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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
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RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS AND ORAL QUESTION PERIOD
(PRELIMINARY PROCEEDINGS)

FOR

FRIDAY, 20 NOVEMBER 2015

Responses to Questions Taken as Notice

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

Environmental Advisory Council report (further)

Mr. Mitchell: Mr. Speaker, yesterday during my response to questions from the hon. Member from Rustico-Emerald I indicated that the report by the Environmental Advisory Council would be fully reflected in the draft of PEI's new water act.

I did, however, neglect to clarify that the EAC report will indeed be made public when it is prepared and would be posted online with all the other presentations that will make up the big part of that report.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier's letter to Auditor General (further)

Premier MacLauchlan: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Yesterday in Question Period the hon. Member from Stratford-Kinlock asked if I would table for the House correspondence with the Auditor General pursuant to the Order in Council establishing or creating a special assignment under the audit act to look into certain matters that have been discussed and (Indistinct) part of the questions.

I undertook to do so and I informed the House that there was no such letter. The Order in Council was adopted on March 10th, 2015 and would have been relayed in the normal course to the Auditor General. It wouldn't have been necessary for there to be a letter from the Premier.

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Transportation, Infrastructure and Energy.

Atlantic Gateway and TIE minister (further)

Ms. Biggar: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Yesterday during Question Period the hon. Member from Belfast-Murray River referenced Gateways and Border Crossings Fund. Just an update on that.

That particular fund was under the old Building Canada Fund which has now expired and we have a new Building Canada Fund. The funds that ran that particular fund were \$2 billion nationally spread over seven years. They're basically all expended at the moment. It was a totally federally funded project. We did use some of that fund, \$8 million of it to fund the highway alignment and also the Charlottetown airport extension. Some improvements were made to the Confederation Bridge as well under that fund.

Again, it was \$2 billion nationally over seven years. There's a little bit left there, I believe, for a marketing piece but we are operating now under the new Building Canada Fund and I'd be happy to get a copy of that for the hon. member.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness and Family and Human Services.

Psychiatrist's salary and audit (further)

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

I rise to table specific details for the Leader of the Third Party in respect to his questions around billing practices and audit protocol with physicians here in the Province of Prince Edward Island which are conducted by Health PEI, and the work that they do and how we continue to strengthen our audit practices in the Province of Prince Edward Island after following recommendations in 2009 from our Auditor General.

Thank you.

Questions by Members

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Inequality and children

Leader of the Opposition: Good morning, Mr. Speaker.

Question to the Premier. Today is national day of the child where issues affecting our children are top of mind. The PEI United Church Women are advocating for government to address some inequality that has a negative effect on our children. What is the government doing to address this?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Mr. Speaker.

Thank you for the question.

One of the first things that we did after coming to government was to increase the allowances for families who are recipients of social assistance, both the food and the housing allowance. Further, we increased the funding for the breakfast food, the breakfast program in the schools, by \$200,000.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Number of and appointments to provincial agencies

Leader of the Opposition: Thank you.

New question to the Premier. How many agencies, boards and commissions do we currently have in the Province of Prince Edward Island?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Mr. Speaker, I don't have the precise number for such bodies, and that would – depending on how you defines them it could include a number of agencies that are created by this House under legislation.

But if we're talking just statutory bodies, let me say it's on the order of 160 but I can bring that precise number back to the House, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Leader of the Opposition: I don't know where the Premier is getting 160, but our research, we have over 70 agencies, boards,

commissions, that type of group in operation.

Do you have any idea how many positions that encompasses or takes in?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Mr. Speaker, I think the best thing to do on this is to bring an answer back to the House and table something because it really does become a question of definition as to what's included.

What I will bring back to the House is the number of bodies that exist under legislation that's been created by this House and then the number of posts that are involved in filling the roles of those bodies.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Leader of the Opposition: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

To the Premier: How many positions have you filled of these agencies, boards, and commissions since you have taken office?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Mr. Speaker, I don't have a precise number on that but what I can tell the House is that we do have a number of vacancies or we have a number of positions where the prior appointment has gone past the intended date.

The reason for that is that our government's commitment to openness and transparency and to engagement was to take our time, put in place a process that is known as Engage PEI that has been unveiled publicly and that is open to people throughout the community to put forward their names to be considered for service on these bodies.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Leader of the Opposition: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Can the Premier explain to the House how his Engage PEI appointment process differs from the Participate PEI appointment process that was used previously?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Mr. Speaker, under the Engage PEI process people can apply online, they can put their name forward.

They are asked to have support from a couple of members of the community so there's an opportunity to get a feel for the extent to which people are involved in the community. We are actively promoting the opportunity and the desire on the part of government for there to be a wide representation and for people to take part in the affairs of government and to bring a variety of perspectives.

Let me say I appreciate the question because it's another opportunity to let people know about Engage PEI.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Leader of the Opposition: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The application basically is the same. Our research has found the employment process the same, even the frequently asked questions online are the same, except for the name change from 'participate' to 'engage.'

Is this just not an exercise in rebranding of the process?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Mr. Speaker, this is a commitment on the part of our government to have participation and to have input and perspectives from citizens from a wide range of points in our province, and to bring their experience and to assist in the work of bodies that have been established under legislation by this Legislature.

We're doing what a government is supposed to do and we welcome that participation, and we thank all members of the House for

making sure that people know about the opportunity to have their names put forward and to contribute.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Rewarding of defeated candidates

Leader of the Opposition: Thank you, Mr. Premier.

Question to the Premier. The Premier may suggest that this is some kind of change but we still some see some defeated candidates, and I have knowledge of this, and well-connected Islanders being rewarded by their employments.

How is that any different from the predecessor and how he operated?

Premier MacLauchlan: I'm sorry, I just didn't hear the finishing of the question

Speaker: Could you repeat the question, hon. Leader of the Opposition?

Leader of the Opposition: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

What we're seeing now appears to be the exact same as what we've seen in the past – people being rewarded, and in some cases to candidates that have been defeated. How is this any different than what your predecessor has done in the past?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Mr. Speaker, there have been a modest number of appointments made.

As I said, we actually have taken our time to bring forward this process so in fact there would be a public and a widely publicized opportunity for citizens throughout the province to come step forward to let people know or let it be known that they're interested in serving, and that's exactly what we've done.

The modest number of appointments that have been made are in situations where names have come forward, for example,

through self governing bodies or autonomous bodies or bodies that in effect have their own nominating process. That might be the pharmacists or it might be the University of Prince Edward Island or it might be other professional bodies. But in fact, we have not taken any energy or not put any priority on filling spots with people of any political stripe. We're coming forward with an Engage PEI process and I say again, I encourage all members of this House to encourage people to put their names forward. Frankly I don't think it helps in encouraging people to take part in the political process or the democratic process in this province to be suggesting that it's got anything to do with political stripe.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Agencies review

Leader of the Opposition: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Okay, that's fine. Let's switch for a minute. I said earlier that that we roughly got over 70 boards in the province for a population of about 135,000 people. If I look at the Province of New Brunswick and I look at the Province of Nova Scotia, they half the boards and commissions with far more population than we have.

Will you commit at looking at reviewing our boards and commissions to what other provinces have done to bring them in line?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Mr. Speaker, let me first of all remind all members that whatever boards and commissions exist is because they exist under the authority of this Legislature under legislation that's been passed kind of over the years.

We have two initiatives underway now. One is called Assessing Red Tape. That is actively underway. In fact I heard it being complimented in the public media this morning. Then in a second part we have an initiative, together with New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, that is aimed directly at levelling the playing field in terms of the

regulatory requirements or the regulatory burden on firms or citizens in our three provinces with the aim of enabling or creating a platform whereby our economies can prosper well together. So in fact, we are very committed to the point that the Leader of the Opposition raises.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Leader of the Opposition: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Final question. It's great that we're acknowledging the red tape and the burden that does play in our society and small business and (Indistinct) like that. Will you commit in this review of red tape and the way that it's processed to also commit to reviewing our boards and commissions and those bodies to bring them in line with other provinces and possibly reduce red tape with that?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Mr. Speaker, I'm happy to say that this is very much the spirit in which we approach government.

Yesterday I brought forward a HUB model and I was criticized by the opposition for not creating an additional office. I guess we'll continue to do our best to create horizontal collaborations to do the best with what we've got, and indeed if we feel that there are bodies that are in some way duplicating or no longer required, we'll absolutely be happy to let the Legislature know and bring forward amendments accordingly.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Kensington-Malpeque.

VLT removal and replacement from private establishments

Mr. MacKay: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Question today to the finance minister: Who decides the placement and removal of all video lottery terminals from private establishments?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Mr. Roach: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

That's the Atlantic Lottery Corporation.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Kensington-Malpeque.

Mr. MacKay: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

What criteria is used to decide when video lottery terminals are removed from an establishment?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Mr. Roach: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

That criteria is established by the Atlantic Lottery Corporation, and too – I don't have the in depth details but I believe it goes something like this: they review each terminal, they see I guess the amount that it's being used, the value of it, and they then determine whether or not it stays or it's moved to another location.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Kensington-Malpeque.

Mr. MacKay: These machines are important revenue source for groups like Legions and Lions Clubs. Does the minister think their community impact should be considered before a decision is made to remove these machines?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Mr. Roach: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

When the Atlantic Lottery Corporation is going to do something with a VLT we are contacted and advised and we do get in contact with the organization or the establishment where they are located.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Kensington-Malpeque.

VLT loss and Summerside Cabinet minister

Mr. MacKay: Mr. Speaker, the St. Eleanors Lions Club may close its doors because they lost all five of their VLTs.

This will impact dozens of community groups who use this space as well as the Lions Club itself. Minister, would you agree that a lack of a Summerside Cabinet minister can explain why this poor decision was allowed to proceed?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Mr. Roach: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

In all of the documents and all of the reviews that I've been involved with, the one thing that's not on the list is whether there's an MLA or a Cabinet minister involved. I don't see that as having any relevance whatsoever.

All our work with the Atlantic Lottery Corporation is based on good business and it's looked at from a business perspective.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

VLTs and ALC

Speaker: The hon. Member from Kensington-Malpeque.

Mr. MacKay: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Minister, have you or any of your colleagues from the Summerside area raised this issue with ALC?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Mr. Roach: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

We have in fact, in this particular situation, had conversation with ALC and with the organization.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Kensington-Malpeque.

Mr. MacKay: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

This summer the Legion in the minister's own home community had a VLT forcibly removed. Does the minister support this move?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Mr. Roach: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I believe, in this instance, I think that the ALC had gone in earlier and removed one of the machines in hopes that the performance issues with the remaining ones would improve and that was not the case.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Kensington-Malpeque.

Mr. MacKay: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Does the minister think that taking VLTs out of Legions and service clubs supports our veterans and community groups?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Mr. Roach: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I think that what they do, in fact, when a machine is removed from one location because it's underperforming, it would in all likelihood go to another location where it would perform and would be monitored. All funds that are received by this province from the Atlantic Lottery Corporation go to assist all organizations in Prince Edward Island through our budgetary process.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

VLTs and GeoSweep

Speaker: The hon. Member from Kensington-Malpeque.

Mr. MacKay: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Minister, are the massive losses in GeoSweep to blame for the ripping out of these VLTs from important community spaces?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Mr. Roach: Mr. Speaker, the short answer is no.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Kensington-Malpeque.

Harness racing and Red Shores

Mr. MacKay: Mr. Speaker, I've been getting a lot of calls from people in the harness racing industry concerned about the future of this industry.

Is the minister aware of any plans to restructure operations at Red Shores in Summerside?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Mr. Roach: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

We work very closely with the harness racing industry and with Red Shores. I can assure the member and this House that we are extremely supportive of the harness racing industry in a major way in Summerside.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Kensington-Malpeque.

Mr. MacKay: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Harness racing is a \$50 million industry creating jobs and spinoffs in rural and urban communities. Does the minister support any plans to downsize operations at Red Shores in Summerside?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Mr. Roach: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

If the member has information on plans of downsizing operations in Summerside I'd certainly like to see it because I have not been made aware of any plans to downsize the industry in Summerside.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Kensington-Malpeque.

Mr. MacKay: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The operation at Red Shores in Summerside is an important revenue source for the city of Summerside, so let's clear the air here. Is the minister confirming that there are no plans by ALC or the province to restructure, downsize, or close Red Shores racing in Summerside?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Mr. Trivers: On the record.

Mr. Roach: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

If they're wishing it for the record I'll give it for the record. I have had absolutely no discussions with anyone, either staff, Red Shores Summerside racetrack, or anyone else, with respect to downsizing operations, or in any way removing operations at the Summerside raceway.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Kensington-Malpeque.

Mr. MacKay: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I just want to clarify something. Harness racing in Summerside, this government has no plans to shut down harness racing in Summerside? Yes or no. (Indistinct).

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Mr. Roach: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I've had the opportunity to attend both facilities in Charlottetown and in Summerside to review the operations and have had discussions with raceway officials at both locations about the Red Shores operations and the raceway. In none of those discussions, including staff, have we had any discussion with respect to closing or reducing operations in either facility.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Third Party.

Greenhouse gas emission target

Dr. Bevan-Baker: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

The Paris Climate Change Conference is coming up shortly where governments from around the world will hopefully agree on the measures needed to keep average global temperature rise below the 2 degrees Celsius mark, I'm told variously by scientists, which we need to do to avoid catastrophic consequences.

A question to the Premier: When you accompany the Canadian delegation in Paris, are you prepared to agree to a binding greenhouse gas emission target and to accept the will of the international community on this matter?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Mr. Speaker, on Monday, November 23rd, I will take part in a First Ministers' conference in Ottawa, the first in seven years.

There will be two subjects on the agenda; one being the reception of refugee families from Syria, the other, which I believe has been assigned a larger amount of time, including to hear from scientists on this subject, in preparation for the Paris conference.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Dr. Bevan-Baker: Given that Prince Edward Island is uniquely vulnerable to climate change, particularly when it comes to sea level rise, in these negotiations with the premiers and our prime minister, will the Premier of Prince Edward Island be advocating for a specific emission target? If so, what will that target be?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Mr. Speaker, I can confirm for the House that at the end of August of this year there were meetings of the New England Governors and the eastern Canadian premiers at which we, together, undertook to aim to have reductions between 35 and 45% in our greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 relative to 2005 baseline.

That's an ambitious undertaking and one that we did not agree to lightly and it will be a benchmark against which we'd be prepared to consider what's being said around the table next Monday.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Provincial investment in fossil fuel companies

Dr. Bevan-Baker: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

As their values plummet, there's a growing global movement for governments and institutions to divest from fossil fuels because of the very situation we're talking about.

Could the Premier inform the House how much the Government of Prince Edward Island and its various funds and Crown corporations currently has invested in fossil fuel companies?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Mr. Speaker, that's something on which I'd have to do some homework and bring a response back to the House, but I'd be happy to do that, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Lewis Point.

Subsidized housing

Ms. Casey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

My question today is directed to the Minister of Health and Wellness and Family and Human Services.

Yesterday the Minister of Health and Wellness and Family and Human Services tabled a report prepared by the PEI Community Advisory Board on homelessness. The report outlined various government initiatives to reduce homelessness on Prince Edward Island.

The minister also stated that since 2013 the province invested in housing through 60 new rent supplements. During the recent election campaign I spoke to many concerned residents regarding the availability of subsidized housing in the Charlottetown area.

Minister, would you kindly give this House an update on the availability of subsidized housing in the Charlottetown area? Are you satisfied with the current service level? What is being done to ensure that Islanders

who are in need of this service have timely access?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness and Family and Human Services.

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

A great question. As the Minister of Health and Wellness and Family and Human Services we are extremely committed in our recent mandate letters from the Premier of this province. We have a clear focus on renewal of a housing strategy.

To respond to the question as minister, I feel that we've made inroads since 2007. We've increased the number of seniors units in this province by approximately 375. We've increased the number of rent supplements across the Island by approximately 190. I recognize that we have waitlists that are unacceptable and I'm very much looking forward to making sure that we continue to build a renewed focused and a housing strategy, and was extremely pleased to hear that under the new federal government's commitment of \$10 billion dollars in infrastructure that they will designate a third of that towards social, which will be a very robust housing mandate in partnership with the provinces and the territories in this country.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Lewis Point, first supplementary.

Ms. Casey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Minister, as you let us know about the new federal government's 10-year investment in social infrastructure, have you spoken with the new federal minister responsible for this plan and will you be asking for an investment in subsidized housing for the Charlottetown area?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness and Family and Human Services.

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

In my formal life as an educator and school councillor I worked very closely with families and saw firsthand the impact that lack of appropriate safe housing has on our children in our communities across Prince Edward Island.

We are currently lining up a conversation with the federal minister responsible. We spent time last week in discussions with the federal health minister. I am very optimistic that the stars are lining up in respect to our province's mandate on a renewed housing strategy and the mandate by our new federal government to continue to expand, increase the volume of rent supplements, and increase the number of affordable seniors housing units here in the Province of Prince Edward Island.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Summerside-St. Eleanors.

New energy strategy re: renewable sources

Ms. Mundy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

A question for the Minister of Transportation, Infrastructure and Energy. Recently the minister made a very exciting announcement at one of the standing committees on energy and infrastructure. She said that the province has begun work on a new energy strategy. I'm very interested in the whole field of renewable energy, it's an area where we should all be pursuing. If a country the size of Denmark who, in their energy strategy, have declared to be independent of fossil fuels by 2050, then PEI, due to its size, could easily be a world leader in renewable energy if it so chooses.

My question: Will the minister please tell the House whether she expects this new strategy to include some discussion on renewable energy sources such as solar power and tidal energy?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Transportation, Infrastructure and Energy.

Ms. Biggar: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you for the question, hon. member.

PEI is the leader in wind energy across the country. We've been recognized in the efforts that we've done that way. Significant progress has been made in renewable energy in terms of biomass. I'd like to point out, too, that through the Office of Energy Efficiency we've spent more than \$15 million dollars in grants and loans to conserve energy for people on PEI.

We will be exploring a number of initiatives across renewable energy sources. I think it's very important that we do that. We will be exploring and we actually have engaged, in terms of tidal power, Acadia University to do some study on our tidal data, so that's in progress as well. There are a number of initiatives that we will be moving forward with around encouraging more renewable energy in Prince Edward Island.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Summerside-St. Eleanors, first supplementary.

New energy strategy release date and public input

Ms. Mundy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you for that, minister.

As you know, a growing number of Islanders are very interested in this area and very committed to environmental sustainability in our province, so I have a two-part question: First, when do you expect the strategy to be released?; and second, will the strategy be a focus for public engagement and consultation?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Transportation, Infrastructure and Energy.

Ms. Biggar: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. member, you mentioned Denmark, I believe, in your comments. I had the opportunity last night to have a conversation with our new federal energy minister, Jim Carr, who had just arrived back from Paris, I might add. I had a conversation with him about his national energy strategy as part of his mandate, and part of our mandate here on Prince Edward Island is to work in partnership with that. I see that as a great opportunity, I think, too. We're unique in our size that we could certainly work towards a goal of using renewable energy to

become 100% self-sufficient. I see that as a goal in the future, certainly.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Ms. Biggar: On the second part of your question, hon. member, we are working towards an RFP going out by the end of this year. We expect to have that process occur over the winter where we will engage primary stakeholders and secondary stakeholders in the whole process through public consultation and through engagement.

Speaker: Now we will call on the hon. Member from Rustico-Emerald.

Watershed Alliance funding

Mr. Trivers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

This is a question for the Minister of Communities, Land and Environment. Minister, in your election platform you announced the total increase of \$250,000 in funding to our watershed groups. This fiscal year your budget showed an increase to watershed groups of only \$180,000.

Can you tell the House what the Watershed Alliance actually received?

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

Mr. Mitchell: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

As the hon. member knows, and we've had several questions on the floor of the Legislature regarding funding for the watershed areas of Prince Edward Island, that we did initially add \$180,000 to what they would receive in dollars, and this year there'll be an additional \$70,000 for a grand total of \$250,000.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Rustico-Emerald.

Mr. Trivers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Minister, I'm trying to figure out how this all adds up because when I talk to the Watershed Alliance I find they've only received \$140,000 dollars so far perhaps, and the bulk was used by two watershed

groups to replace lost federal funding. In effect, there was really a zero increase to watershed budgets.

Will you ensure that the watershed groups get the total amount of money that you promised in this House earlier this year plus the money that was not brought forward?

Thank you.

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

Mr. Mitchell: Yes, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and certainly appreciate the question.

I know that I've met with many of the watershed groups all across Prince Edward Island. Yes, there was a couple of groups that had received no funding from the federal government last year.

Our commitment to the watershed funding is solid. The watershed groups did receive all that funding last year. There was an additional \$41,000 that is still with the federation Watershed Alliance that is trying to establish the best way to spend those dollars. We are going to be working very collaboratively with the Watershed Alliance to see where the best use of that funding will be for the next season that they have to work in and they'll be a big part of helping us to decide how we disperse that \$1.2 million.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Rustico-Emerald.

Mr. Trivers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Another question for the minister. Just to be clear, how much money can the watershed groups expect to receive the next fiscal year?

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

Mr. Mitchell: Yes, thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Currently we are discussing that with the Watershed Alliance. As I said, they have a \$41,000 amount currently right now that they're looking how the best way to spend that money is. Over the coming months we will be working further together to establish

the best way to disperse it all. The formula from past seasons they felt is not as effective as it could be, and we are certainly working in a very collaborative, approachable way with them to decide what would be the best way as we move forward to into their coming season.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Rustico-Emerald.

Mr. Trivers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

In the House you said that you would increase the amount to \$250,000 in subsequent years. Those were your words.

I know you're working with the Watershed Alliance groups to determine the level of funding, but based on that statement, will you assure our watershed groups that they will receive their \$250,000 increase in funding for the 2016-2017 fiscal year?

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

Mr. Mitchell: Yes, thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I can commit that the total funding that we have established with the Watershed Alliance group will be there for them this year. It is a bit of a process to decide the best way to break those dollars out.

There are approximately 23 watersheds all across Prince Edward Island doing extremely good work in all regions of the Island. We want to make sure that they have the proper dollars to carry on with projects that they've either started so far or are looking forward to building in the future.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Rustico-Emerald.

Mr. Trivers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

It's interesting you're talking about now project-based funding. I'm just wondering where you're going with that.

Minister, during the last session of the Legislature you said you'd be meeting with

the PEI Watershed Alliance, and you mentioned that again today, to discuss concerns about the dispersal of watershed funding and to determine the best practice going forward.

The Watershed Alliance has been seeking a multi-year funding arrangement so they know what money's available, committed money, and they can confidently plan ahead.

Has a new funding formula been initiated that commits money for multiple years, committed money?

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

Mr. Mitchell: Yes, thank you, Mr. Speaker.

We are working with the alliance to provide predictable, sustainable funding. We had made a discussion point that we will get together somewhere over the winter months – either January or February, whichever is more convenient to them – we will sit down for a full day, discuss what their vision is, where they need assistance. We're more than willing to continue on with that.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Rustico-Emerald.

Mr. Trivers: Minister, a stated goal of the new watershed strategy was to provide watershed groups with stable and adequate multi-year funding through a transparent funding process, of course.

Can you outline to the House when this new multi-year formula will be rolled out? You mentioned meeting with them this winter. Does that mean it will be ready in the spring?

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

Mr. Mitchell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I expect the Watershed Alliance to play a significantly important part in this dispersal of these dollars. This is the group that has the best understanding of what needs to be done in these watersheds all across Prince Edward Island. They're the group that has

the most experience working with those individuals they have involved in their groups and we certainly want to support their vision and be able to supply those predicable dollars as we move forward.

Mr. Speaker, thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Rustico-Emerald.

Mr. Trivers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you, minister.

Again, just to reinforce the point, each year the watershed groups face uncertainty as to how much funding will be approved and this has hindered their ability to proceed on projects. In fact, some cases they went ahead, they took the gamble, they spent the money – for example, by hiring a student – and then they didn't receive the funding.

Also, timing is of key importance because they need to hire these students in the spring. In April, typically.

Will you assure these groups that funding will be confirmed and forthcoming in a timely manner for hiring to take place so projects can get underway before the summer is half over?

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

Mr. Mitchell: Yes, thank you, Mr. Speaker.

As I said earlier, I am totally committed to working with the watershed groups and alliance. I know ours is not the only funding these groups do receive. They are able to apply for programs and grants through the federal government, through other departments of provincial government, and many of them also use private sector.

I understand that it's hard for them to determine exactly how many dollars they're going to have from year to year, but we're working very diligently on trying to provide that the provincial dollars that will be available to them will be predictable and sustainable, multi-year.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Rustico-Emerald, final question.

Mr. Trivers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Minister, that's great news and we'll definitely hold you to that.

Minister, in the spring 2015 session of this House you agreed that watershed groups add 10 times the value of every dollar they receive, 10 to one return. Given how important sustainability and stewardship of the environment is to Islanders and this massive return on investment, why are you only committing to an increase of \$250,000 per year?

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

Mr. Mitchell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

We understand in our meetings with the watershed groups that they have a lot of work to do and it takes a lot of funds. We've committed that 250,000 extra year over year now, and we'll continue to work on ways that we can enhance programs, find other dollars to assist them when they need to.

As I said, there are other programs they can apply for within government. Transportation and infrastructure has programs. Federal government has programs. We will work with them to try to assist them in any way to get the funding they need to perform their work.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[End of Question Period]