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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
OF
PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND

RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS AND ORAL QUESTION PERIOD
(PRELIMINARY PROCEEDINGS)

FOR

WEDNESDAY, 6 MARCH 2024

[1:21 p.m.]

[S. MacEwen in the chair]

Responses to Questions Taken as Notice

Questions by Members

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

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

My question is for the Minister of Health.

To say that people in western Prince Edward Island are worried about health care is a massive understatement. Emergency room closures are far too common, and in fact, the emergency room at Western Hospital closed about 10 percent of the time last year. As discussed yesterday, the Collaborative Emergency Centre at Western will be closed for the foreseeable future.

Yesterday, the minister said that the collaborative emergency centre model "...is not really deployed across Canada." This seems to be the reason the minister offers to abandon the health care needs of western Prince Edward Island.

CEC model

So, my question is: When did the minister decide that the CEC model is not really worth pursuing?

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Hon. M. McLane: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Again, I don't make those decisions. We know it's a staffing issue to maintain that service in western PEI. We are embarking – I think you'll see it in the budget – on a master planning exercise for western PEI that will help us deliver the services that we want, and we can, in that region of Prince Edward Island.

So, again, I wouldn't make an operational decision on whether to open or close anything, but we continue to work on

western PEI and how it will look for the next five, 10, and 20 years.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

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

There's a long record of Conservatives trying to shut down the hospital in Alberton. In fact, the current member from that district led that exercise some years ago, trying to shut down two hospitals in West Prince and put some kind of a substitute in Bloomfield.

Step by step now, this government appears, willingly, to shortchange services at Western, apparently in the hopes that people in the area will just eventually give up. Many people are saying to me that it's getting harder and harder to attract new residents because health care in West Prince is so unpredictable.

Health care for Prince County residents (further)

Minister: Why this constant erosion of services in the west?

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Hon. M. McLane: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Again, it's services we do want to provide. With our growing population, we need to have all our facilities working to full capacity when we can staff them appropriately. If you just look back on the last five years – I was looking at numbers the other night – we've actually, since I think 2019, attracted the population of the city of Summerside plus the town of Cornwall to Prince Edward Island. So, that does place pressures on our health care system in any part of PEI, so we'll continue to try to fill the gaps and provide the services in a safe way.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

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

So, that just confirms what I just said. We're not attracting people to West Prince because the health care is unpredictable.

I think we're seeing the same thing happening now at the Prince County Hospital in Summerside. This government is clearly not up to the job of maintaining services, and the erosion of Prince County has begun. As services continue to deteriorate in the west, there is more and more concern being raised. People are wondering whether they can rely on this government to ensure health care access in western Prince Edward Island.

So, minister: As this confidence continues to erode, what is being done to ensure that the CEC is a reliable service for people in western Prince Edward Island?

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Hon. M. McLane: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[1:25 p.m.]

I'm going to take the hon. member's information – that sits in front of me – that said that Alberton is one of the fastest growing communities on PEI. So, I guess I'd dispute that claim. He would know better than most, being the representative from that area.

Again, we want to provide services at both O'Leary and Western, and the PCH, to serve everybody in western PEI. We continue to make changes in scope of practice and licensing pathways to attract more health care workers to everywhere on Prince Edward Island, so we will continue to do that.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

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

Yesterday, we saw that the Medical Society of Prince Edward Island is asking for a pause on the medical school. Like myself,

the Medical Society agrees that the potential school is worth exploring, but they are worried that the work to prepare it has not been done.

Feedback on medical school (further)

So, my question is: Is this government ready to put a pause on the medical school?

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Hon. D. King: Mr. Speaker, I would say my answer to that question would be no.

I didn't see the conversation that on television last night, but we are in receipt of a letter from the Medical Society as late as the 27th or 28th of February – I forget the exact date – outlining how we need to work together to develop this initiative. Nowhere in the letter does it call for a pause.

But I would say to the hon. member what I have said to everybody: a pause for what? We know we're in a difficult situation with health care. It's not like there's a magical number of doctors that are going to appear in the next one or two or three years that's going to make it, all of a sudden, easier to do this.

Essentially what we've been talking about here is that, in 18 months from now, in September 2025, we'll have the first intake of students at UPEI. The first two years, they're largely going to be in the classroom, and it's not really until late summer of 2028 when we need to start working with them and get them immersed into the health care system. As UPEI has told us, as late as yesterday, they're in contact with 40 or 45 doctors in PEI who are wanting to work within the system.

So, I do think we have time to implement this, and I take those comments very seriously. I know UPEI and Health PEI are working to try to address all of those, but I think this is something we need to do because there's no magic bullet coming beyond it.

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

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

The Medical Society addressed that, that they want to put a pause on it. They put a red flag up. The former CEO of Health PEI put a red flag up. Many others have put red flags up on this.

It is very important that the physicians on Prince Edward Island – they have a very important role in this new medical school, so there has to be some communication with them. This is our medical community we're talking about.

They have a lot of expertise in health care, obviously. They have more than the minister, or more than the Premier would have, and more than anybody in the Premier's office would have. So, surely the minister is paying close attention to the doctors in this province.

The president of the Medical Society said that the physicians have not been consulted or heard.

So, if the doctors of this province are worried, where on earth is the minister getting his advice on this multi-million-dollar project?

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Hon. D. King: Mr. Speaker, again, I would take exception to some of the comments that are being put forward here, simply because the Medical Society has been part of the whole process to date. They participated in the process to hire the new dean of medicine. They've been sitting at the table.

Now, I don't know how the information gets dispersed within the group of physicians beyond that, but I do take very seriously their need to have input. We believe they have had – we want them to have more input. But again, as I said, the announcement came in 2021. We're not going to really need to see the health care system really accessed in any way – and very easily, initially – until late summer of 2028. So, I do think that should give us enough time.

As I say, UPEI has been working diligently. They have consulted and have interest between 40 and 45 doctors so far, and then they're working on making sure that we can do this so it becomes an asset to the health care system.

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Hon. H. Perry: Let's just be blunt, Mr. Speaker. This government can't even keep a small CEC, Collaborative Emergency Care, open in Alberton, but they're attempting to launch a medical school here on Prince Edward Island.

Good grief, this government is not up to the job of even the small tasks, so how can anyone have faith in their ability to guide us through this project?

[1:30 p.m.]

My question: With the Medical Society raising concerns, and with the government's own reports pointing out flaws, what is the rush?

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Hon. D. King: Again, Mr. Speaker, I don't know what the rush is, but I think the determination by UPEI to do this, and why we have agreed to support it, is because we need to take control of our destiny and try to train and retain doctors here in Prince Edward Island. I mean, I've said it about 10 times in here. I don't know how we address a labour challenge without addressing labour.

You know, as much as we work behind the scenes to help changing with the scopes of practice and making it easier for internationally trained physicians and stuff to come to our province, there is a shortage of doctors being trained across the country and around the world. We have an opportunity here to do something really, really important, and really, really special.

UPEI has worked diligently at this; they're partnering with MUN. It's a very, very unique arrangement, working with a school that has done this for decades. There's a really good opportunity here for Islanders – Island students – to participate in the Island health care system to relieve some of the pressures that have far too long dogged our province.

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Hon. H. Perry: Mr. Speaker, my concern is this: The government is not up to the job of delivering even the basic health care – like the CEC in Western Hospital in Alberton – but this storytelling government is asking Islanders to take them seriously when it comes to a multi-million-dollar complicated project like the medical school.

So, my question is more of a request: Could you not deal with the basics first, and do vanity projects after the foundation is repaired?

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Hon. D. King: Yeah, I'm not sure what the vanity in it is that the hon. Leader of the Opposition refers to. I think we can all agree – if we don't agree on much in here these days, we can all agree that the health care system is not performing to the needs that Islanders need, want, or deserve.

I think we're trying to support an initiative by our university – which has 50 years of experience in doing wonderful things to help train and educate our labour force here – to work in a very unique and collaborative way to help us address the shortage of physicians in this province, and to give Islanders a chance to participate in the health care delivery for their Island families, and friends, and neighbours.

As I say, I wish this would have happened 10 or 15 or 20 years ago, but it hasn't. We're working very closely with the university. We know they're working closely with physicians and everyone else within the health care system to try to make sure that this actually becomes a benefit to the system. We know it won't be easy, but PEI has a great record of doing hard things and I think this will be one of them.

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Hon. H. Perry: Mr. Speaker, in the last 12 months, we witnessed multiple rounds of corporate greed at Islanders' expense. Three electric rate increases, another rate increase before IRAC, possibly another rate increase to cover costs at Point Lepreau, and there's more: another rate increase potential for the installation of smart meters.

All of these amount to bailouts on the back of Islanders to cover the cost of Fortis, a multi-billion-dollar company. According to their recent annual report, their revenue last year was up more than three quarters of a billion dollars.

Fortis profits and electricity rates

Question to the minister: Why are we even talking about anymore rate increases given the amount of obvious resources held by this extremely profitable company?

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Environment, Energy and Climate Action.

Hon. S. Myers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Perhaps the member wasn't listening on Friday, or didn't watch the news Friday night, or he didn't read the newspaper on Saturday morning, but that's precisely why we're striking a group to look at Maritime Electric, and see if the ownership is better served belonging with Islanders.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Hon. H. Perry: I listen. There's a lot of wind I listen to, too, when I have window up in the vehicle.

We know that Fortis, who owns Maritime Electric, has neglected their duty in regards to vegetation management. Sadly, any windstorms this province encounters leads to power outages, leaving Islanders in the dark because Maritime Electric has failed to trim trees and manage the vegetation along the grid.

Now they're looking for more money. Last time I checked, if you don't do your job, you don't get a raise. Remember, this government doesn't believe in sick time for hardworking Islanders but are willing to accept a self-written sick note handed to them by billion-dollar corporations.

Minister, why don't you tell the multi-billion-dollar company that they're responsible for vegetation management needed to maintain lines, or are you going to give them the raise that they are looking for?

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Environment, Energy and Climate Action.

[1:35 p.m.]

Hon. S. Myers: It's borderline silly because we don't give them – IRAC decides, which is an independent body. We don't jump in front of IRAC. We create the legislation. The member over there is capable of bringing legislation to the floor, though he never does. He could bring legislation himself to say those exact things.

But what I will say is we've been going through the legislative process. We're about a year and a half into it. We've been right across the Island. Some members in here have attended some of the meetings. We are basically working on what the framework for the next 20 years of Prince Edward Island electricity looks like. Quite frankly, that will include who should own Summerside Electric, who should own Maritime Electric, and how we can best protect the ratepayers and keep the lights on.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

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

I would love to bring some legislation forward, but as we saw yesterday, legislation that we brought forward to try to increase housing units faster, the majority of the Conservative government, of course, squashed that, as they do everything else.

The Fiona bill of \$37 million remains before IRAC and the minister is talking about possibly paying the bill with Islanders' money. Now, let's not forget this government somehow failed to recognize in the fall of 2022 that Fortis and its billions in profits does not qualify for small business funding from the federal government. No one should be bailing them out, and in the end, whether the bill is ultimately paid by the taxpayers or ratepayers, this government is content in making sure that Islanders are paying. Islanders are providing the bailout. Fortis wins again.

Minister, are you going to tell them we are done bailing out billion-dollar companies in this province? Will you tell them that?

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Environment, Energy and Climate Action.

Hon. S. Myers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

There's a lot to unpack there.

Let's start with the fact that Trudeau lied to us and said that he would pay that bill so that we wouldn't have to pay it, so it wouldn't affect the taxpayers of Prince Edward Island, so that it wouldn't have to affect the ratepayers of Prince Edward Island. He lied. If you're talking about who failed to recognize, it's the guy who lied to our Premier, who said that he would take care of us when all the lights were out here on Prince Edward Island, when people were struggling to get their power back on, when people were worried in the warming shelters, worried about when they were going to come back home. You want to blame somebody, you can blame Trudeau.

As far as how we handle Maritime Electric, it's handled legislatively. I've been very, very clear. I don't think I could be any clearer. We intend to look at Maritime Electric and Summerside Electric and see who the ownership should belong to, to ensure that we do the best by not just the taxpayers of Prince Edward Island but the ratepayers of Prince Edward Island.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

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

I'm not sure how a multi-billion-dollar company would qualify for a small business fund.

The minister continues to claim that he is looking after Islanders; that he doesn't sell the power, that Maritime Electric does; that Maritime Electric and Fortis, the multi-billion company, are the problem. Blame them.

Minister, you are the regulator. What role are you playing thus far, or is Fortis running the show?

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Environment, Energy and Climate Action.

Hon. S. Myers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I'm not the regulator. IRAC is the regulator. I think there's a lot of confusion over there. I'm not sure who wrote the questions or if you just picked them out of a Cracker Jack box on your way down from Tignish today, but clearly you have zero understanding of how the energy file works here on Prince Edward Island.

But what I will say is, we intend to bring legislation forward. We've been very clear that we intend to bring legislation forward of what the next 20 to 50 years should look like here on Prince Edward Island as far as electricity, as far as rates, as far as energy production, where production should be held, who should own energy production, how communities could benefit, how individuals could benefit, how we could help reduce rates through time of day, and those types of things.

Again, I'll reiterate that we have struck a group to begin looking at what electricity looks like here on Prince Edward Island with both of the main electricity companies here on Prince Edward Island, who should own them, how it should work for taxpayers, and how it should work for ratepayers.

Quite frankly, Mr. Speaker, every Islander I've talked to is happy with that except for him.

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member for O'Leary-Inverness.

R. Henderson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

As we've heard some of the responses here today in the Legislature, I want to emphasize that it is the Minister of Energy's responsibility to protect Islanders and electric ratepayers, as well as our taxpayers, and to ensure that a utility who holds a monopoly treats its customers fairly in the delivery of electricity needs.

But what do we see? We just keep hearing blame somebody else, talk about something else. Then the minister here the other day makes a statement, plus he says he's going to buy Summerside Electric, which is another thing, or find out who owns that. Are you going to expropriate these? What's the plan here on this?

[1:40 p.m.]

But anyway, question to the Minister of Energy: Would your department have any idea what the profits that Fortis takes in as it pertains to Maritime Electric in the last 12 months? As we know, Fortis has \$12 billion worth of revenue. In 2022, it had net earnings of \$1.3 billion to its shareholders.

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Environment, Energy and Climate Action.

Hon. S. Myers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

There was quite a bit of things said there that I'm not sure are 100 percent true either. I'm not blaming anybody. What I'm saying is we're taking control of the file. We're taking control of the legislation. We're going to bring legislation forward and show Islanders how we view how electricity should work well, well, well into the future, and what ownership should look like, what community ownership would look like, and how the benefits could stay right in the community. I've been very clear on that. I couldn't be any clearer.

I've also been very clear that the activity that we are going out to do, to look at the ownership and who should own the utility – whether it should be private or whether it should be brought into the public domain – is in fact exactly to do what the member is saying I'm not doing. It's to stick up for ratepayers. It's to stick up for Islanders to help ensure that there's a clear future for them where people can afford to keep the electricity on in their home.

I can't be any clearer. We are 100 percent sticking up for Islanders with the initiatives that we have brought forward. It's too bad, for 12 years, the hon. member sat over there and said nothing.

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

R. Henderson: That's a wonderful rant that the minister puts on there, but I hope this minister actually gave those very same statements to Fortis when he met with them in July 2022. As it appears on social media, he had a meeting with Fortis over in St. John's.

Did you represent Islanders like you said you're just doing here right now, or did you ask them: "Just keep the lights on over there. We're not going to worry about what we pay. Islanders are happy with whatever you give us"?

Tell us a little bit about what you said to the members at Fortis, the executive directors.

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Environment, Energy and Climate Action.

Hon. S. Myers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I met with the vice president of Fortis and I told the media here on Friday – I didn't make any of the stories – that I intend to meet them again this summer when I'm in St. John's, for the environment ministers' meetings in July, to have a frank discussion about the future of Maritime Electric and where we view it in the province.

But what I will say: when we sat down, at the time, what we were trying to do was get them to move towards some of the models that we were saying when we were saying we wanted to move towards distributed energy. We wanted to do a study on community-owned energy where the community could benefit.

The Georgetown project that's now being undertaken by UPEI was one of the projects that we talked about. "Would you partner on that? Would you come on board? Will you allow it to happen without us having to go through a legislative change to make you allow it to happen?"

That was the crux of the conversation we had that time: How we could move forward the initiatives of government – that we had clearly stated that we wanted to be our initiatives – without being encumbered by Maritime Electric, or without being told by Maritime Electric that it can't happen or that it won't work? Because we knew it worked

everywhere else in the world and we wanted to prove it here in Prince Edward Island.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Third Party.

K. Bernard: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

As was mentioned yesterday on CBC, we heard that the Medical Society of PEI very thoughtfully laid out why the medical school may be a good idea, but now simply isn't the right time to pursue it. They say that the only responsible next step is to press pause until we know we are in a position to staff it without hurting our already strained system.

MSPEI, which represents 400 doctors, is the latest group to express concerns, joining senior civil servants, independent consultants, and engaged Islanders who are all very worried that PEI continues to bulldoze ahead to create a new medical school at a time when the health system is unraveling.

Evidence to support medical school

To the Premier: Who should Islanders trust when it comes to the medical school, their doctors or the Premier?

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Hon. D. King: That's a very good question. I hope we could trust both because we're going to need everybody and more working together to make it successful, which I do believe in my heart that everybody within this Legislature wants to see it successful. I believe that.

As I say, I respect very much Dr. Cassell. I respect very much the members of the Medical Society of PEI. I thank them for their work. I work closely with them every day in this job, and I want to continue to do that. I know UPEI is doing that as well.

Again, I would ask the question: What would the pause get us? With the situation that we find ourselves in, it's as if we're waiting for something magical to happen so that we could do this, I guess, easier or more efficiently, whatever those exact words are.

Again, I think that this will end up being a very, very, net, net, net positive for the health care system in Prince Edward Island, and will give Islanders a chance to participate in the delivery of health care. I do agree with those who say it should have happened a long, long time ago, and I wish it would have, but I can only deal in the here and now, and that's the path that we're supporting UPEI on at this time, Mr. Speaker.

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Third Party.

K. Bernard: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[1:45 p.m.]

Yes, this should have happened a long, long time ago, but it hasn't, and the only way to truly show respect and thanks to health care professionals is by listening to them.

Last week in this House, the Premier said that the thing that carried the most weight for him pushing ahead with the school, despite so much concern from the experts, was the statistic on the number of Island students who get accepted to medical school.

He has often stated that only one in 11 students who apply for medical schools get accepted, compared to one in two in Newfoundland and Labrador, and that this inequity is his primary reason for pressing ahead.

I can't find any evidence for this claim. If the Premier has this convincing evidence, will he table it in this House tomorrow?

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Hon. D. King: Sure, I'd be happy table all of that, that we can. Again, I think that example comes from 44 students from PEI applied to MUN, Memorial University medical school, and four got in. So, that would be a simple one in 11, for example, with that school. There are very, very limited seats for out of –

[Interjections]

Hon. D. King: Yeah, but when you talk about Dal and Sherbrooke, the out-of-

province seats that are available are very, very miniscule, and that's why we need to create more opportunities for Island students.

I think what we're seeing through this is that UPEI has initially wanted to make those seats available for Islanders because we think it would be the best opportunity to train and to retain those physicians in Prince Edward Island. They're badly, badly needed.

And I think, as I said in the State of the Province Address, that these are some of the issues in the changing world, with protectionism being what it is in between not just countries but provinces. We need to take a little greater control of our own destiny here, and that's what we're trying to do.

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Third Party.

K. Bernard: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

One cohort, in one year, in one school. That's what we're basing our decision on a medical school for? God, if that's our math, we're in trouble.

Unlike the UPEI medical school, which will see physicians fully trained by 2032 at the earliest, medical students in other countries could be fully trained in two years, which is 2026, if we made more residency seats available. This is considerably less expensive, less risky, and would deliver quicker health care benefits for Islanders as we perhaps figure out a medical school.

To the Premier: Why are you so focused on gambling on a medical school when you could focus on policy measures that experts actually support right now?

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Hon. D. King: Well I guess the question I would ask in response to that: If we can make room to train people from all over the world, why can't we make room to train them right here from Prince Edward Island?

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member from Borden-Kinkora.

M. MacFarlane: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

There's been much talk in this Chamber and outside about the ongoing deterioration of services at the Prince County Hospital. The two recent public meetings at Credit Union Place drew large and passionate crowds with much to say on the issue, and they expressed some real deep-seated fears about the future of that hospital, which I would point out serves not only Summerside but my District of Borden-Kinkora, as well as West Prince and other regions here in this province.

In response, government came up with the idea of an emergency operations committee regarding critical care at the Prince County Hospital. However, and somewhat unbelievably, I've been told there are no medical staff from the Prince County Hospital on this committee, even though they are the experts on the ground at the PCH.

PCH emergency operations committee (further)

Question the Minister of Health: Can the minister explain why there are no Prince County Hospital medical staff on this important committee that is designed to save critical care at the Prince County Hospital?

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Hon. M. McLane: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

And I do agree, physician engagement is important at the PCH and we continue to do that. I know, actually, from a recruitment perspective, we actually are bringing a physician leader with us to Dalhousie in March to attend internal medicine recruitment activities. So, it's good to have their partnership in our efforts to recruit to that hospital. The OCS is an important part of us reestablishing services.

Labour is that key part. We want to be able to operate PCH safely for the physicians, the staff, and the patients. We are asking a lot of those physicians that have maintained that service for a long time for us and it's really hard on them. You can see it when you talk to them how difficult it's been. So, we want to support them as much as we can.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member from Borden-Kinkora.

[1:50 p.m.]

M. MacFarlane: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I believe that, in a roundabout way, sort of answers the question in that there are in fact no physicians or medical staff from the Prince County Hospital on this emergency operations committee, which is designed to save the Prince County Hospital.

I would note that this includes none of the 42 doctors who wrote the jointly signed letter that was the catalyst to this whole public outcry in the first place.

So, I'm going to ask the same minister a very similar question: if you would correct the situation immediately and ensure that voices from the Prince County Hospital are represented on this committee, the very committee that is tasked with saving the hospital that so many Islanders are working hard to save?

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Hon. M. McLane: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

We are talking with our physician leaders at that facility. We do need an administrator at that facility, for sure. We know that that's a gap. We've engaged a firm in order to have an administrator there to represent PCH. I think that is part of the issue that we need to improve at that facility, is to have a permanent administrator position in that role to represent the hospital.

We're doing everything we can. It's a daily meeting, I think, to maintain those services and try to grow them.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member from Borden-Kinkora.

M. MacFarlane: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I understand that the doctors and the critical care staff at the Prince County Hospital have asked twice of this government for representation on this committee and they

have not had a response from anyone – which does seem to be consistent, unfortunately, in the health care approach – other than a suggestion; I believe there was a suggestion that they start their own mini emergency operations committee, separate and apart from the real emergency operations committee.

I guess my question to the minister would be that if the real emergency operations committee cannot be started immediately in the hope of saving the Prince County Hospital critical care unit, will you turn it over to the Prince County Hospital so they can take the lead on it and get things moving?

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Hon. M. McLane: Thank you.

We do have Dr. Martha Carmichael involved in the chief medical officer role that's involved in those meetings, I know that for sure. I think it is important to engage our physician community and I'm sure that that's happening at that facility. If it's not, that's something I would not be aware of, so I'm not about your claims that they haven't been asked. I can't verify or deny those requests, but I appreciate the intensity of what we want to accomplish at the PCH.

We want it as bad as the physicians do at that facility. They've done a lot for us – not only the physicians, all the staff there – to maintain that unit as best they can under very trying circumstances.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member from Rustico-Emerald.

B. Trivers: Mr. Speaker, our tourism operators bring in a whopping \$85 million in tax revenue. However, the Tourism PEI budget of \$30 million includes \$17 million for provincial golf courses, and the Department of Tourism collects \$10 million in revenue, so really, the general Tourism PEI budget is a measly \$3 million, or just 3.5 percent of the taxes our tourism operators generate. That's about the same as the credit card fees they pay.

When a single deal with the NHL increases the Tourism PEI marketing budget by almost 50 percent, it's crystal clear how little is being spent on the critical tourism industry by government.

Budget and support for tourism

Question to the Minister of Finance: Why does the Province of PEI spend so little to support our tourism operators and our tourism industry?

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance

Hon. J. Burridge: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Department of Tourism would put forward their priorities for the year....

[Interjections]

Hon. J. Burridge: They would put forward their priorities and what their spends are for the year. We would take a look at that and decide whether that's a good spend or not. But really, truly, the department put forward their numbers, and they put forward a solid plan this year with some new initiatives in there that I think supports tourism industry in PEI, and we'll continue to do that moving forward.

Thank you.

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member from Rustico-Emerald.

B. Trivers: Mr. Speaker, our tourism operators collect HST on behalf of government. When the customer pays by credit card, the business must pay credit card fees on that HST, anywhere from 1.5 to 3.5 percent per transaction. As more and more consumers use credit cards, the processor fees for collecting HST add up, adding up to hundreds of thousands in new costs for this businesses, all in service of government.

Before the HST was harmonized, or a decade ago, Island businesses could get rebates on the credit card processing fees. Those were replaced with input tax credits that don't capture all of the extra costs incurred.

[1:55 p.m.]

Question to the Minister of Finance: Has government ever looked at adjusting these tax credits to help address the surge in credit card processing fees businesses are being forced to swallow?

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Hon. J. Burridge: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

This is something that I know came to caucus with a presentation through Restaurants Canada. I'm sorry I missed it; I had a conflict. But I got the briefing on it, and this is kind of new information to me, right now as I sit here, so I will take it back and take a look and see if we can do some analysis on that.

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member from Rustico-Emerald.

B. Trivers: Mr. Speaker, restaurants and other food service businesses are unique because they incur all the costs other businesses do but they can't fully claim all the credits because food makes up so much of their expenses.

We have a thriving restaurant sector in the province that contributes massively to our economy. The restaurant sector generates over \$175 million on credit card sales, and almost \$20 million in provincial sales tax.

Question to the Finance minister: Would you commit to having government implement a rebate on the credit card processing fees paid to collect the provincial portion of the HST?

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Hon. J. Burridge: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Yeah, I'll definitely commit to take this back and take a look at it and do some analysis. I think it's critical that we do support our businesses. This isn't just restaurants and tourism; this, quite frankly, probably is all business that have to deal with this. So, this is certainly something we can take a look at and come back with some options.

Thanks.

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member from Summerside-Wilmot.

T. DesRoches: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The residents of Summerside and Prince County and all Island should have a big sigh of relief today because we saw at the start of Question Period that the opposition is finally going to take health care seriously and forget about the sump pumps and card tables of last week.

Last week I asked the Minister of Health some questions on the Prince County Hospital that came from a town hall meeting that I had, and we had some satisfactory answers, but the jury is still out on a lot of those answers. We often hear about the time it takes to fill a position and vacancies at the Prince County Hospital and about the lengthy steps in the process.

Process for health care hiring

Question to the Minister of Health: Can you walk us through all of the steps that need to happen to fill vacancies, from posting a job to a successful candidate in place?

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Hon. M. McLane: Thank the hon. member for the question.

We do have processes in place. We have actually had meetings with the department, Health PEI, and PSC to look at all those processes that we do. I call it the pipelining meetings, to ensure that the pipeline is as efficient as possible. I know the PSC has made some investments in hiring to bring down some of their turnaround times. We always have to look at classification and how those positions reflect union and collective agreements, too, so that they're in sync as well.

The PSC has made improvements in turnaround times with increased volumes. I do know that from the briefing; maybe the minister can talk a little bit more about that. But I don't mind sharing that data with the hon. member or with this House, that they have made efficiency improvements at the PSC.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member from Summerside-Wilmot.

T. DesRoches: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I gather from that that it's probably a lot of steps. I know that in speaking with the minister, he'll often have numbers and all of that, and I appreciate that.

But we also hear that we lose a lot of our health care professionals to neighbouring provinces because they don't have as many steps in filling these positions. In turn, that leaves the residents unhappy, which leaves me unhappy, minister.

Does the Minister of Health know, are there more or less steps, or what are the steps in filling positions in our neighbouring provinces?

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Hon. M. McLane: Thank you, hon. member, for the question.

I guess if I compare us to some of our largest provinces, some of them have as many as 100 health authorities, so the complexity of those provinces, I really couldn't comment on. I guess we have to be focused on what we're doing here.

I know the hon. member from Tyne Valley asked me about locum contracts the other day, and I didn't give a great answer, so I did look into it. We have put an online system in fall of this year. We call for appointment and privileging, so it saves the data. Now that we have the Atlantic registry, I think there are some conversations going on that that – I think they call it CMAS system – will be shared amongst the provinces to allow greater mobility. I think that's another improvement, that we work with our other provinces to allow physicians specifically to apply for positions faster.

[2:00 p.m.]

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member from Summerside-Wilmot.

T. DesRoches: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I think that the number of steps, hurdles, and red tape involved in the hiring process is probably a bigger part of the problem than realized. We often hear, from different people around the communities and in the health care positions, to take politics out of the process. Recently, I asked one vested group how they would do this, and they frankly put it: "Remove some of the steps."

So, my question is for the Minister of Health and Wellness again: How can we streamline the steps in the hiring process to be more competitive, and what are we doing to achieve this?

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Hon. M. McLane: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank the hon. member for the question. Some good questions today.

I do know, for external postings, we have removed the end date, so they do stay up in perpetuity. They used to have a start and an end date for postings; I know we've removed that.

We've also created the nursing portal as well, which has been very effective. Nurses don't have to apply for a specific position specifically. They can apply to the portal, and then we sit down with them and match skillsets. I think that's another improvement. I know for grads in the nursing program, if they have done some of their clinical work within Health PEI, we were going to bypass the interview process and the job offer process.

So, those are a few things that we've done. Is there more work to be done? No doubt. Obviously, we always have to work in conjunction with our unions and colleges to ensure that we check all the boxes, so we'll continue to do that. Thank you for the question.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Deputy Speaker: Just before the next question, hon. member.

Rule 64, Questions requiring a lengthy reply: "Where, in the opinion of the

Speaker, a question put to a minister is of such a nature as to require a lengthy reply,” – such as the number of steps you outlined – “the Speaker may, upon the request of the minister, direct the question to be put in writing, or to stand as notice and be transferred to the order paper.”

So, if there’s a minister who receives a question and feels it needs a much more lengthy response than is allowed in Question Period, you are allowed to request that.

T. DesRoches: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition, final question.

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

We all know now that the Premier made the trek to Boston in January 2023 to watch the NHL’s Winter Classic game, and we know that the justification for this trip was to host discussions with NHL representatives about the marketing opportunities that were announced recently.

Premier’s attendance at NHL game (further)

Question to the Premier: If this trip was part of the announcement that your government made with such fanfare, why were the expenses for this New Year’s Day road trip to Boston hidden and not filed until April, several weeks after the 2023 provincial election?

Deputy Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Hon. D. King: Mr. Speaker, that I do not know. I file my quarterly reports, as I’m legislatively obligated to do, in partnership with my admin people. It’s signed off by the chief of staff. I suppose we probably weren’t in the office because we had called the election in March – would be my guess – but I’d need to verify with admin assistant, Mr. Speaker.

[End of Question Period]