would suggest is that the government has appropriated \$1.577 billion.

The latter budget bill was made up of a number of things, including \$106 million that flowed to municipalities made up of things like transit funding as well as operating funding to municipalities. It was made up of \$40 million of education expenditures. That's—a total of that, we allocated about \$100 million to the education system, which was identified at the time as in—second highest in the country.

That \$100 million, again, was made up of the \$40 million appropriation in that bill, plus \$48 million of money that we saved when the initial phase came down and schools shut down for the year, as well as \$12 million for PPE.

* (16:30)

And there's a variety of other expenditures. In the second budgetary bill, one represented about \$47 million through education, develop—EDT, education and training, that represented \$47 million in workforce developments that will support businesses that need the support when we go forward as well as about 133-some-odd million dollars in contingencies to support individuals.

The reality is we don't know how long the pandemic is going to go on. My guess is that we'll be still talking about this and individuals and businesses will need the supports for many, many months to come. And I think it will also have an impact on our budget appropriations. We lost about \$1.5 billion from revenues and the expenditures that are there. So we're tracking towards about a \$2.9-billion deficit. My hope is that it's better than that.

But at the end of the day, we want to make sure two things happen: No. 1, Manitobans are supported from a health perspective and businesses and individuals are supported. And if you look what the

Parliamentary Budget Office is suggesting is that we're amongst the highest in terms of the supports for Manitobans. But our decisions on supporting Manitobans and businesses isn't done, and I would suggest that the year is only half over in terms of the expenditure appropriations.

Mr. Wasyliv: So the \$800-million rainy day fund is not included in the 2.4 million dollar—or billion dollar commitment for COVID. Is that correct?

Mr. Fielding: We're very proud of the fact that we rebuilt the rainy day fund. You may recall that under your previous government, you drained the rainy day fund. It was around \$800 million. It got drained to about \$110 million when we came to office. It was actually one of the first things that some of our Treasury Board officials had identified to us. Best practices suggest that you should have anywhere between 5 to 15 per cent in some sort of a reserve. So we're very proud of the fact that we've replenished the rainy day fund to about \$800 million.

There was a time during the March—I guess March shutdown, where the capital markets, not just for Manitoba but throughout the country, was pretty much dried up. And the fact that we had a rainy day fund, although we didn't tap into it, the rainy day fund was something that we would need to go to to fund government operations because the markets had completely dried up in terms of the dollars that were there.

Now, the Government of Canada, through monetary policy, had made some changes where they bought back our guaranteed T-bills, the short-term borrowings as well as the longer term with the bond program that's made the spreads a little bit more even. We anticipate that borrowing, as we identified in the budget, was going to be about \$5.6 billion; that was the normal course of action, and that has increased about \$2-billion fold, so we anticipate it being anywhere between 7 and a half to 9 billion dollars, depending on supports and programs and depending on what revenues we need and expenditures we need.

Mr. Wasyliv: So none of the \$800 million in the rainy day fund has been allocated to any COVID programming?

Mr. Fielding: The rainy day fund is something that all bond-rating agencies have really credited our government with. We were disappointed, again, when we came to office knowing the fact that the previous government had drained the fund, and that really impacts Manitobans.

You know, there's been some questions before, well, why have a rainy day fund if you can just go to the capital markets? Well, the problem with that logic is if you had that logic and you had emergency situation and you had to go to the capital markets when the spreads in terms of how you borrow the money, why, that could cost tens of millions of dollars.

So the fact that we have that money in reserve and knowing the fact that we don't know where the pandemic will go and how much more supports that are in place, it's an important marker for Manitobans. And I think if you ask anyone in the bond-rating agencies, they'll tell you that it's extremely important that government has reserve, and it's disappointing that it was drained to such a level under the previous government.

Mr. Wasyliv: So none of the \$800 million in the rainy day fund has been allocated for COVID funds?

Mr. Fielding: We haven't had to tap into the fund as of yet. There was a time in March where all the capital markets were basically frozen out, so there'd be no provinces that could go and issue your bonds in March and get money. That would have been a dire situation for—a very dangerous situation for governments because then you couldn't fund the bills. You couldn't fund to pay for your employees and other things like that. That is a concern.

That's why we were so concerned when we came to office and found out that the rainy day fund had been drained from \$800 million to \$110 million, and we're very proud of the fact that now we have over \$800 million in the rainy day fund. That fund might be—there may be a time in the very near distant future that we'll need to tap into that fund.

Mr. Wasyliv: How much has been sent—sorry, spent on personal protective equipment, and if you could break it down on what materials have been purchased and in what amounts.

Mr. Fielding: Yes. I'm going to give you two things.

I'm going to refer you to, No. 1, the Q1 report on page 3 that identifies the expenditures that are there. It identifies in Q3 about \$178 million on face shields and masks. The report in Q—sorry, the Q1 report—the second is in gowns and coveralls, about \$104 million, or 29 per cent of it; gloves and hand sanitizers, about \$22 million; ventilators and other equipment, about \$21 million; nasal swabs, test kits, about \$20 million; and other miscellaneous items, about \$18 million. I can say that we are tracking to close to \$408 million.

And we also know that, and the Premier (Mr. Pallister) had indicated this in question period the other day, that we have a six-month supply for this.

Now, there is an accounting piece that happens here. Just through accounting through summary budgeting instruments as well as the PSAS accounting standards, you expense this when you actually use it. But what I can tell yourself, the committee and Manitobans is that we have a six-month supply of personal protection equipment in close to \$400 million.

Mr. Wasyliw: Of the original \$1.1-billion appropriation from the spring, how much has actually been spent and how much has not been spent to date?

* (16:40)

Mr. Fielding: Okay, I'm going to refer you to the Q1 report that was brought out. Now, additional money has been appropriated since then, which I can probably get a little more into details, but on page 6 of the report it identifies where the money has been spent of that initial billion-dollar commitment.

We have spent \$1.15 billion and, as you may recall, last week we appropriated an additional \$577 million, allocated the money. Now, some of it flows to municipalities, some being \$106 million, some is to fall through there. Education: spend \$40 million. Some is related to workforce-development dollars; I think it's around \$47 million. And there is some monies in contingency related to additional expenditures that we may have for either businesses or individuals or other cost measures that we would have in place.

So I'm going to refer you to the Q1 report, but that, again, that is a little bit outdated, but that's why we needed the additional appropriation bill of the \$577 million that was approved through the Legislature.

Mr. Wasyliw: Now, in the \$577 million October appropriation, you had indicated the other day that 230 of that million went to an ICIP-type program. Now, my understanding that's the infrastructure, federal infrastructure program. That's a pre-existing program.

So, was this money that was already allocated to that program and it doesn't represent any new spending that wasn't going to take place in any event?

Mr. Fielding: I'm going to go through the budget document, and I'm going to directly answer the question as well to the member.

So, of the \$577 million that we appropriated through the Legislature for the additional budget bill, it was made up of \$40 million for Education, \$106 million for Municipal Relations—and that was for, again, for the cities and municipalities, some for transit, and some for just their raw operating grant that they goes around, just over 74, 75 million for the operating and about 32, 33, somewhere around there for the transit, the bulk of the transit the City got because it was based on ridership. There's only three or four different cities that has ridership in the province.

There was, through ISA, there was 40–four hundred and thirty-three million, I think the member is getting at.

Of the capital programs, I think this answers his question: there is \$280 million for what we're calling Manitoba Restart Capital. And of that, that was made up for \$230 million which was not appropriated in the previous budget for ICIP-type of funding; that's for different projects and we're waiting on approvals from Ottawa for these things.

And about \$50 million for water-related capital projects. So, when municipalities had maybe waste water projects, we identified about \$50 million.

So, to answer the question directly, that was not money that was appropriated in the previous budget, is \$280 million of Manitoba—the Manitoba Restart Capital Program made up of those subsections.

Mr. Wasyliw: Those are questions for finance.

Mr. Chairperson: Are there any other questions?

Hearing no further questions, we will now proceed to consideration of the resolutions relevant to this department. At this time I invite virtual members to to unmute themselves so they can respond to the question.

I will now call resolution No. 7.2.

Resolution 7.2: RESOLVED that there be granted to Her Majesty a sum not exceeding \$27,962,000 for Finance, Fiscal and Financial Management, for the fiscal year ending March 31st, 2021.

Resolution agreed to.

Resolution 7.3: RESOLVED that there be granted to Her Majesty a sum not exceeding \$8,376,000 for Finance, Treasury Board Secretariat, for the fiscal year ending March 31st, 2021.

Resolution agreed to.

Resolution 7.4: RESOLVED that there be granted to Her Majesty a sum not exceeding \$2,134,000 for Finance, Priorities and Planning Committee of Cabinet Secretariat, for the fiscal year ending March 31st, 2021.

Resolution agreed to.

Resolution 7.5: RESOLVED that there be granted to Her Majesty a sum not exceeding \$14,830,000 for Finance, Labour and Regulatory Services, for the fiscal year ending March 31st, 2021.

Resolution agreed to.

Resolution 7.6: RESOLVED that there be granted to Her Majesty a sum not exceeding \$3,008,000 for Finance, Intergovernmental Affairs, for the fiscal year ending March 31st, 2021.

Resolution agreed to.

Resolution 7.7: RESOLVED that there be granted to Her Majesty a sum not exceeding \$11,471,000 for Finance, Consumer Protection, for the fiscal year ending March 31st, 2021.

Resolution agreed to.

Resolution 7.8: RESOLVED that there be granted to Her Majesty a sum not exceeding \$120,000 for Finance, Capital Assets, for the fiscal year ending March 31st, 2021.

Resolution agreed to.

Resolution 7.9: RESOLVED that there be granted to Her Majesty a sum not exceeding \$581,000 for Finance, Other Reporting Entities Capital Investment, for the fiscal year ending March 31st, 2021.

Resolution agreed to.

The last item to be considered for the Estimates of this department is item 7.1(a), the minister's salary, contained in resolution 7.1.

The floor is open for questions.

Seeing no questions, if no motions are forthcoming—whoops, sorry. Those are instructions to me.

Resolution 7.1: RESOLVED that there be granted to Her Majesty a sum not exceeding \$11,092,000 for Finance, Corporate Services, for the fiscal year ending March 31st, 2021.

Resolution agreed to.

This completes the Estimates for the Department of Finance.

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

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

Committee recess. We'll recess for about five minutes and call in the minister.

The committee recessed at 4:49 p.m.

The committee resumed at 4:56 p.m.

FAMILIES

Mr. Chairperson (Andrew Micklefield): 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 Families.

Does the honourable minister have an opening statement?

Hon. Heather Stefanson (Minister of Families): Good afternoon. It's an honour and a privilege, as Minister of Families, to introduce the 2020-21 budget Estimates for the Department of Families.

The COVID-19 pandemic has created hardships that our province has not endured for a generation. It has fundamentally changed how we work and how we live our lives. It has also changed how governments across the country provide services to vulnerable people, necessitating more support for workers and new ways of delivering the help that families need.

I'm proud to say that the Department of Families has risen to those challenges. Across the department, and there's so many amazing people there, we have provided staff with the support, the personal protective equipment and the risk recognition pay that they deserve, and we are investing record levels in the services Manitobans rely on, ensuring that we continue protecting our most vulnerable citizens as we combat COVID-19 pandemic together.

In child care, one of our earliest challenges was providing child care to the children of essential service workers. Early in the pandemic, we created an online matching system to ensure that essential service workers could continue accessing the child care they needed so they could go to work. I'm proud to say that this matching system continues to operate, enabling parents to look up vacancies and secure child care when they need it.

To keep early childhood educators safe and supported, we have invested in over 900,000 individual PPE items and provided 1,000 early childhood educators with \$1.4 million in risk recognition pay. Since the beginning of the pandemic, we have invested nearly \$90 million in provincial operating grants for child-care centres throughout the province. In August, we signed a \$15-million, one-year extension to our bilateral agreement with the federal government that included a \$2.4-million COVID-19 response grant to further help our child-care centres recover their COVID-related costs. Our government also recognizes that child care will be critical to our economic recovery and growth when we emerge from this pandemic.

Budget 2020 invests \$181 million in the child-care system in Manitoba, almost \$20 million more than the NDP ever invested in child care in our province. Since forming government, we have created nearly 2,500 new spaces through our capital program and we are investing \$22 million this year in innovative new programs to expand the number of spaces available to parents who need child care—

Mr. Chairperson: The hour being 5 o'clock, committee rise.

HEALTH, SENIORS AND ACTIVE LIVING

* (15:20)

Mr. Chairperson (Doyle Pivniuk): Will the Committee of Supply please come to order. This section of Committee of Supply will resume to consideration of the Estimates for the Department of Health, Seniors and Active Living.

As previously agreed, questions for this department will proceed in a global manner. The floor is open for questions.

The honourable member for Point Douglas. Could the member from Point Douglas unmute her mic?

Mrs. Bernadette Smith (Point Douglas): Sorry about that.

First of all I just want to say thank you to all the doctors out there who penned the letter of concern to the Minister of Health and Premier (Mr. Pallister) with concerns related to COVID. We stand with you and share those very concerns and will continue to press this Pallister government to do more to keep Manitobans safe, healthy and alive.

* (15:30)

Secondly, I just want to go back to make a little statement yesterday in regards to the minister not answering how much unspent federal money will be carried over for the 2019-2020 year. These are a hundred per cent federal dollars; a report went in October 1st. This government knows how much money is on the table and how much is not being spent this year in the midst of a global pandemic, I might add, where thousands of people are struggling with mental health and addictions.

This money should be being spent in this fiscal year, and not being carried over, as the minister alluded to last time we were in Estimates, saying that oh, these are for projects in later years, so again, you know, this minister is keeping federal dollars that belong to Manitobans that need to be invested today for mental health and addictions.

So I'll go back to my question that I asked yesterday, and I've asked several times in the House now: How many people have died as a result of an overdose during this pandemic, and why is Manitoba so far behind in reporting this when other provinces have been transparent and are letting the community and the public know, and they have actually used this data to help guide next steps?

Miigwech.

Hon. Cameron Friesen (Minister of Health, Seniors and Active Living): There were a minimum of three separate inquiries in the member's statement, and so I will choose first to respond to the first of those questions.

I welcome an opportunity to speak further about the letter that the doctors wrote. I assume—I presume today that we would know that we have media following along as well today in these proceedings; that's a good clarification to make.

Yesterday, I was somewhat surprised to find out that we have the audio feed and the video feed of the Legislature in these virtual proceedings that is also fully available to media. That's good. These are proceedings that should be available to Manitobans.

And so now, because there wasn't an opportunity today, it would seem, for me to do a media scrum subsequent to the Committee of Supply, then I can give a response here and indicate again that we did receive a letter from these undersigned doctors who signed this letter to express concern and, you know, while I stand by the words I said yesterday, to say the timing is a challenge coming right now.

Because right now, we really believe that Manitobans need reassurances. They really do. The numbers on COVID-19 are continuing to travel upward; that makes a lot of Manitobans very nervous. There's a lot of Manitobans who are scared about what this is going to mean in the future.

And in the same way, I have to reflect that the letter also reveals that there's a lot of doctors who are scared out there. And that is legitimate. They are scared about what it will mean for them in the workplace, their health, they are scared for the patients that they want to serve, they are scared for the conditions in which they are being asked, may be asked, to work in the future.

And, as I read and re-read the letter, I reflect that it's important to go right to the point. So what is the point of the letter? And I would suggest that the point of the letter is to say we are not getting enough information. It's what I've heard before in this system.

So I asked questions of my senior staff, and I've asked questions of doctors. I had a meeting with a group of doctors last night, really appreciated the interaction that I had with some senior leaders and doctors in our system from various areas of practice, various hospitals within the system.

And I said to them, why is this happening? And they said, well, it's because, you know, these doctors really feel like enough information isn't being shared with them at this point in time. And I wanted to consider that carefully, and it's why I've called for a technical briefing with those senior system leaders who are responsible to be guiding us at this time.

Those people include but are not limited to Lanette Siragusa, the chief integration officer for the Shared Health, and it includes Dr. Perry Gray, who leads the planning part of the health incident command structure. It includes people like Beth Beaupre, the director of labour relations over at Shared Health, formerly the assistant deputy minister in the Department of Health responsible for labour.

And we're making those people available. But also, in addition to that, we're making these same leaders available to doctors, starting with critical-care doctors and medicine-area doctors, to let them know more about the plan, because I think what we're hearing in that letter is they want to know the plan.

Doctors in this letter said they are concerned about contact tracing. I would love the opportunity to share with them more openly about the way we're increasing resources for contact tracing. Doctors

expressed they were concerned about capacity like lab capacity. And I can say to them with more confidence that we just crossed a level where we recorded 4,000 tests in a single day, and we're now at a daily test average of more than 3,000. Doctors said they were concerned about the ability to get good communication and good information to them in a timely way. And if that's something we can do better, we're going to do it better, because I really, truly believe we're all in this together.

So, there's more that the doctors said in their letter, but I would say Manitobans need that reassurance at this time. Doctors are doing the things that doctors do, but doctors more than anyone understand that people have specialties, and the specialties that we have serving Manitobans at this time are those specialties in the area of system planning and co-ordination and capacity planning, resource planning, health human resource planning.

And I ask doctors everywhere, both those who signed the letter and the many, many who did not sign the letter, to put their faith in those people. And if we can help them have more confidence, we will do so.

Mrs. Smith: I've asked several times, and I'm not sure why the minister avoids this question, or, you know—Manitobans have been asking—families, in fact, have been asking: How many people have died during this pandemic due to an overdose?

There was a gentleman in my mom's apartment building. She was looking after my granddaughter, and she walked out to go change her laundry and there was someone overdosing. And unfortunately, this young man succumbed to an overdose and ended up dying. This is just one family who's been asking about these numbers, because they want to know exactly what this government is doing to address it.

And we heard yesterday again that they're holding money—that is all federal dollars that is supposed to be allocated to mental health and addictions—for future years, in a global pandemic when people are losing their lives, when we've seen a 400 per cent increase in needle use in Brandon, when we're seeing, you know, blood-borne diseases increase in this province.

So again, I'm going to ask the minister: How many people have died during this pandemic due to an overdose, and why is our Province so behind at being transparent and letting Manitobans know this number which would in fact help guide what this government does next to address and help save people's lives?

* (15:40)

Mr. Friesen: I'm pleased to be able to provide a response to the member's question.

So, I want to be clear with the member. The member is asserting that somehow the government is kicking the can of funding down the road for future years. And while I assure the member that all of these bilateral agreements are written in order to accommodate the ability to not lapse monies by being able to plan investments and spend in future years, that does not mean that we have not significantly made the mental health additions—now that are helping people now in communities, now in this province.

So, I would want to state that there is no accuracy to try to say that these investments are not being made now or at this time or in a timely way. I will answer a few questions, but I did want to indicate first—I'm just waiting for the computer to catch up, yes.

So, the numbers that the member is asking for are actually numbers that are still with the Chief Medical Examiner. These are not numbers that are released by the minister. They're released by the Chief Medical Examiner. The Chief Medical Examiner is not in the Department of Health; the numbers that the member is requesting have not been provided to the minister yet.

I believe that the minister in question who received this information is the Minister of Justice (Mr. Cullen). But, nevertheless, we are taking action on these issues because they are serious issues and the member is right to raise them.

I want to indicate to the member how some of this funding flows. So, we can start a project, we can bring an investment and then what we can do is we can spend—we can expend amounts on consecutive years through the five-year framework of the bilateral agreement.

And so when you see some of the information you actually see the investment written out in an—in the various annual years. You might see 2019-2020 and then 2020-2021 and then '21-22, and then you might even see differences in the expenditure level. For instance, if a program has commenced in year, you may see a lower amount, and then you might see the greater amount for when it's a fully operational year. So it could be a pro-rated investment for six months, then it could be a full investment on all 12 months.

Let me speak to some of the investments that we've made that help us to make the point that these are not investments that have been pushed down the road. For instance, the member will remember the

integrated youth services' NorWest expansion; I was joined by the Minister of Justice, the Minister of Families (Mrs. Stefanson) at that announcement that is—in three years it will approach \$750,000. Member will remember that starting in 2019-2020, we had that enhanced access to mental health emergency assessment and treatment services at the Health Sciences Centre.

Now, this is a good example because it shows how we started the project in the fiscal year 2019-2020, but then the funding for that project goes up by 10 times in the next year to show a full expenditure, and actually not even a full expenditure, because then the investment continues to rise in respect of the year 2021-2022 to the amount of over \$2 million alone for that one investment.

Some other ones that I would want to highlight in my time remaining: the RAAM. I spoke about the RAAM investments, and these are making such a difference in the lives of the individuals that the member's referring to. We are hearing anecdote after anecdote of people who have said, the time it took for me to get treatment has gotten better; what did you guys do? It's getting better, my time it took to get in front of a counsellor, in front of a psychiatrist, to get to the pharmacy that I needed—pharmaceuticals that I needed.

And so the RAAM access doesn't just include those hubs, it also includes the—sorry, doesn't just include the clinics, but the hub we brought, which is another million-dollar investment on three years, and I'd be pleased to continue to read into the record how we are bringing other investments like the mobile withdrawal management service expressly for methamphetamine addictions, and that ability to deliver that program in both Brandon and in Winnipeg has been meeting the needs of so many Manitobans who otherwise would have not had access to a program that was so designed to meet them where they are. There again, almost a million-dollar investment in just the space of three years.

Mrs. Smith: Can the minister provide us with an update on rates of blood-borne illnesses, how much acute hepatitis B and how many syphilis cases?

* (15:50)

Mr. Friesen: Chair, I've been conferring with my officials—oh, I'm sorry; I don't know if I have to repeat the fact that I do have with me today, remote from the Chamber but joining me via a Teams connection, both

my deputy minister, Karen Herd, and the CFO, Dan Skwarchuk, who was with us the other day as well.

So, we're attempting to gather information for the member. We're going to provide an array of information and then the member can judge the extent to which that answers the question.

There are a number of recommendations that have come in Manitoba as a result—by public health as a consequence of the escalation of STBBIs in this jurisdiction. When I was the new minister and seeing this trend, I was asking as well for extra-jurisdictional comparisons, because we were trying to understand what was going on.

And we are seeing as well, as I talk to my other colleagues in jurisdictions, that this is a concern that is widely held in Canada right now, and indeed in parts of the Western world for a broad array of factors: choice of illicit drugs being used, lifestyle choices, multiple sexual partners, risky lifestyle behaviours are contributing to the rise, my officials tell me, in levels that we would never want to see of STBBIs in this province and indeed in other provinces.

As a result of that, there has been a—efforts reinforced to address this, trying to figure out how to reinforce some resources to increase our reach to meet some subpopulations. And let me speak to a few of those recommendations that we're acting on.

As the member knows, the member has reflected on the needle exchanges, and that is one indicator of activities. And so, of course, in the short term there is that expansion in support of these harm-reduction capabilities and the focus on peer networks.

So, in addition to that, of course, though, a significant recommendation we're acting on is to support pre- and post-natal maternal and infant care programs. We've done that by expanding the capacity at the Mothering Project at Mount Carmel Clinic. I'd be pleased to talk with the member about how that program is working out and how we are working with that third party to be able to interact, because they have that trust, because they have that expertise, because they have those relationships, it is easier, at some points, to work through third parties.

We hear—I heard, the last two and some—two years and some months, that it can be very difficult for public health to reach some of these subpopulations. In some cases, it's almost as you're moving towards them, they're moving away, and that's why I think it's so important to also work through third parties,

established networks and channels that give more assurance to groups.

Other recommendation: increasing laboratory capacity and resources to allow all individuals in Manitoba to be tested twice in pregnancy and then again at delivery; to expand also HIV point-of-care testing in Brandon, and we've done that, and—or, I believe it's under way; and also exploring alternate test methods, like dried blood spot testing.

In addition to that, other recommendations, including enhanced public health nursing and outreach capacity; rejigging the way the workforce is oriented, where they are working, how they are reaching these populations; and then, of course, deploying the PHIMS, the Public Health Information Management System, across all regions of the province. We were interested to see that that had not been previously done. So, we are taking up the challenge that was not taken up previously to be able to move into that.

I do have some numbers for the member in respect of the current epidemiology that are effective as of November 29th of last year. This may be of interest to the member, and with 35 seconds remaining in my allotted time, I will indicate that this would be inclusive of seven different areas of continued tracking by each of the regional health authorities. And I would ask the member to indicate whether they would like to have that information shared.

MLA Uzoma Asagwara (Union Station): The minister, yesterday, spoke about the different committees that have been generated as a result of this pandemic; so, different task teams and committees that have come together to navigate the complexities and the challenges of this pandemic.

And so I'm wondering if the minister can advise if there's a committee that has been tasked with developing protocols and planning with a specific mandate around the COVID vaccination?

I know that there are folks working diligently to try and generate a COVID vaccine, and so if the minister could advise if an official committee has been formed with the mandate to develop the policies and protocols around that COVID vaccination, you know, who would receive that vaccination, who would be prioritized, or if people would be prioritized, how that would work. Any information the minister can share around that would be greatly appreciated.

* (16:00)

Mr. Friesen: Thank you for the question. I'm pleased to provide an update to the member for Union Station (MLA Asagwara) and indeed, to all Manitobans on vaccine preparations.

This forms an important body of the government's work and it is something that has been somewhat out of the limelight until right now, as other things have been attended to, but it is, of course, we know, of essential importance as we come closer and closer to a time when clinical trials are returning positive results. And—sorry, I was just—my deputy was just talking to me. And so, here's the update, though, that I'll bring for today.

So, first of all, this—the issue of a pandemic response, COVID-19 vaccine, is of crucial importance to all Manitobans. We have been engaged with the federal government for months in order to understand what the planning was. I can tell the critic that, even in the early spring, there were already preliminary discussions about where are we at as a nation.

Of course, there were all those natural concerns about where's a vaccine going to originate from; what will happen if vaccine is from China; what will happen if vaccine is originating from Russia; will North America entertain the idea of vaccine products that come from other jurisdictions. And we saw very quickly in the western hemisphere that effort was catching up; in continental Europe it was catching up. Because there are, of course, political considerations, and I'm no expert in all of those, but we know that there is apprehension, you know, in the world.

And so I could indicate to the individual question that there is, indeed, a task force that has been set up that is specific to the responsibility. And in the planning for the epidemic response, there was discussion as to where we would most appropriately locate that responsibility under individuals like, of course, the MOH, the medical officer of health responsible for a vaccine, Dr. Tim Hilderman.

And so a task force has been set up that has membership from Health, Seniors and Active Living, public health, Central Services, in order to, of course, to consider all of those logistical considerations that must be considered.

There is—this is a separate task force, will operate much the same as our testing task force, which was charged with the responsibility of being able to quickly bring improvement to add numbers of sites and retrain workforce and handle logistical issues and interface with health providers.

So in the same way right now, there are many considerations when it comes to how we plan for a vaccine. Of course, first and foremost, we must remain in contact with the federal government, because they are the ones who must approve vaccine. We understand there are a number of global pharmaceutical companies that, even here in North America, are close, some into clinical trials, some approaching clinical trials—essentially seven principal vaccine providers who are on the list of the federal government, who are involved in this work. The task force itself reports up to the clerk's COVID co-ordinating committee here that has membership from various departments as well.

Some of the logistics that have to be handled, of course, though, are things like how we receive vaccine and how we store vaccine. This is not simply like storing supplies, textbooks or Band-Aids, like we do right across our system through the Manitoba distribution agency; rather, in this case, this kind of vaccine could come with some very, very special requirements for storage and some very, very complicated technicalities when it comes to distribution. Nevertheless, we continue to identify things like storage requirements, distribution requirements, site requirements.

At the same time, this group is tasked with receiving information about how the federal government will scope out who is eligible and in what order, what sequencing. This causes me to think back to the ethical framework for decision-making on the distribution of PPE in the early days of pandemic response, a broad document that had sign-on by all provinces and territories in the federal government, that would provide a framework for distribution.

* (16:10)

We know that our populations that are particularly affected may be the elderly in hospital, health-care providers, those whose—who reside in the North and others. I'd be happy to continue to have the conversation when my time is renewed.

MLA Asagwara: My colleague, the member for Point Douglas (Mrs. Smith), just needed some clarification. So I just wanted to clarify that the minister would be providing the numbers around STBBIs from 2019 to that member?

And my question is: Will the minister release to us the inspection reports for personal-care homes in 2020? So will the minister please, you know, share

that information and release the inspection reports for all personal-care homes in 2020?

Mr. Friesen: I'm just going to turn my volume down.

Mr. Chair, I've failed to say before, I wanted to say thank you to LBIS the—not Elvis, but LBIS, Legislative Building information services, that helped us this afternoon when we had a pretty significant IT challenge in hooking up here to be able to allow my deputy and CFO to participate in these proceedings remotely. My apologies to the opposition parties. It was unforeseeable, but we do thank them for their quick work to be able to rectify this situation, and I wouldn't anticipate there'd be a repeat of that because now they say they've solved the issue that was occurring for the future.

To the member's first question, yes, we can provide the information that was asked in terms of the 2019 November—I think it was November 20th or 29th—reporting on levels of STBBIs in the system in seven subcategories; we will provide that information.

Member's second question is whether the government will provide the inspection reports for last year. The short answer is yes.

I do want to provide context. I want Manitobans to understand that the inspection reports were not provided by the NDP. I was the minister—I was the member for Morden-Winkler, who was the critic for Health, and I asked the NDP government if they would provide the inspection reports for personal-care homes, and the answer was no. To get information about inspection reports at personal-care homes in the past, under the NDP government, members had to use the FIPPA process.

All members of this House will know that our government has made some very significant commitments to be able to make information available to Manitobans on a proactive basis. And I think we have literally hundreds and hundreds of pieces of information that used to be held behind the big curtain and then only offered out in piecemeal or parsed out very carefully by FIPPA officers under the previous government, and those things are now all available on our government's proactive disclosure website. Our intent, as well, when it comes to inspections is to also, in the same way, be able to put these inspection reports online.

But there is more, and I want to just refer to it briefly.

In Manitoba, we believe that we have a very good oversight of our 125 licensed personal-care homes in this province. We know that that compliance of personal-care homes with the PCH standard regulations is the responsibility of the Licensing and Compliance branch, the LCB. The current process for assessing compliance is in any two-year period that all of the 125 PCHs receive a standards review, and in that same two-year period, approximately 25 PCHs will also receive an unannounced review.

But I want to provide an update and say that, in lieu of the pandemic, of course, we had to pause those standards reviews. And we quickly had advice provided to us. We said, what are we going to do? We're not going to pause inspections.

And so there was actually a very, very significant plan that was returned to government. Public health ordered that we would essentially move those to be able to inspect by different means, but to do no less of an inspection of personal-care homes. In fact, as a result of this, we will actually do more personal-care home inspections this year than ever before. And that is quite something considering we're in a global pandemic.

We know how important that process is—ongoing inspections is, especially when you—in the spring, when all Canadian provinces had to curtail visitation privileges. That was a tremendous burden to families, to residents in those homes. A reporter had asked me about six months ago, what's the hardest thing we've done so far. And if it's not the closing of visits at personal-care homes, I don't know what it was. But that was very tough.

And so we know since then, of course, we've been able to open those visitation privileges more and more through our pandemic response system, restore privileges to family members, designate some family members as caregivers to have them be not even subject to the higher levels of restrictions. And, then, of course our very significant \$40-million campaign to bring visitation shelters to personal-care homes is significant.

I want to add, though, that a modified review process was developed that's currently in use. And between July the 8th and October 30th, 105 MRs—these reviews—were completed, in addition to those 20 unannounced visits, that thus all 125 licensed facilities participate in a review in 2020.

This shows the degree to which we take inspections and standards, reviews, of our personal-care homes seriously in order to keep residents safe.

Mr. Chairperson: The honourable member for Union Station. My correction. The honourable member for River Heights on a question.

* (16:20)

Hon. Jon Gerrard (River Heights): I just have 'til 4:30, so if we could move quickly, that would be appreciated.

My first question deals with prevention, and prevention is key to preventing, for example, lead exposure. Intrinsic's report of last November predicted that the average blood lead level of children in Point Douglas to be 4.7 mcg per decilitre. At this average, there would be between two and four out of every 10 children in Point Douglas with toxic blood lead levels.

Such toxic blood lead levels have been associated with learning and behavioural difficulties, with difficulties in school, with juvenile delinquency, with substance abuse, with mental illness, with homelessness and with crime. Government would do well to prevent these bad outcomes.

Early identification of children with high lead levels can be achieved by screening children between ages one and three, and children identified early can be significantly helped.

When will the government begin screening all children born in Point Douglas and in other areas of high lead exposure?

Mr. Friesen: I thank the member for the question.

The member knows that this government has responded very significantly when it comes to the issues that the member is raising on concentrations of lead in soil in some Winnipeg neighbourhoods.

If I reflect and review, I know this file came to my attention. It's a shared responsibility between Health, Seniors and Active Living and also the Department of Conservation and Climate. We became aware of what could only be described as a cover-up by the former government when it came to disclosing to families, neighbourhoods, schools, community centres, the knowledge they had of elevated levels of lead in soil from a study that had taken place years ago.

We became aware of even the fact that there had been resources designed, things like websites, public-facing activities to be able to let the public know and

to disclose to them the, you know, what the level of concern should be. And then we also became aware that those resources were never deployed. They were never acted on. Instead, these things were swept under the rug, and that is why the former minister for Conservation and Climate in their role had ordered a review, new tests. We received a master report. The member will know that master report. We did tender an award of a contract for assessment in lead remediation activities at Weston School for the amount of almost a half a million dollars.

We collaborated, of course, for additional materials to develop and implement handwashing toolkits, educational materials. We presented—we made presentations to parents and caregivers for the purposes of reducing lead exposure. We directed Conservation and Climate to establish a soil-monitoring program for Winnipeg neighbourhoods. I sat in on those same briefings to see what those additional levels were.

I think that what we read in the master—the summary of the reports we got back is that there is no immediate risk, that the water is safe to drink. I remember sitting with the former acting chief provincial public health officer before our current Chief Provincial Public Health Officer took his role.

And the former chief—I said, help me understand the relative danger in these neighbourhoods. I said, would you play in this playground with your children? And he said, without a doubt. I said, would you be safe to have your children be outside as the chief provincial public health officer? He said, without a doubt. And he talked to me about the kind of interaction with soil that would be necessary, how incredibly intense that would have to be. Essentially, you would have to ingest soil in order for it to be unsafe.

So, we were, you know—obviously you want to acknowledge that people are fearful when they hear this. That's why we took action. That is why we took action with essential services and Conservation and Climate including, you know, a contract for \$100,000 to scope business needs, to inform system data and reporting requirements. We did mitigation remediation work to the specific recommendation in the report to which the member is referring. There are questions that are still outstanding about that key—or that specific recommendation. It wasn't a key recommendation but it talked about—the report talked about whether there would be value for a reporting and monitoring system.

And we have been advised by officials that, while possible, they're not certain the value that this would add or how they would go about doing that. Nevertheless, I think we all agree that what is essential in all of this is that, you know, that there's good handwashing techniques in place, that we are eliminating ingestion, you know, by transfer, and that we are continuing to commit to education to raise awareness of common exposure routes and impact routine activities and ways to reduce exposure.

So, there are no legislative changes that were required to implement the proposals we've done, but we have moved forward to implement the response to the recommendations, continuing to educate, respond to inquiries by people, and we continue to develop planning for the future to reduce lead emissions.

We know that lead resides in soil for a long, long time. We know that there is less lead around than there was, but of course the member and I both understand that lead resides in soil and that degradation rate is slow, and that is why we took the exceptional measures as well of mitigating right at Weston School and some other places to make sure that there was an abundance of awareness of how we were acting.

* (16:30)

Mr. Gerrard: I will just provide a summary comment and hand it back to the member for Union Station (MLA Asagwara).

I thank the member, but he misses the main point, that is, that there are kids right now with toxic blood lead levels and they're not being detected and picked up and helped, and they need to be.

So I now pass it back to the member for Union Station.

Mr. Chairperson: The honourable member for Union Station—oh, the honourable member for—the honourable minister.

Mr. Friesen: Mr. Chair, can you advise if that's allowable under the rules that I am not allowed to respond—the opportunity to respond to the member's question?

Mr. Chairperson: Yes. You can respond if you want.

Mr. Friesen: The member for River Heights (Mr. Gerrard) makes the claim that this is the most important part of the study. We would agree that safety is essential, but it has not been the opinion of senior leadership that that is the—that the biomonitoring study is the most crucial part of this.

We believe that education of the public is the most crucial part of this; that reassurance that it is safe to move around in their communities, it's safe to grow vegetables in gardens, that handwashing is important so as to not ingest materials.

But there's also the complications around how such a study would take place. It is a lot of work to undertake for a benefit that has—that is questionable. You would—it would be like a very large and complex cohorting. You would have to have buy-in. We're not certain that all families would allow the children to participate. If there is a migration of individuals it would be very difficult to be able to track that.

I wonder if the member would know of a third party who would take an interest into perhaps taking up this if it had some value otherwise, but we continue to receive the advice that the most important things to the departments' perspective—departments, plural—is that, you know, that education commitment and, of course, also these very significant investments that our government has been making in mitigation and those things.

And I won't read them exhaustively, but those do include things like the mitigation-remediation at Weston School; the soil-monitoring programs that are going on in identified neighbourhoods; the drinking water subsidy at child-care centres, that's almost up to \$1 million already; lead mitigation grants and data systems.

I would also take—tell the member that I would encourage them to also take the conversation up with Minister for Conservation and Climate. She has also shared with me, though, a reminder that every family and their doctor can monitor levels of blood.

So, anyone can do this through their own medical provider, they can take actions on medical advice if those levels are high. That's always been available to families through their family doctor, so there's no one who's prevented who has this concern from being able to come forward.

I believe that the member of River Heights is well aware of this and I think it's irresponsible to suggest otherwise.

MLA Asagwara: Done.

Mr. Chairperson: Done? Okay.

Seeing that there's no further questions, we will now go to the resolutions, beginning with the second resolution as we deferred consideration of the first resolution containing the minister's salary.

At this point, we will all allow virtual members to unmute their mics so that we can respond to the questions on each resolution.

Reading the second resolution—okay.

Resolution 21.2: RESOLVED that there be granted to Her Majesty a sum not exceeding \$31,338,000 for Health, Seniors and Active Living, Policy and Accountability, for fiscal year ending March 31st, 2021.

Resolution agreed to.

Resolution 21.3: RESOLVED that there be granted to Her Majesty a sum not exceeding \$13,877,000 for Health, Seniors and Active Living, Insurance, for fiscal year ending March 31st, 2021.

Resolution agreed to.

Resolution 21.4: RESOLVED that there be granted to Her Majesty a sum not exceeding \$31,082,000 for Health, Seniors and Active Living, Population Health, for fiscal year ending March 31st, 2021.

Resolution agreed to.

Resolution 21.5: RESOLVED that there be granted to Her Majesty a sum not exceeding \$76,079,000 for Health, Seniors and Active Living, Transition, for the fiscal year ending March 31st, 2021.

Resolution agreed to.

Resolution 21.6: RESOLVED that there be granted to Her Majesty a sum exceeding—not exceeding \$5,920,669,000 for Health, Seniors and Active Living, Health Services Insurance Fund, for fiscal year ending March 31st, 2021.

Resolution agreed to.

Resolution 21.7: RESOLVED that there be granted to Her Majesty a sum not exceeding \$213,587,000 for Health, Seniors and Active Living, Capital Funding, for fiscal year ending March 31st, 2021.

Resolution agreed to.

Resolution 21.8: RESOLVED that there be granted to Her Majesty a sum not exceeding \$3,485,000 for Health, Seniors and Active Living, Capital Assets, for the fiscal year ending March 31st, 2021.

Resolution agreed to.

Resolution 21.9: RESOLVED that there be granted to Her Majesty a sum not exceeding \$291,217,000 for Health, Seniors and Active Living, Other Reporting Entities Capital Investments, for the fiscal year ending March 31st, 2021.

Resolution agreed to.

* (16:40)

The last item to be considered for the Estimates for this department is the—item 21.1(a), the minister's salary, contained in resolution 21.1.

At this point, we request that the minister—all ministerial—okay, wait—the floor is open for any questions.

MLA Asagwara: I move that line item 21.1(a) be amended so that the minister's salary be reduced to \$1.

Motion presented.

Mr. Chairperson: The motion is in order. Are there any questions or comments on the motion?

Is the committee ready for the question?

Some Honourable Members: Question.

Mr. Chairperson: Shall the motion pass?

Some Honourable Members: Pass.

Some Honourable Members: No.

Mr. Chairperson: I hear—my opinion, the—I hear noes.

Voice Vote

Mr. Chairperson: All those in favour, say yea.

Some Honourable Members: Yea.

Mr. Chairperson: All those opposed, say nay.

Some Honourable Members: Nay.

Mr. Chairperson: In my opinion, the Nays have it.

Ms. Nahanni Fontaine (Official Opposition House Leader): On division.

Mr. Chairperson: On division. Motion did not—defeated on division.

Mr. Chairperson: Okay, now we're going to resolution 21.1: RESOLVED that there be granted to Her Majesty a sum not exceeding \$12,054,000 for Health, Seniors and Active Living, Resources and Performance, for the fiscal year ending March 31st, 2021.

Resolution agreed to.

This completes the Estimates for Health, Seniors and Active Living.

The next set of Estimates will be considered for the section of the Committee of Supply for the Department of Education.

Shall we briefly recess and allow the ministers to—and critics to—for—opportunity to prepare and commencement of the next department.

Some Honourable Members: No.

Mr. Chairperson: No? Okay.

So we'll just ask the—we'll pause for everybody to get all connected to the Department of Education.

EDUCATION

Mr. Chairperson (Doyle Pivniuk): Will the Committee of Supply please come to order. This section of Committee of Supply will consider the Estimates for the Department of Education.

Does the honourable minister have an opening statement?

Hon. Kelvin Goertzen (Minister of Education): I do.

First of all, it's a pleasure to be able to be here and to begin the Supply Estimates for Education. I hope we have a long and fruitful discussion on the Estimates of Education.

This, obviously, has been a unique year for all of those involved in the department and throughout the education system more generally. So, normally, I would take time, as ministers do, to go through the various accomplishments within the department and upcoming projects and strategies and to highlight some of the things within the Estimates book and the appropriation.

And while I do want to, certainly, talk a little bit about the new school commitment, the capital funds, the schools that have already been opened as a result of the commitments of our government, those that are under construction and those that are planned for the future—I mean, those are very exciting things for communities when they have the opportunity to open a new school because a school is often very much, you know, the centre of a community in terms of its activity and is more than just a school—but these are, of course, different and unique times, Mr. Chairperson, as you and all members of the committee know.

* (16:50)

And the work that's been done, not just over the last few weeks since schools have been opened again, but certainly over the last few months, has been difficult. It's been important and it's been remarkable in many ways. As we've seen institutions across the world, whether those are business institutions or charitable or faith-based, adapt and change—or this Legislature, in fact, Mr. Chairperson.

Certainly, schools have had to do the same. And, really, I've been very impressed with all of those working within the system, how they've stepped up to do that. And so we've seen a lot of different things.

Of course, at the high school level, there's more of a blended learning environment where many high school students are not there every day and so that has been a different model for high school teachers to have to implement, to have some at-home-learning students and then to have some who are in the classroom environment. There are, of course, some where they can achieve the full distancing that are going full-time and so that is good and that's important. But it's been different.

At the K-to-8 system, of course, we know we've had many groups, many classes that have been cohorted, which has been unique and different, and there's been an adaptation there too. I think I mentioned in the House in one different context how I saw, early on after schools opened in September, where the school had students who were out in the playground and they had bands, coloured bands around their waists so that supervisors could easily identify whether or not those cohorts were mixing or not. They could tell who was in which cohort or not.

So, it's that kind of innovation, I think, that, you know, really speaks well of all of those who are working in the school system, not just teachers but, of course, teachers, EAs, the bus drivers, janitors, everyone who's involved has really stepped up and is making a difference.

But that doesn't mean that it's been easy. Clearly, the higher case count that we've seen in the last few weeks has an impact on schools. The more cases that are happening within the broader community, the more cases are going to, of course, go into the schools because our students are part of that broader community.

But I think that what sometimes is misunderstood or not always appreciated is, you know, Dr. Roussin has talked about the level of transmission within the school setting and overall, to this point, has indicated

that comparative to other parts of society, the transmission rate within the school has been relatively low. And that's really what we'd be looking for.

We can't prevent entirely—obviously, students who are in the community and who might be working in jobs and those other things, if they get COVID-19 within the community, we won't always know; they might be asymptomatic coming into the school. But are the plans that have been put in place stopping the transmission, then, from happening, preventing the spread within schools?

Now, there's been, of course, a couple of schools where there has been transmission and there has been outbreaks declared, but overall what we're seeing is, you know, a number of sort of one-off cases up until this point.

Now, we're always monitoring that, of course, together with Dr. Roussin and public health. And I want to, you know, take that moment to particularly thank public health. I know we get questions sometime from the opposition in question period. They might question public health in terms of the timeliness of getting reports back to schools or to parents—and that's their role as an opposition, I'm not being critical of that; I spent a long time in opposition, longer than any human being should spend in opposition but I—so I appreciate the role that is done, Mr. Chairperson, but I also think that in these times, we have to be—as supportive as we are, you know—critical of those who are working for sure in the system and particularly in public health.

Now, the relationship that public health has with the school system isn't a new relationship, of course. They will have been involved for flu clinics and other issues that have happened in schools from a health perspective for many, many years. And so this isn't something that they're not accustomed to but, certainly, at a different scale, Mr. Chairperson.

And so we appreciate greatly the work that Dr. Roussin and his team are doing on a daily basis, but then in the planning for this as well, you know, the planning around cohorts and whether that would be the right way to go. But all of the discussion in the summer and all of the planning from public health was about how do we not just get the schools open; it wasn't let's get to the earliest part of September, open the schools, and then we've achieved something. It was: how do we keep them open?

Because we know that there would be, you know, continued cases in the community, maybe not knew

exactly how—what the numbers would be but, of course, there was going to be continued cases. And so it was all about how do we keep the schools open. And to this point, I think that a lot of the things that have been put in place have allowed us to keep the schools open.

Now, there are different restriction levels in different parts of Manitoba. Some communities are under red, some are under orange, and so that has caused changes as well. Each one of these changes, I know that it puts stress on the system and it puts stress on teachers and EAs and everybody working in the school system, and I don't want to diminish that, Mr. Chairperson.

We're—I'm very, very well aware, not only from, you know, family members who work in the school system and from friends, but just broadly, as the Education Minister, I recognize how much stress that there is in the system, as there is stress in society in general. I mean, I also know that any profession would indicate that they have a lot of challenges they have to overcome but particularly speaking about the education system, there's no question that this has been a difficult time, and we know that and we hear that.

So one of the things that we, of course, did early in the spring was to say to the school divisions, hold the savings that you had when schools were temporarily closed—turned out to be longer than we thought. That amounted for \$48 million of savings. We then said we're going to provide \$52 million of savings in addition to that for \$100 million.

Now, for some reason the opposition has this feeling that that \$100 million should've been spent all in one month or maybe even all in one day, and then I guess the next day they would ask for 100—another \$100 million, and on and on it would've gone. But that was never the intention.

The intention was we have \$100 million of taxpayers' dollars available for school divisions, and they can use that for the various things they need that are COVID-related as we're going along. And they are using it. I've reported to the House that about 15 and a half million dollars was spent in September. We expect a similar number in October when I get those results in, and that'll continue on for the months ahead that I'm sure—or, I'm sure. So, that was always the plan.

Now, the federal money that's now been allocated—and, again, there's a bit of a misconception

because only half of that money has flowed. I understand that half of the money from the federal government will only come some time next year, but that the Province's received half to date and we'll have some discussion, I think, relatively shortly, about how that money's being allocated.

But we have indicated that, clearly, remote learning is something that needs additional support—not just because there are more students at home in a home-schooling environment that, I think, need more support because they're maybe not natural home-schoolers. Their parents are choosing to home-school their children for reasons to do with the pandemic and not because they naturally would've wanted to home-school. So I think there needs to be more support provided there.

But there are more cohorts that are going home and doing at-home learning and, of course, there's immunocompromised who've been learning at home from the beginning of the school year. So I do believe there needs to be more support there, and I think that the federal government funding, the half that's been provided, can play a role in that, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

So, I think that we have, you know, a good plan in place. It's not perfect. It's always being changed because we haven't gone through a pandemic in 100 years, so there's learning as we go. And I think we'll continue to learn as we go, and I look forward to hearing the questions from my critic.

As he knows, I have great respect for the member for Transcona, both on a personal level and a professional level. The times that he's interacted with myself and with the department, he's always given good advice. He might not think that we always take

the advice, but we always listen, and I do think that some of the advice that he's given has shown up in some of the actions that we've taken as well.

So I look forward to his questions and his comments as we go through this process.

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

Does the official opposition critic have any opening comments?

Mr. Nello Altomare (Transcona): I want to thank the minister for leaving me 52 seconds or less to make my opening statements. I'll keep them very brief.

I know the government has spoken a lot about their Ready. Safe. Grow. slogan that they've been posterizing around the city and around the province.

I want to ask the minister: How has the department supported schools in being safe to start?

Mr. Chairperson: Oh, I just want to remind the member that we're not in questions with your opening statement. But you will still get 10 minutes even for partly tomorrow—unless you want to go to questions.

Mr. Altomare: I did ask a question.

Mr. Chairperson: Okay.

The hour being 5 p.m., the committee rise.

Call in the Speaker.

IN SESSION

Madam Speaker: The hour being 5 p.m., this House is now adjourned and stands adjourned until 10 a.m. tomorrow.

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF MANITOBA

Wednesday, November 4, 2020

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS			
Introduction of Bills		Physicians' Open Letter Regarding Pandemic	
		Kinew	586
		Pallister	586
Bill 208–The Wildlife Amendment Act (Protecting Property from Water and Wildlife Damage)		Physicians' Open Letter Regarding Pandemic	
Johnson	579	Asagwara	586
		Friesen	586
Bill 301–The Winnipeg Humane Society Foundation Incorporation Amendment Act		PPE for Child-Care Centres	
Fontaine	579	Marcelino	587
		Stefanson	587
		Pallister	588
Ministerial Statements		Headingley Correctional Facility	
4-H Month		Fontaine	588
Pedersen	579	Cullen	588
Brar	580	Correctional Facilities	
Gerrard	580	Fontaine	589
		Cullen	589
Members' Statements		Incarcerated Individuals	
Moving Nellie Home		Fontaine	589
Piwniuk	581	Cullen	589
Muninder Sidhu		COVID-19 Pandemic	
Kinew	581	Wasyliw	589
		Pallister	589
Brandon General Hospital Foundation		Physicians' Open Letter Regarding Pandemic	
Isleifson	582	Lamont	591
Supports for the North During Pandemic		Pallister	591
Lindsey	582	Small Business Support	
Chris Chipman		Lamont	591
Gordon	583	Pallister	591
Oral Questions		Government's PPE Purchases	
COVID-19 Financial Assistance		Lamoureux	591
Kinew	583	Pallister	592
Pallister	584	Support for Homeless Shelters	
		Lagimodiere	592
		Stefanson	592
COVID-19–Education System		COVID-19 Case at Keeyask Generating Station	
Kinew	584	Adams	592
Pallister	584	Wharton	592
Front-Line Health Workers		Speaker's Ruling	
Kinew	585	Driedger	592
Pallister	585		

ORDERS OF THE DAY

GOVERNMENT BUSINESS

Committee of Supply
(Concurrent Sections)

Executive Council

Kinew	594
Pallister	594
Lamont	600

Economic Development and Training

Moses	602
Eichler	603

Agriculture and Resource Development

Pedersen	607
Brar	608

Crown Services

Sala	610
Wharton	610
Lamoureux	611

Finance

Fielding	613
Wasyliw	615

Families

Stefanson	625
-----------	-----

Health, Seniors and Active Living

B. Smith	626
Friesen	626
Asagwara	629
Gerrard	632

Education

Goertzen	635
Altomare	637

The Legislative Assembly of Manitoba Debates and Proceedings
are also available on the Internet at the following address:

<http://www.manitoba.ca/legislature/hansard/hansard.html>