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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
OF
PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND

RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS AND ORAL QUESTION PERIOD
(PRELIMINARY PROCEEDINGS)

FOR

FRIDAY, 8 MARCH 2024

[10:35 a.m.]

[Hon. D. Compton in the chair]

Responses to Questions Taken as Notice

Questions by Members

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

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

International students cap and housing

Yesterday we had an announcement from the Minister of Workforce regarding international student rates. With this announcement, it's clear that while this government might be capping the number of possible new students coming here at 2,000 for this coming year, it could actually mean more international students enrolled at our institutions if that cap is met.

Is that correct, minister?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Workforce, Advanced Learning and Population.

Hon. J. Redmond: Thank you, Madam Speaker, and thank you to the hon. member for the question.

The new federal policy that's put in place puts an allocation on all provinces and territories across the country. Our allocation of students is 2,000. That was distributed to our public post-secondary institutes, and we look forward to welcoming those students when they come in the fall.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

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

No one blames students for wanting to attend one of our institutions here on Prince Edward Island, just like no one can blame newcomers for wanting to make PEI their home. But the reality remains that this government has not done enough to keep up with the demand. Services are stretched thin as it is, yet this government doesn't seem

willing or even able to make the proper investments needed.

Question to the minister: How many student housing units do students in our province have access to between all of our institutions?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Workforce, Advanced Learning and Population.

Hon. J. Redmond: Thank you, Madam Speaker, and thank you for the question.

We certainly stay in touch with our post-secondary institutes all the time to ensure that they have adequate housing for their students. We know that those who come internationally generally would like to live on campus, and I know that our post-secondary institutes do the best they can to ensure that that can happen.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Hon. H. Perry: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker, but that didn't answer my question.

If our institutions want to take in more international students, one would reasonably expect that they would ensure that, at a minimum, they should be able to access student housing here on the Island.

Question to the minister: How will your government ensure our post-secondary institutions are providing adequate housing supports for students if they are going to continue to bring in thousands of students here a year, so as not to add to an already overburdened housing market?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Workforce, Advanced Learning and Population.

Hon. J. Redmond: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

I think I just want to help with some of this, here. Our post-secondary institutions – we've been given an allocation from the federal government. Each school has the allocations that they're able to offer for students to come this year. They are similar

numbers – the allocation was based on numbers in the past, and they're looking forward to welcoming those students in the fall.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Hon. H. Perry: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker, but that didn't answer the question.

We already have a less than 1 percent vacancy rate here on Prince Edward Island, and inviting more people here without addressing the issues that we're seeing right now is not going to help the problem.

The fact is our housing market is tapped. We already hear of UPEI telling students not to come here for their studies if they haven't secured housing ahead of time. Now, it would seem that this government is okay to leave students fending for themselves when it comes to housing while they take their money through post-secondary institutions.

Question to the minister: Why should international students, or any students who are seeking student housing, have any faith that your government will have actually taken the steps needed to ensure they have safe, affordable housing, given the horrendous track record that this government has in creating safe, affordable housing for anyone, let alone students?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Workforce, Advanced Learning and Population.

Hon. J. Redmond: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

For international students who are coming, there are not more being invited. With an allocation, it actually puts a cap on that, making it a very strategic way that the post-secondary does need to recruit to ensure that they can have students come to add to that diversity and culture that's so important.

Certainly, more is needed to help those institutions. We do invest in our public post-secondaries. There is a brand-new residence at UPEI that we did invest in as well, and we'll continue to work with our post-secondary institutions to ensure that they can

provide students that wholesome learning experience.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

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

But with the cap, it could actually mean that there could be more international students coming here this year.

Targeted immigration for specific sectors

A question to the Minister of Workforce, Advanced Learning and Population: For several years now, the population of Prince Edward Island has been growing dramatically. The pressures across the province are immense, and it seems pretty clear that this government is simply not coping with these challenges very well.

Why did this government place so little effort into attracting construction workers to our province during 2023?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Workforce, Advanced Learning and Population.

Hon. J. Redmond: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

[10:40 a.m.]

In relation to international students from a post-secondary institution, recruitment is a hard job and they are creative and innovative. With an allocation cap on the documentation that you can send out to offer to students – we've never experienced that before. So, the added numbers probably won't be there. There potentially could be, quite possibly less students coming based on only being able to offer the documentation to the number of allocations that you have.

The new announcement yesterday supports us – the ability to put an expiration date on those documentations to be able to offer if a student doesn't come, but again, they'll have to work hard to gain those international students. There will not be a flood coming. The cap actually puts it in a different position.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

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

Hon. H. Perry: Thank you very much.

The cap could mean there's less, but the cap could also mean there's a potential for more, too.

But my question to the minister was this: Why did the government place so little effort in attracting construction workers to the province during 2023?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Workforce, Advanced Learning and Population.

Hon. J. Redmond: Thank you, Madam Speaker, and thank you again for the question from the hon. member.

We certainly work hard with our Construction Association of PEI. We have a recent agreement with that organization and ACOA to do some more international recruitment. We are in schools. Our post-secondary institution that has many of our trades visits our high schools. There is a new project happening there to support and to give them opportunities to try trades out. We'll continue to work hard to recruit construction skilled workers to PEI.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

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

To no surprise, we have a very serious housing problem here in our province. Everyone knows there is a real shortage of people to work in the construction sector, yet according to numbers provided by the government by CBC journalist Kevin Yarr, only 31 immigrants invited to our Island in 2023 were in the construction sector. That was out of more than 2,000 people who were invited here under the PNP and the Atlantic Immigration Program.

My question is: Was this government unaware of the fact that, through 2023, we needed skilled workers in the construction trades?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Workforce, Advanced Learning and Population.

Hon. J. Redmond: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

With this construction and the need for these skilled workers, we work hard all the time with our stakeholders, private companies in the industry, and helping and supporting them and directing to recruit.

In regards to immigration, we are looking for skilled construction workers. These aren't always easy to recruit, but we're committed to work hard to ensure that we get the workers that we need here to help with our housing shortage, to help with our health care, and to help with our education.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

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

It makes very little sense. There are people from all over the world who want to move here to Prince Edward Island, and yet, with that vast pool of people to choose from, we don't seem to concentrate on the areas that we obviously need: 1 percent nursing, 1 percent construction workers, during a housing crisis, during a health care crisis.

Why did this government choose to invite more than 500 people to work in the food service and hospitality sectors?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Workforce, Advanced Learning and Population.

Hon. J. Redmond: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Again, as recently as this past July, we have refocused our immigration and programs that we have the ability to pull those levers on. We are focusing on our construction trade, our health care, and our education, as well as manufacturing and trucking.

These specific sectors require certain skills. They're harder to recruit for, but we are refocusing and working hard to hopefully close that gap and we'll continue to do so.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

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

But it took five years and a housing crisis and a health care crisis for this government to finally realize that we need to have targeted immigration towards construction and health care.

But with tourism, I fully understand that tourism is very important to Prince Edward Island, but let's face it, we need people to build houses in this province, and I haven't heard too many Islanders talk about a significant shortage of workers at Tim Hortons or McDonald's.

Minister, where did the pressure come from to invite so many people here in the food service and the hospitality sectors?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Workforce, Advanced Learning and Population.

Hon. J. Redmond: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

[10:45 a.m.]

Some of our immigration workers that are working in the quick-service industry can come through to live here in many forms. That's something that we do not have the ability to control. If you are on a post-graduate work permit and you've graduated from another province, you have the ability to live in the country and come and work here in hopes to gain your hours that you need.

We are working hard. We've refocused our distribution; that will focus our numbers into our targeted areas of the workforce.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

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

I'm sure that this province wasn't out there in this great big world, looking for people to pour double-doubles. What we really need is electricians, we need plumbers, and we need carpenters. Once again, why the concentration on the food service and hospitality?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Workforce, Advanced Learning and Population.

Hon. J. Redmond: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Again, those that come to choose to live in PÉI and want to build their life here are an important part of our Island as well. We have taken a refocused approach and we are targeting for today and future on that workforce that we need in our health, our skilled trades, and our education.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Hon. H. Perry: Okay, just a simple question, Madam Speaker: Which businesses were pushing government to push so much work into fast food and hospitality workers?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Workforce, Advanced Learning and Population.

Hon. J. Redmond: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

There is no one pushing to drive the numbers there. We are working hard to bring in skilled workers. Again, those who have permits to allow them to move in through the country are doing so, and they are able to.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition

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

So, these decisions appear to be completely off the charts when it comes to common sense. Much of this record leads me to the conclusion, again, that this government is simply not up to the job.

Another part of these numbers is the fact that only seven people – seven people – in nursing and allied health services were invited to this province in 2023.

So, what's the problem here? Does the right hand not know what the left hand is doing? Was the minister's department unaware of a health care crisis in this province, where we need nurses a whole lot more than we need people in fast food?

Question: Was the department unaware of the need to recruit nurses and other health care workers?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Workforce, Advanced Learning and Population.

Hon. J. Redmond: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

We are quite aware, as we've refocused our immigration targets, and health care is the number one focus. We will continue to work hard to recruit workers here to help fill that gap.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

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

Again, it took five years and a crisis in health care for this government to finally realize that we need targeted immigration. I know that in the recent population framework – you know that little thin document that you recently made public? – in that little weak venture, there was some mention of reducing the number of people invited to the Island through various immigration streams.

How many people will come to Prince Edward Island in 2024 through the immigrant streams?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Workforce, Advanced Learning and Population.

Hon. J. Redmond: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

We have a number of allocations that we receive from the federal government and based on our 2023 numbers, we are only going to fill that to 75 percent of that allocation to help – we still need employees to come to fill in our gaps in our sectors, but it will also help with the population growth.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from O'Leary-Inverness.

R. Henderson: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Earlier this week in Question Period, the Premier inaccurately informed this Legislature that he thought the Community Hospital O'Leary was closed as a hospital. This reckless statement by a Premier of this province gave concern to those directors of the Community Hospital Foundation, as well as the 134 dedicated, hardworking staff at Community Hospital at that site.

Is the Premier out of touch with the health care system in this province? He says he needs to be involved in health care and I'm okay with that, but make sure he's accurate in knowing what health care services are delivered in this province. The *Oxford Dictionary* defines hospital as a building or institution providing medical treatment and nursing care for sick or injured people.

Community Hospital O'Leary

Question to the Premier: How do you define a hospital?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

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

I would say that when I was making my comments, I would have referred to the downgrading of the services offered in those places to the point in O'Leary and Souris, where the former MLA actually took the sign off the hospital and delivered it into the Minister of Health, saying that you've

closed down all of our services. That's what I was referring to, which happened repeatedly under the former administration.

Speaker: The hon. Member from O'Leary-Inverness.

[10:50 a.m.]

R. Henderson: Well, isn't that rather interesting? So, when you downgraded the services at Prince County Hospital, did you close the Prince County Hospital? When you downgraded the services at Kings County Memorial, did you downgrade that service? Did you close that hospital? Same thing with Western Hospital.

In fact, the sign is still on the Community Hospital O'Leary if you want to know for sure; if you never go up there and check it out.

Community Hospital O'Leary provides funding – its funding actually comes from the Community Hospital's budget; 13 acute care beds services, providing convalescent, restorative, and palliative care. Islanders are referred to those services by physicians. Ambulatory care services are offered there, X-ray, lab equipment, and a foundation to help with the purchase of equipment, which is actually currently chaired by a former Conservative MLA who was the campaign manager of his candidate. It has four family physicians work from the site, and it has a long-term care facility that has 40 long-term care beds.

Question to the Premier: Why did you say Community Hospital is not a hospital in your delirious rant to the Leader of the Opposition a few days ago? Do you want to retract that statement and apologize to the people of O'Leary-Inverness for that inaccurate comment?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

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

It sounds like we have a government that's spending an awful lot of money delivering a wonderful service to a wonderful hospital in O'Leary, so we'll say thank you very much for that.

In spite of the path it was on under the previous administration, I can stand here confidently and say it will continue to play an important role in the delivery of health care systems in Prince Edward Island. I thank all of those who work within it, and to Eva Rodgerson, keep up the good work. We know who fights for the hospital up there, and it's you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from O'Leary-Inverness.

R. Henderson: While not an exact apology, it is reassuring that now the Premier is advocating at least for what the chair of the foundation – and she does do a good job, regardless of her political affiliation.

This foundation has fought hard for many of the services that are offered there at that particular....

Recently, there have been rumours abounded that the government wants to close ambulatory care services in O'Leary. This is an essential service. We have two young nurses who provide excellent service that require – wound, IV therapy, biopsies; the list goes on.

Question to the Premier: Based on your previous comment, will you commit to maintaining the existing services at CHO in O'Leary, providing that they have the staff to deliver the service?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

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

I would say that I would need the Minister of Health and Wellness to verify all of this, but I think I can say confidently that if the staff is there to provide the service, I would love to continue to provide it there, just like I would like to provide the level of service at all of our facilities across PEI that go above and beyond to make sure we have the delivery of health care in PEI that Islanders need and want.

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

G. McNeilly: I asked the Minister of Health last week: Are we losing resident seats at

Dalhousie in the near future? He didn't give a straight answer.

Medical seats at Dalhousie (further)

Premier, can you tell us what the plan is for the residency seats at Dal? Are we severing our relationship with this great Atlantic institution in 2029 as indicated in a letter from Dalhousie I tabled last week from their Faculty of Medicine?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Hon. D. King: Madam Speaker, I'll give the same answer to this question that the minister did, that all of the institutions are working together as we look into the future. They're talking about residency and the requirements that are going to be needed throughout the region. That's what the process will be, taking place.

I wouldn't want to assume how everything will work out, but all of those individuals from different institutions are working together to try to make sure we can deliver more health care professionals for Atlantic Canadians and Canadians.

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

G. McNeilly: You can blame it on whoever you want to blame it on, Mr. Premier, but your government said we would be keeping the seats at Dalhousie.

So, I just want to clarify: Has the plan changed, or is this another broken promise from your government in 2021, talking about this issue?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Hon. D. King: Madam Speaker, I'm not blaming anybody. I'm telling him the process that's going to take place so all of our institutions who provide services and who train our medical professionals can make sure we can do so within a system, knowing that it's strained, and how we can all work together to deliver the best education for them and get them ready to take a place in the system. So, I'm not blaming anybody.

We have a wonderful relationship with Memorial University. We have a wonderful relationship with Dalhousie University. It's served us well. It will continue to serve us well into the future, and we're looking at how we can deliver these services so we can train more health care professionals here in the region.

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

G. McNeilly: I want to be clear: the official opposition wants the medical school to be a success. At the same time, we want the challenges raised in the Spindle report and the Peachey report to be dealt with, Mr. Premier. Both reports say we were short about 50 doctors to bring access up to an appropriate level for Islanders. We also have a Medical Society asking for a pause until a solid plan is in place.

[10:55 a.m.]

Plan for UPEI medical school (further)

Mr. Premier, you recruited seven doctors in the last few months, but on the other side of the ledger, you lost four doctors. That's up three. That's a far cry from 50 doctors. Mr. Premier, we're not ready. What are you doing right now to ensure confidence in Islanders that we're ready for both of these things? Because it's happening pretty quickly.

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Hon. D. King: One of the things I'm trying to do is fight off all the fear that the opposition is trying to spin on this whole thing.

We have wonderful, hardworking people who have done this before, who have worked within the system, who are working with many, many partners to make this a success. We have to work with them. We have to believe within ourselves as Islanders that we're capable of doing big things.

Cape Breton University in Sydney – Cape Breton is no different than Prince Edward Island, but they're not getting resistance from all of the opposition over there; they're rallying together to make it happen. That's what we should be doing in this province

because we need to train more doctors. We can do that here. Islanders want to participate in this.

Will there be challenges? Absolutely, but we've done big things before. Fifty percent of the people in this province didn't want the Confederation Bridge, but we worked through it. We built it and not one of them would send it back now that we look back on it.

We need to work through this. We can do it. Let's trust the people that are working there to get it done. They have wonderful, thorough reports that they know they have to follow through. We have three years before we need to see any action within the health care system to get ready for this. We have time to do this. We can work through this. I wish the opposition would get on board.

[Interjections]

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Third Party.

K. Bernard: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Earlier this week, the Task Force for Housing and Climate published its blueprint for more and better housing, which includes recommendations for the provincial government. Among these expert recommendations is a recommendation to create public rental registries to enhance our data collection to ensure government policy is working. Of course, the PCs have continuously resisted calls to create a rental registry.

Solutions for rental housing market

Question to the Minister of Housing, Land and Communities: Why is a rental registry such a good idea to experts but not to the provincial Cabinet?

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

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

We have many things on our plate in my department in order to advance the interests of the province in terms of housing. I have a mandate to move ahead on many fronts.

Whether a rental registry is a good idea or not, it's not part of our work plan at this time. It's certainly something I'm willing to consider in the future if I'm in this job long enough. But there are many things we can do to improve the situation on the housing front and for renters in this province. A rental registry may be one of them. It's simply not on our radar at this time. It's not on my work plan.

We are concentrating in priorities in my mandate letter. It's plenty of work for us to do right now. We have to concentrate on the things that we have identified as priorities.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Third Party.

K. Bernard: That is so unfortunate given that we know how much a rental registry can help people in crisis.

One of the positive actions in the housing plan is working with non-profit and co-operative housing organizations to increase the supply of affordable rental housing through acquisitions. Last year, this House passed a motion to have government review this housing solution that would help keep housing affordable and out of the hands of speculators.

To the same minister: Why did you give no consideration to this solution in your housing strategy?

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

Hon. R. Lantz: I didn't catch the last part there; I only caught the first where the member was referring to our program in the budget – that we're still working on – which is our Community Housing Expansion Program. She correctly stated that, in part, that program will involve building capacity within our non-profit and co-operative community to acquire housing, but not only that, over time, as we build up their capacity and fund them further, to actually develop, build, and operate more property.

I think it's going to be a comprehensive program. It's going to take time to ramp it up because like many sectors in the housing sector, it does require building capacity. Just

as it does to build housing, the non-profit sector needs to be built up to build capacity and to operate more community housing in this province.

We're committed to doing that. It shows in our budget. We're moving forward very quickly on that project.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Third Party, your second supplementary.

[11:00 a.m.]

K. Bernard: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

I think you misheard the question because your caucus was heckling, but that question was on the right of...

[Interjections]

K. Bernard: That question was actually on the right of first refusal, which your government has not put into your budget but is also another good policy.

Vacancy rates: the housing strategy also shows government's inconsistent views on what constitutes a healthy vacancy rate. First it was 4 percent, then it was 3 percent, and now it's as little as 2 percent.

To the minister: How long will it be before we see government trying to convince Islanders that a 1 percent vacancy rate is healthy?

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

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

I'll say right now that our current 1.1 percent vacancy rate is not healthy. We need to get that up. We're starting to see progress. That rose in the recent statistics, from 0.8 percent up to 1.1 percent. In fact, it rose quite significantly in other areas of the province. The one weak point was Charlottetown, where the vacancy rate actually dropped.

Although, we are seeing some encouraging indicators. In fact, housing permitting was starting to rise at the end of last year. January was one of the best Januarys in a

decade in the Charlottetown area for housing starts. We're starting to see....

[Interjections]

Hon. R. Lantz: So, if we can get Charlottetown on course, we're really starting to see things turn in the right direction. In fact, on Monday night, Charlottetown city council is considering a vast number of applications for rental units in the Charlottetown area; over 2,000 units they'll be considering which....

[Interjections]

Speaker: The hon. Member from Borden-Kinkora.

M. MacFarlane: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

In my district, the Confederation Bridge fabrication yard in Borden-Carleton has been left unused and undeveloped for 27 years now. Recently, taxpayers picked up the bill to clean up the mess left behind by Strait Crossing Inc.; it cost about \$1.3 million.

In 2021, government issued an expression of interest for development ideas for the parcel and the closing date on that now is almost three years ago.

Future of former SCI fabrication yard

Question to the Minister of Economic Development, Innovation and Trade: What is the status of developing the former fabrication yard at this time, further to that expression of interest?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Economic Development, Innovation and Trade.

Hon. G. Arsenault: Thank you, Madam Speaker, and thank you, hon. member, for the question.

As you know, the fab yard is an important piece of property for the Province; very crucial for us to be able to develop that piece of land. We have embarked, since my arrival, in a very transparent process with the Town of Borden-Carleton to move forward with that. That work has been completed. We've met and supported the

town on numerous occasions. We continue to do so.

We will move forward. The Town needs a little bit more time to look at different bylaws that they need to amend to make this a reality and they've asked us to extend that timeline. We're very happy to do so and to continue to work with the Town of Borden-Carleton to make this a success.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

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

M. MacFarlane: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

There was a lot in that response. My next question would be: Since the expression of interest went out, there has been a proposal come forward, minister, to develop a golf course on the site. On September 28th of last year, the developer did have a community meeting in the town of Borden to discuss the idea. I understand that there'd be no public funds required for the golf course, as the money is lined up.

During the by-election campaign, I talked with many people in the district who were supportive of the idea generally, but they did not feel as if their wishes or preferences for the development of the property were at all being considered by the government.

My question for the minister: Will you commit to a process for developing the fabrication yard that includes an opportunity for all the residents of Borden-Carleton to express their opinions on the development of this important parcel of land?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Economic Development, Innovation and Trade.

Hon. G. Arsenault: Thank you, Madam Speaker, and thank you, hon. member, for the question.

We do continue to work with the Town of Borden-Carleton, and we don't want to jump the gun and take a step here in moving forward. We've worked continuously with the Town of Borden-Carleton; we will continue to do so. They will consider all options, and at this stage they need a bit

more time to be able to move things forward. We are aware of all the considerations that are in place right now and we want to give the Town of Borden-Carleton the opportunity to come forward and bring us options to consider.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

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

M. MacFarlane: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

[11:05 a.m.]

I understand from the minister's response that it's in the hands of the Town of Borden-Carleton, but I understand there's also no scheduled meeting right now for the Town and the department to explore those further ideas to see what might work best.

However, I have been advised that there might be some work already completed on the site of the former fabrication yard, so that would be suggestive that maybe there's been a decision already made to move forward. Hopefully, that's not the case and that the minister is actually sincere in his efforts to try and communicate with the Town and the residents of the community.

The former minister, I would note, did commit to having a process that would ensure the community was fully engaged and involved.

My question to the minister: Will the Province commit to an open and fair RFP process – if we're moving forward with a formal and proper RFP process – that would allow equal consideration for all ideas? If so, would that include this golf course?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Economic Development, Innovation and Trade.

Hon. G. Arsenault: Thank you, Madam Speaker, and thank the hon. member for the question.

We will consider all options. We've been transparent throughout the whole process. We will continue to be transparent. We will continue to support the Town of Borden-Carleton. All options are going to be put on

the table, and I can guarantee this House that there has been no decision made at this point. We continue to support the decision of working towards attaining the goal in developing that important part of property that we have here in the province, and we will do so hand in hand with the Town of Borden-Carleton.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Souris-Elmira.

R. Croucher: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

Impaired driving continues to be a menace on our communities that too often has deadly consequences. I have seen this firsthand in my roles as a paramedic, a firefighter, and as the funeral director.

Addressing impaired driving

My question is to the Minister of Justice, Public Safety and Attorney General: What measures or new measures are in the budget to combat impaired driving?

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

Hon. B. Thompson: Thank you, Madam Speaker, and thank you to the member for the question.

Impaired driving is too relevant on this Island, and it's been that way for far too long. I think it's everyone's responsibility in here to try to combat this.

It's just a reminder, over Christmastime, when three souls were lost to a stretch of road that I drive every day, and my family drives, my neighbours drive every day. We can't have any more of that.

To answer your question, we are adding capacity to our police force. We're adding two more members to focus on impaired driving to our traffic unit, and to do training and investigative work to fight impaired driving across this Island.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Souris-Elmira, your first supplementary.

R. Croucher: Thank you, Madam Speaker, and thank you to the minister.

It's encouraging to hear that there are steps being taken.

After a lot of years and a lot of effort, the provincial traffic unit was restored. Increasingly, the amount of situations involving drug-impaired driving are happening on our Island roads.

A question to the Minister of Justice, Public Safety and Attorney General: How is law enforcement adapting their operations to meet this rising threat of drug-impaired driving?

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

Hon. B. Thompson: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Thank you for the question again.

I met with the superintendent of the RCMP this week. We discussed many things, including our traffic unit, which we're building capacity in. It's been – from a lot of years before this – being cut, and we're adding capacity to it.

Is that enough? No, we have to do more, but we really want to focus on impaired driving. Superintendent Lewis wants to really combat this. We work great with MADD across this Island – Mothers Against Drunk Driving. They're a great team to work with.

But everyone in this Legislature here has to do a part, and I look forward to any suggestions or any things that we can do. But we are starting, also, a yearlong campaign, not just near the end of the year near Christmastime. We're going to do a yearlong campaign.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Souris-Elmira, your second supplementary.

R. Croucher: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

That yearlong campaign, I love to hear that because it's more than just a few days of the

year that we need to be talking about this. It's good that you're keeping your finger on the pulse of this because we need all the help we can get.

Increasingly, there is a public appetite to take a tougher approach to combat impaired driving.

[11:10 a.m.]

A question to the Minister of Justice, Public Safety and Attorney General: Are there any legislative measures on the horizon to strengthen the toolbox to those fighting impaired driving on our Island roads?

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

Hon. B. Thompson: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

That's a good question, and that's something that we discuss often. But when you look at Prince Edward Island's laws right now, we have some of the toughest drinking and driving laws. We're the only province in the country that incarcerates first-time offenders in impaired driving, and it's not helping. Just throwing bigger fines and more incarceration isn't addressing the core problem.

Maybe we have to take an upstream approach with education, which we're going to do, but maybe there has to be other wraparound services. If you're caught, maybe you go to an impaired driving boot camp or something like that. We've got to really think outside the box so Islanders can feel safe on the roads at all times. We've got to really combat this.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Winsloe.

Z. Bell: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Last week, I had an exchange with the Minister of Environment. I reminded the minister at the time that April 1st, there will be an increase on the carbon tax. I was also reminding government of the continued increases that seem to be continuing to hit Islanders, including the recent rate increases

from Maritime Electric. This is the number one concern that I hear about every single day: how much things cost and how much things are continuing to rise.

Carbon tax increase

Question to the Premier: I am hoping that the carbon tax increase on April 1st has been something that you have been talking about. What will this increase on April 1st for the increase in the carbon tax mean for an already stretched wallet for Islanders?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

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

As of April 1st, I think the price per tonne for carbon is going to \$80, I believe. That will result immediately in PEI with the price of gas going up 3.4 cents and the price of diesel going up 4 cents per litre. To take that into full account, on April 1st, the carbon tax in its entirety will be – 23 cents per litre of gas that you pay at the pump is carbon tax, and 26.6 cents per litre is diesel.

I have written a letter to the Prime Minister where I outlined how advanced we have been in this province to fight carbon. We've seen lots of very positive initiatives that we've implemented here that have made a difference. I asked if he would not increase this at this time on April 1st because it's going to cause some hardship.

The ultimate hardship – there is an offset, of course, where the funds are distributed back to individuals, and it does help offset the cushion, but where it really impacts PEI the hardest – and I'm sorry for the lengthy answer but I think it's important, Madam Speaker – is that the cost of goods coming to and from PEI come here by diesel. That's a consistent price all the time that's added to the end and is one of the many reasons why PEI has, for example, the highest food prices.

I would like to see this levelled off in some way until we can get some of those tough inflationary issues a little bit greater under control. I'll wait to hear back from the Prime Minister.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Winsloe.

Z. Bell: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Since I've been in this House, it's been a back and forth with the federal government on the carbon tax. Two years ago, in this Legislature, we had the hybrid version with the federally mandated carbon tax. Gas, I think, at the time went up 4.4 cents a litre. The Premier says another 3.7 cents a litre means 23 cents a litre.

It's hard to believe that every single time you go to get gas now, you're at least \$100 in my vehicle just to fill up gas. If you're to the hockey rink or if you're travelling, this is a cost that is hitting Islanders hard.

A question to the Premier: I don't think you said it in your answer. You said that you would send a letter to the Prime Minister. What has been the response from the federal government on this?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Hon. D. King: I'm not sure if we have a response as of yet. I mean, it's just this week when we wrote the letter, so I would give the Prime Minister time, with all of the things that he deals with on a daily basis, to read the letter and thoughtfully respond to it.

I think it's clear. I think everyone in Prince Edward Island understands the importance of battling, to the extent we can, climate change. We know it's a very real thing here. We've leaned into it as an Island, as a province, really, really aggressively. We've seen some very, very positive initiatives that have helped reduce our carbon footprint.

[11:15 a.m.]

Just to be fully open about it all, the cost of doing this is really, really difficult right now at a time when the cost of living is really, really high for everybody. On top of that, the Clean Fuel Standard that was added last year was 4 cents per litre for gas and 3.4 cents for diesel.

So, there's a considerable amount of added tax that has gone on this that have impacted Islanders, and as I say, it's one of the reasons why our food prices are so, so high,

because all of that cost to transport it here is passed on in the end to the consumer.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Winsloe.

Z. Bell: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

The Premier talked about how Islanders are cognizant, and Islanders are quick to adapt. The minister mentioned there were 7,000 heat pumps installed. Driving around the Island, you'll see a lot more solar on people's roofs and in their yards, et cetera. I do think that Islanders are drawing the line at the new Tim Hortons lids, but that's a different set of questions.

I had mentioned earlier about how in 2022, the Province was able to get what I thought was a pretty good deal for the province. In 2023, the federal government dug in their heels and we went to the federal backstop. I do know recently that the Prime Minister did give a pause to the home heating oil exemption for Atlantic Canada at a time.

Is this something that you and your colleagues around the Maritimes, Mr. Premier, think might be able to be implemented again, the pause?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Hon. D. King: Yeah, we were successful as Atlantic Premiers to convince the federal government not to charge the 17 cents they were going to add to home heating fuel to a place where it's our primary source right now, as we work to change that. So, we were successful in that.

I think this is an issue where everybody kind of agrees to the end of what we need to do, and there's a big disagreement on how we get there, and whether the carrot or the stick in this region is the best solution.

I think where I get concerned is that under this current plan, we're at \$80 per tonne for carbon now, with the end goal being \$170 per tonne by early 2030 or 2032. I forget the exact.... So, that's going to continue to see considerable increases for these things.

I understand the premise of carbon pricing and I support it, essentially, but I also have been saying since I first started to run in

politics that when we don't have any other alternatives here, it becomes a punitive and unfair tax and cost on those people at the end, and those are Islanders here, unfortunately.

So, I would like to think the Prime Minister would at least entertain the request and work, like we have been doing on many other files, to try to combat the high cost of living for Islanders.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-West Royalty, final question.

G. McNeilly: Question to the Minister of Justice, just picking up on Souris-Elmira's great questions on drinking and driving. This is a major concern in Prince Edward Island, all across this House, and all across Prince Edward Island.

Talked often about police capacity, law enforcement, but the real issue is about harm reduction and health promotion. We are failing as a Province to do these two things properly and educate people. The government takes in over \$25 million of revenues from alcohol sales.

Health promotion and harm reduction

Minister: I will be bringing a private member's bill later on this session. Will you look at everything possible to make sure we're investing in health promotion and harm reduction across this province more consistently?

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

Hon. B. Thompson: Thank you, Madam Speaker, and thank you for the question.

Absolutely, yes. This is a public health concern, not just a justice concern. So, we definitely will.

Thank you.

[End of Question Period]