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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

OF

PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND

RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS AND ORAL QUESTION PERIOD
(PRELIMINARY PROCEEDINGS)

FOR

THURSDAY, 6 MAY 2010

Responses to Questions Taken As Notice

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development and Attorney General.

Lottery system for kindergarten teachers (further)

Mr. D. Currie: Madam Speaker, I ask for your indulgence in answering this question as I feel it is important to correct the misinformation that the hon. Leader of the Opposition brought to members and the public yesterday afternoon.

I would like to emphasize that, as minister, as I've indicated, I've not been involved in the hiring process for kindergarten teachers and that I have, and always will have, full confidence in the staff in the department, as well as the three school boards, that the process conducted was a fair and open one.

The goal of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, and all three school boards across the province, is to build the best and most balanced teaching teams in all schools across our One Island community. The department and the school boards made every effort to consider preferences of teachers, but the needs and the best interests of the students, in some cases, outweighed the geographical preferences of the teachers.

Each interview was conducted by government and had professionals that were engaged in that to ensure fairness during the interview process. All principals agreed to consider student needs first, then to consider other factors such as the family of school needs, district needs and teacher location preference. All principals agreed the schools with more than one class should consider a balanced mix of more or less experienced teachers, experience with special needs children, matching the skills of the teachers with the needs of the students.

Through this process the principals looked at a number of different factors that determined which schools have the highest needs. The schools with the greatest need were given first opportunities to (Indistinct) teachers. Schools were identified as having the greatest need through literary assessment data that was reconfirmed by the superintendent in the media recently.

So I just would like to remind, and also share, with the Leader of the Opposition and all members of the House that we're extremely excited by the five-year-olds coming to the public school system, and that all kindergarten teachers were treated with the utmost respect and fairness through the entire process.

Thank you.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure Renewal.

Corrections to newspaper article

Mr. MacKinley: Madam Speaker, with your indulgence, I just want to correct an article in the *Guardian*.

Some Hon. Members: (Indistinct).

Mr. MacKinley: Is that okay?

Speaker: Yes.

Mr. MacKinley: In the paper today, Wayne Thibodeau wrote: MacKinley said the province should save about 400 annually. Basically what we're saving on the contract is 400 to 500,000 over a six-year term.

Another one here, another question Mr. Thibodeau wrote: No open tender was called for the work, quoted by the gentleman over there, too, I guess he told him.

Anyway, there was a RFP called. Transportation and public works did not call a tender because we can't call a tender. It falls under Island Waste Management Corporation. They are the ones that called for RFP in removing the Tory tires and flushed the new tires that were coming in under the Liberals. Out of that, the Dawson company was a low bid but they couldn't get going quick enough for us to get rid of these tires.

An Hon. Member: (Indistinct) .

Mr. MacKinley: Yes, there was. Well, RFP, we'll explain it to you sometime.

Some Hon. Members: (Indistinct).

Mr. MacKinley: It's a process. It's almost the same - it's the same (Indistinct). Anyway -

Speaker: Minister, minister, it's not - minister, just offer clarification.

Mr. MacKinley: - with that I'm going to table the contract agreement.

Thank you very much.

Questions by Members

Speaker: The hon. Member from Montague-Kilmuir.

Estimates on tourism season

Mr. Bagnall: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

My question today is for the Minister of Tourism and Culture. Mister Minister, it's fast approaching tourism season. Last summer the tourists arriving by air to Prince Edward Island were down. I wonder, has your department seen any encouragements, or estimates on traffic for this year for the upcoming season?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Tourism and Culture.

Mr. Vessey: Madam Speaker, my department has been working very hard with the airlines and the major players to offer more flights into the province, and things look well.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Montague-Kilmuir.

Discussions with airlines

Mr. Bagnall: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Air traffic was down 10.2% in June. It was down 8.2% in July. It was down 7.9% in

September and 9% in October. Although August we did have an increase of 4.5%.

Minister, what discussion have you had with airlines to bring up the air flights coming into the province?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Tourism and Culture.

Mr. Vessey: Madam Speaker, airline flights into the province have increased. Air Canada has increased flights from Montreal, from Toronto and from Halifax.

An Hon. Member: Ottawa.

Mr. Vessey: And Ottawa.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Montague-Kilmuir.

Mr. Bagnall: Has there been any airline services that have been cut for PEI this year?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Tourism and Culture.

Mr. Vessey: Madam Speaker, Delta Airlines has changed a couple of flights that were on last year.

Boston, I believe, and Detroit have changed, but we've added a flight from New York.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Montague-Kilmuir.

Mr. Bagnall: Thank you. Minister, should you be very concerned about this? Because Boston and Prince Edward Island has had a cultural and a family history for the last decades. Summer traffic from Boston to PEI has always been a good market and we're losing that. Do you expect that the New York traffic is going to hit the same results as the Boston?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Tourism and Culture.

Mr. Vessey: Madam Speaker, we're hoping that New York, as the hub of the east coast, is a good connector in. The numbers aren't in on that yet but it is a great flight, and I'm very happy to say that Delta has added it to their schedule.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Montague-Kilmuir.

Mr. Bagnall: Madam Speaker, it's the same minister.

Overnight stay from New England, we're down by over double digits last year in percentages. Minister, shouldn't you be trying to reverse that trend rather than move away from the New England states? What are you doing to bring back this traffic with Delta for bringing a flight in out of Boston?

I know the minister there, ex-minister, is trying to help you with the question, but if you could get (Indistinct), it'd be nice.

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Tourism and Culture.

Mr. Vessey: Madam Speaker, it's unfortunate that the hon. member there is negative on the tourism flights.

This is a primary industry that's got the most potential in our province for growth and we've got great people doing great things in tourism. I'm very proud of my department.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Montague-Kilmuir.

Mr. Bagnall: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Mister Minister, I know the previous minister saw fit to spend a couple hundred thousand to go to Ottawa and have a wine and cheese party. That was her promotion to get the flights in from Ottawa. Minister, what are you doing? I mean, other governments have met with the companies and actually put some money on the table for them to come into the province. If we had to use it, it was there. But usually the air traffic picked up enough that we never had to use it.

So what are you doing? Have you met with these companies? Have you put a deal on the table to bring the flights in from Boston?

An Hon. Member: Yes.

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Tourism and Culture.

Mr. Vessey: Yes, Madam Speaker, we've met with the airlines and we've put a package on the table.

They didn't accept it. We've got to be very focused on the flight that we did get out of New York. It's a major hub on the east coast and it's a great connector flight. That's what we have.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Montague-Kilmuir.

Mr. Bagnall: So, minister, you put a promotion on the table. Would you mind tabling that promotion, or agreement, that you put in with them?

Premier Ghiz: (Indistinct) that's a good idea.

Mr. Bagnall: Because, minister, it didn't work. So it can't be a great one.

So I'll go to the minister again. Madam Speaker, it's the same minister.

We have seen that the finance minister tabled massive deficit after deficit and, I tell you, there has been no financial restraint under this government at all.

Speaker: Do you have a question, hon. member?

Mr. Bagnall: Yes, I'm getting to it. It's in here.

Liquor commission

Madam Speaker, I understand that the minister of innovation was moved from this file, from the liquor store.

I'm wondering, are we going to see any results now for the liquor commission? What are your plans for it now?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Tourism and Culture.

Mr. Vessey: Madam Speaker, I'd like the hon. member maybe to - results of what? I'm not clear on the question.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Montague-Kilmuir.

Mr. Bagnall: That's all right, Madam Speaker.

I didn't think he would pick up on the - what his plans for the liquor commission were to move forward. But that's okay. The minister is responsible for the liquor commission. As a new minister, we are hopeful -

An Hon. Member: Here we go.

Mr. Bagnall: - that you will bring at least a sober thought to your department.

Some Hon. Members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Bagnall: Because obviously, there wasn't too many there in the past. So Mister Minister, what are you going to do about all of the renovations that are taking place in your department in times of restraint? Are you going to deal with that issue?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Tourism and Culture .

Mr. Vessey: Madam Speaker, as I said in the House before, it takes investment sometimes to make money.

I'm just not sure where the hon. member is going with the question.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Montague-Kilmuir.

Mr. Bagnall: That's fine. Madam Speaker, the minister knows that they've been spending and wasting money on breaking leases, renovations, and remodelling of Brooke MacMillan's office.

Can you tell us: Are you going to be dealing with some actual issues rather than making Brooke's office look good?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Tourism and Culture.

Mr. Vessey: Madam Speaker, Brooke's office, as the hon. member refers to, was, I believe, built in August of 1973.

We have people over there working in basements. There's no air conditioning. There's no ventilation. Four or five people sharing an office. We've increased our business, our profits are up. You have to invest money to make money, and to give people a place to work with quality of air and quality of ventilation. If he has a problem with that, so be it.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Montague-Kilmuir.

Mr. Bagnall: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Mr. Minister, it's taxpayers' money that you're spending now. It's a time of restraint. It's a time when we're having massive deficits in government, and you're spending your money on remodelling offices.

I could understand if there were leaks in the roof or it was unsafe for the staff to work in. But to remodel the offices for the sake of giving a plush office to Brooke MacMillan

is a waste of taxpayers' dollars. When are you going to reel Brooke MacMillan in so that he gets his department under wraps?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Tourism and Culture.

Mr. Vessey: Madam Speaker, the CEO of the liquor commission has been doing a great job.

He's running it like a business, as it should have been. It's been a lot of years around there with not like a business. Profits have been up. I commend the CEO of the liquor commission for the job he has done in the sales in his commission.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Montague-Kilmuir.

Mr. Bagnall: Yes. We say how well he did with the last job he was in.

So, with that, will you table the exorbitant costs of the furniture - the nice plush furniture - you're putting in his office, and the department? Will you table the furniture costs for us?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Tourism and Culture.

Mr. Vessey: Madam Speaker, just so this House knows, the liquor commission last year returned $37,000,800 to the province.

That's up 2.3 million from the previous year. Again, I commend the CEO of the liquor commission for a job well done.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Montague-Kilmuir.

Mr. Bagnall: I can understand that. If the provincial treasurer keeps raising the price of alcohol, of course the profits are going to go up.

With that, minister, will you make a commitment today to bring this CEO of the liquor commission - his spending in line? Will you make it - to bring it back under control? Will you make that commitment to the House today?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Tourism and Culture.

Mr. Vessey: Madam Speaker, the hon. member quotes (Indistinct) increases in liquor.

I'd just like the House to know that our prices in our province are low or lower than all Maritime provinces.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Montague-Kilmuir.

Mr. Bagnall: Madam Speaker, we talk about the liquor commission and all the great spending and what they're doing.

The last thing they did last year was went out and hired wine and beer experts. I mean, that's over a hundred thousand dollars, plus the travel for all of these beer and wine experts to travel all over the world tasting wine. Minister, when are you going to bring these things in line? Are you going to continue to keep these positions?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Tourism and

Culture.

Mr. Vessey: Madam Speaker, with the assistance of the positions that the hon. member has just mentioned, they were part of increasing the sales of the liquor commission to over $37 million.

Consumer demand is driven, and we need managers to look after the products and ordering of the products. Again, the liquor commission sales are up 2.3 million over last year. I don't see a problem with that.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Montague-Kilmuir.

Mr. Bagnall: Madam Speaker, I understand that liquor sales are going to go up.

No problem. I understand that in order to do that he has to - in the real world, he would have to remodel to keep in line with other people. But he's got a monopoly. I mean, there's nobody else selling alcohol, there's nobody else promoting it.

Some Hon. Members: (Indistinct).

Mr. Bagnall: So how are you going to improve your profits when there's nobody else selling the product? You're not opening new stores. You're not opening it up to the public so they can sell the product. You have a monopoly. You set your own prices. You have a monopoly.

Some Hon. Members: (Indistinct).

Speaker: Order, please!

Mr. Bagnall: Why are you hedging on your operating costs? Because that's what's happening.

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Tourism and Culture.

Mr. Vessey: I don't know if the hon. member wants us to privatize the liquor stores or not, but -

An Hon. Member: I think that's what he wants.

Mr. Vessey: Again, the liquor commission has an increase in sales, up $2.3 million over last year. I commend the CEO of the liquor commission for that.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Montague-Kilmuir.

Mr. Bagnall: I'm wondering, minister, now that you're the minister, I know when you were in government member's office over there, your secretary worked for you there. Then you gave her the job as a wine tester, or a beer tester, and now you've changed around and you've taken her out of there again and you've put her back into your own office again. I'm wondering: What Liberal did you appoint into that position to fill her spot?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Tourism and Culture.

Mr. Vessey: I guess, again, a personal attack from the opposition. I believe the person he is noting was in the civil service for 12 years and applied to an internal competition by the Public Service Commission -

Premier Ghiz: You hired her.

Mr. Vessey: - and if the hon. member has a problem with that, then maybe he should bring it up with the Public Service Commission.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Montague-Kilmuir.

Mr. Bagnall: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Now that you're in charge of this department, are you prepared to cut out this foolish spending on remodelling? The extra million dollars you're spending moving a liquor store from across the street in Stratford. Minister, we're in a time of restraint here. Will you cut out this foolish spending?

Mr. Sheridan: Return on investment.

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Tourism and Culture.

Mr. Vessey: Madam Speaker, the liquor store in question, I believe, is in Stratford.

Since that store opened, it's increased 143% increase in sales. It's outgrown its purpose and we needed a larger location. We're treating it like a business. As I said earlier, you have to invest money to make money.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Montague-Kilmuir.

Mr. Bagnall: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

I agree the Stratford liquor store was doing well. It would still continue to do well.

Premier Ghiz: You couldn't move in there. When was the last time you were in there?

Mr. Bagnall: If you had competition moving in, then I could understand where you may have to do a remodelling, break leases, and increase rent space to do business. But you have a monopoly on this business. Why are you spending a million dollars to renovate and open up another store across the street from the one that is doing well, is putting on good increases, as you said? Why would you waste the money and do that remodelling?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Tourism and Culture.

Mr. Vessey: Madam Speaker, again, we're treating the liquor commission as a business.

It's time to move on and to get more space and open up markets and increase even more revenue from the liquor commission.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Montague-Kilmuir.

Mr. Bagnall: What's the cost of this remodelling?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Tourism and Culture.

Mr. Vessey: Madam Speaker, there are always costs to renovations.

We're making a business decision to move forward on a new move to a new location

with more floor space. We'll continue to do business decisions within the liquor commission, good, sound, solid business decisions.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Montague-Kilmuir.

Mr. Bagnall: I don't think he heard the question. What is the cost of the remodelling?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Tourism and Culture.

Mr. Vessey: I don't know if I have that at the tips of my fingers or not, Madam Speaker, but I'll gladly have a look and bring it back if I can.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Montague-Kilmuir.

Mr. Bagnall: So there is a cost?

Some Hon. Members: (Indistinct).

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Tourism and Culture.

Mr. Vessey: I do believe so.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Montague-Kilmuir.

Mr. Bagnall: Because the previous minister stood up in this House and he told us that there wouldn't be any cost for anything to government. He's saying there was going to be no cost, you're saying there is. How much will the cost be?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Tourism and Culture.

Mr. Vessey: Madam Speaker, renovations always cost money.

If the hon. member there, he may be in the wrong business if he can make renovations for free. There is a cost for renovations. I said I'll look into it, and if I can bring it back I will.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Montague-Kilmuir.

Mr. Bagnall: Thank you. I agree to that, but the previous minister stood up in this House and he said that there would be no cost.

An Hon. Member: Show me where.

Mr. Bagnall: We'll get the Hansard and show you, because it is in the Hansard. There will be no cost to do this business. But I guess that was -

Some Hon. Members: (Indistinct).

Mr. Bagnall: That was fantasy number one, I think.

Minister, will you come clean on this file and table all the costs associated with moving this liquor store across the street?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Tourism and Culture.

Mr. Vessey: As I said earlier, I'll have a look at that when I go back to my department. I'll bring it forward if I can.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Montague-Kilmuir.

Mr. Bagnall: Madam Speaker, we see that minister of finance's scheme to get the deficit under control is to sell more alcohol and smoke more cigarettes.

Minister, is that your theme, that if you remodel you'll sell more alcohol to help the provincial treasurer get some money for his Budget? Is that why you're doing that? So you get more people to drink in this province?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Tourism and Culture.

Mr. Vessey: Madam Speaker, the liquor commission's being run like a business, and if the hon. member has an issue with that then maybe he wants us to privatize it.

I'm not sure where he's coming from.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Montague-Kilmuir.

Mr. Bagnall: Will you stand up now today for the taxpayers and tell us that you will cut out these renovations, cut out this million dollar expenditure that you're going to be doing, and stay where you are and not waste the money this year in a time of restraint?

I know that we've had a habit of wasting money over there, but will you, as the new minister, stand up here and take some leadership on this file?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Tourism and Culture.

Mr. Vessey: Madam Speaker, as I said earlier, the liquor commission's mandate is to make money.

Last year they returned $37.8 million, up $2.3 million from the previous year, and I think that speaks for itself.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

McCain production

Leader of the Opposition: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

To the minister of agriculture. Mr. Minister, we've been hearing that McCain's are planning on cutting production this fall. Would you update the House on that?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Agriculture and Deputy Premier.

Mr. Webster: Madam Speaker, McCain's are downsizing on the volume of processing potatoes that they're going to require after October of this year.

Earlier this week, on Monday, we had a small delegation to Florenceville and talked to the vice-president and so on and discussed the issues around the future of the McCain's plant, encouraging them to increase production of specialty products, not decrease, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Leader of the Opposition: To the minister of agriculture. Are there more potato contracts being cut because of this reduction in production?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Agriculture and Deputy Premier.

Mr. Webster: Madam Speaker, the cuts that will come into effect in October of this year, the producers have already been notified of those reductions between 30 and 45 days ago.

They will be going from, I'm advised - five days, 24 hours a day is what they've been running and they're going back one day a week, which will be four days, 24 hours a day.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Leader of the Opposition: Madam Speaker, to the agriculture minister: Will there be job losses at the facility?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Agriculture and Deputy Premier.

Mr. Webster: Madam Speaker, we expect there to be temporary layoffs with regards to that downsizing.

McCain's alluded to the fact of the strong Canadian dollar at par with USA is one big issue that their whole fleet of processing plants is trying to endure.

The other issue is the recessional economy that we're in at the moment. That has slowed the consumption of specialty potato products and that is a result of why they are cutting their volumes for an indeterminate period of time.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Leader of the Opposition: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

This is disastrous news. Question to the finance minister. Will this cause you to change your projections on your revenue?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance and Municipal Affairs.

Mr. Sheridan: No.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Leader of the Opposition: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

To the finance minister. The Canadian dollar affects lots of exports. We're talking about potatoes. It's going to have the same impact on blueberries, lobster, etc. Are you going to change your projections?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance and Municipal Affairs.

Mr. Sheridan: No, we will not be, Madam Speaker.

It does work for many different companies

in the opposite direction. We're going to do everything, as we always have done on this side of the House, to encourage growth in business and I'm sure they'll make up for the difference.

Thank you very much.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Leader of the Opposition: Thank you. Back to the agriculture minister, then. To the agriculture community, what are you going to be doing to help all these sectors and especially the potato sector that's already hurting?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Agriculture and Deputy Premier.

Mr. Webster: Madam Speaker, we'll be continuing all our programs that we currently have to help growers through this recessional or soft economy period of time.

Also, when we had our conversation with McCain's, we asked them if they would try to target a projection of a 35% increase over 24 months on their expansion. They replied back to us that certainly the quality of PEI potatoes are very good. The challenge around it is the high Canadian dollar and certainly the recessional economy.

If the economy starts to rebound in USA, that will make all the difference in the world. But they have a fleet of plants and they're all running at approximately 70% capacity at the moment, and there's some challenges around that. The way to make money is run it at a higher level than that. This is not a unique in PEI situation. It's pretty much all over North America, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Leader of the Opposition: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

We better take a broader look than that. If you look at Greece, the US, the whole international market is still quite volatile.

Financial support to McCain's

But my question to the innovation minister is: Last year you provided direct financial support to people that were working in Cavendish plant when they had to go through a layoff. Are you going to be doing the same for McCain's?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Innovation and Advanced Learning.

Mr. Campbell: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

With McCain's or Cavendish or any other business in PEI, if we're contacted by the company to try and assist in any way, with any program, we'd certainly entertain that request and evaluate it, and if we can help I'm sure we will.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Co-pay for drugs

Leader of the Opposition: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

My next question is going to go to the health minister. When the government came in, in 2007, they had made a series of promises, many in the area of drug coverage. So my first question is to the health minister, and I quote what was told in the last election: This government was going to reduce the drug cost assistance program co-pay amounts for seniors by 50% over three years.

We need to remind the government they received $24 million in surplus that year. So my question to the minister - it's in your three - why are you only starting to cover this co-pay right now and reduce it further next year? Is it because there's an election coming next year? Are you going to politicize this one, too?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Ms. Bertram: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

I'm so pleased to be able to respond to this question as Minister of Health and Wellness. I am so pleased that our government that our government has fulfilled, in essence, half of that promise to this date of reducing this year the announcement of 25% reduction in seniors co-pay in this province, Madam Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Ms. Bertram: Which, Madam Speaker, that equates to about a half a million dollars spent in that program line and it equates to putting a million dollars back in the pockets of Island seniors, 65 years of age and older. That is very significant.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Ms. Bertram: We have announced many new drugs in the last few days. We have a $34 million-plus budget for drug programs in this province.

Madam Speaker, we're going to work to realize that election promise that we made as a government.

Thank you.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Tracadie-Hillsborough Park.

Community application for takeover of school

Mr. Watts: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

My question today is for the Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure Renewal. Mr. Minister, a few months ago, the community of Grand Tracadie made application to your department to take over the school in Grand Tracadie. I believe it was a fairly favourable application. So, Mr. Minister, could you tell me how far along in process your department is with this application?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure Renewal.

Mr. MacKinley: The transfer is going to go ahead. The community out there is going to provide services like early learning program, after school program, fitness program, library, computer (Indistinct) program, and a lot more. This is very great for the area, and I'm glad that the community came to approach government to take over this school.

Also, it's just a matter of the lawyers to finish up the legal work in the transfer and that could take a little time. We expect that to be completed probably in early June, late June.

Secondly is we're going to give them $36,800 to look after this school, to get them on their feet, over the next two years. One grant.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Alberton-Roseville.

Alberton courthouse

Mr. Murphy: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

I'd appreciate your indulgence with my preamble here. It might be a little - but it requires an explanation.

The communities of Alberton, Tignish and O'Leary that currently buy police services from the RCMP, it costs about $95,000 each for each community. For that they get the equivalent of one officer for 40 hours a week. So you can see the negative impact that the previous government put on policing in the western part of the province when they closed the courthouse in Alberton. Out of that 40 hours, the officer's time that he has to travel to Summerside, court appearances in Summerside, come out of that 40 hours of protection that they should be patrolling the community.

So my question to the Attorney General is: Will he consider reversing this decision?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development and Attorney General.

Mr. D. Currie: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

We do know that the Alberton courthouse was closed in 2004, and since the closure all services have been provided through the Summerside courthouse. Recently we've been focusing on the Summerside courthouse, and we made investments in the new CourtSmart digital recording system. We've improved security measures. We're in the process of introducing closed-circuit television system that will facilitate testimony for vulnerable children.

Our immediate priority right now is to open the 48-bed unit at Sleepy Hollow, which is the provincial facility, and that facility is experiencing some fairly intense issues around overcrowding, and contraband getting into the facility. So that is our immediate priority.

The second part of the provincial modernization of the system will be the Summerside facility, but we are in discussions right now, the capital project team is in place and will continue to look at options and possibilities as we move forward, and certainly be willing to have

more discussions as we move forward.

Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Co-pay for drugs (further)

Leader of the Opposition: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

In regards to the seniors co-pay, they currently actually pay $11 drug cost for the first $11, which is the part that government's actually reducing by 25%. The pharmacy fee ranges from s$6 to $9 which is the prescription fee. So, seniors are really paying between 17 and $20 per prescription, with the proposed reduction would mean seniors are going to pay $14 to 17, which is really only 14 to 16%. But that's okay. The government is trying.

My question is: Why are you manipulating the words and saying you're doing the start of this in year three? You had $24 million when you first came in, and now you're going to do the rest next year, election year. Why are you manipulating people and trying to show that you're still following through to complete an election promise that should have been delivered in 2007?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Ms. Bertram: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

I'm proud of the successes and the announcement that this government has made in regards to whether it be health, whether it be education, any other departments that this government has supported and fulfilled within our platform during the 2007 election under our Premier.

We are supporting our seniors in this province. Yes, we are working to realize that 50% as a promise to Island seniors. Yes, we have reduced their co-pay by two - $8.25 versus $11.

We are going through negotiations - we haven't started yet - with the pharmacy association and we will be working on that other extra amount during that negotiation process. So we are working to help Island seniors.

But I also have to just reiterate that the Leader of the Opposition, during those years when we were in opposition, in 2003, 2004, 2005, there were approximately 12 drugs added to the provincial formulary. They left the provincial formulary in disarray. We have added 45% to that budget line, this government, and we are investing in Islanders' health, Islanders' drug needs, and I'm very pleased of the accomplishments to date.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Leader of the Opposition: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

This is another election promise that this government made in 2007. But it's great that

we're making progress. I guess my question then, for all the seniors of the province, is: Are you telling the House today and the public that next year the 50% reduction will be on both aspects, both the pharmacy fee and the co-pay? Is that what you're telling us?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Ms. Bertram: Madam Speaker, I am standing here today, as I did two weeks ago, when we announced that the seniors' co-pay was reduced and the hon. treasurer said in his speech that the seniors' co-pay was being reduced by 25%, that we are working towards our election platform, and the election is still a year and a half away, so we still have time to work on all that.

May I also remind the Leader of the Opposition, we have realized drugs on our provincial formulary. We just added 10 new drugs. There were 18 drugs added last year. Another election promise that was very critical to insulin dependent Islanders was the blood glucose test strips. This government has invested $1.5 million into that program, and it is very valuable to Islanders, and another election platform promise that we have realized.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Leader of the Opposition: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

No problem, we're going to get to that half-filled promise, too. My question to the minister is this, on this promise from the election: provide Islanders with the same access to publicly funded drugs as other Canadians by increasing the provincial government share of total drug spending to the national average. Right now that national average is $292 a person. PEI is spending 236. I remind this minister, she inherited a $24 million surplus. Why didn't you use some of that money to do what you said you were going to do during the 2007 election? Why not?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Ms. Bertram: Madam Speaker, this Leader of the Opposition has a short memory.

Because we inherited a drug program that was underfunded back in 2007. So let's bring everyone to reality. This government has increased a drug expenditure by 45%. We are spending in excess of $34 million this year in drug programs, which is very valuable. Like I said before, do we have work to do? Yes. Am I pleased with the accomplishments we've made to date? Yes, I am. We will continue to work hard to realize the drug needs of Islanders in this province.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Leader of the Opposition: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

That's another broken promise from the

election, but let's not help remind this minister, $24 million in audited surplus, but also, the famous $175 million that the federal government gave, the Building Canada Fund, broken down into $25 million per year.

My question to the minister is: Why didn't you live up to your election promise? PEI is about 20% behind the Canadian average. Why didn't you use any of that money to fulfill your promise in 2007? Why?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Ms. Bertram: Madam Speaker, Leader of the Opposition, I can respond to these of knowledge because of my old portfolio.

Infrastructure dollars, hon. Leader of the Opposition, if you weren't aware, were dedicated to specific infrastructure projects in this project. The federal government worked with that. It wasn't dedicated to drug programs in the province.

But are we working with the federal government and trying to ask the federal government to have a catastrophic drug program, a national pharmaceutical strategy for the country, Madam Speaker?

We are, and we want the federal government to come on board, to support this as national ministers of health and wellness in this country. So I implore the Leader of the Opposition to get her facts straight.

I am so pleased that we were able to allocate the dollars we were this year in this budget. I thank the Premier, and I thank the treasurer, for helping us do that this year, and our whole government, Madam Speaker.

Thank you.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Leader of the Opposition: Madam Speaker, these lovely Islander first for health care Liberal promises, number one, two, three, four, five, six, seven.

Drug coverage for the working poor

But my question to the same health minister is: Pat Binns actually negotiated 25 million per year for 175 million that was available. But one group in the province that is still struggling every day for drug coverage is adults who have no dependents and low incomes, the working poor. My question to the health minister: What are you doing to help with drug coverage for this group?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Ms. Bertram: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

We have many different drug programs in the province. We are responding to the needs of Islanders, whether it be their income. I am not saying today that we have worked - again, I say, we have work to do. I've already committed on this floor to a modernization of our drug program here in the province.

But we have a host of different programs in this province that we do support Islanders that have economic needs in the province and maybe don't have access to those drugs. But, Leader of the Opposition, I would ask you to get your facts straight in terms of our drug programs, because we are investing in Islanders, we are investing in drugs, Madam Speaker, and I am pleased with our accomplishments to date.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Leader of the Opposition: Madam Speaker, to the health minister, I was talking as recently as yesterday to a pharmacist who tells me what it's like to work in a pharmacy on a daily basis.

When people aged 55 to 64 come in, they have to order prescriptions and pay for them on a one week or a two week basis. They can't follow through with the presecriptions, taking them the way they should be, because they do not have the money. Right now there's no coverage for this group.

To the health minister: What are you doing for this group?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Ms. Bertram: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

We accept a lot of phone calls through the department, through our drug program, our director Faye Martin and other staff members. But also the Leader of the Opposition must be cognizant, if she's talking to pharmacists as well, the Government of Ontario just instituted legislation with pharmacies, too. So there's another side of the story that we must be (Indistinct), but we're trying to work together here in the Province of Prince Edward Island.

The Leader of the Opposition, I would ask her, she obviously takes one-off cases to this Legislature a lot, but I have to say that we are investing $34 million this year in drug programs in the province. Very pleased last week that we were able to announce 10 new medications to the provincial drug formulary. Yesterday members of this Legislature were at a luncheon for the CNIB and their new Vision Health Month that they're announcing this month. They were so pleased that we were able to put Lucentis, a high cost drug medication, on our provincial drug formulary, and what quality of life that will bring to so many Islanders.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

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

Leader of the Opposition: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Presently on PEI 25% of people have no drug coverage. We're talking about approximately 35,000 people. This group of people, aged 55 to 64, they can't afford their medicine. When they are paying only on a week to week basis for chronic medicine they get sicker. It doesn't work. To the health minister: What are you doing for this group? And please don't avoid the question. Please answer this question, Madam Minister.

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Ms. Bertram: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

I would like to list that the programs that we have in our department, because, you know what? We defended our budget yesterday and there were no questions in regards to the drug program when we defended our budget yesterday.

I would like to table, with your indulgence, some of the programs that we offer at no means testing to Islanders. We have the AIDS program, which is $407,000-plus; transplant drug program in this province of almost half a million dollars; cystic fibrosis program, $83,000-plus; growth hormone program at 66,000; PKU program for individuals needing formula free of charge, at 43,000. We have rheumatic fever program, we have STD drug program, we have a TB program, we have interferon program, hepatitis, immunization programs, at no means testing. We have a community mental health program. Nutrition service program.

All of these at no means testing to any Islanders. We are responding to Islanders in need through the high cost drug program, and we continue to work hard to even realize further supports to Islanders.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

[End of Question Period]