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

FOR

WEDNESDAY, 15 NOVEMBER 2017

Responses to Questions Taken as Notice

Questions by Members

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

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

Over the last several months, I have travelled Prince Edward Island extensively and I have been meeting with and listening to Islanders.

What I have heard has been a collective plea from Islanders that this mental health crisis that we're experiencing here on PEI would finally receive the urgent and immediate attention that it certainly deserves.

Replacement of Hillsborough Hospital

My question to the Premier: Premier, when will the aging Hillsborough Hospital finally be replaced with a modern mental health campus?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Mr. Speaker, I thank the Leader of the Opposition for the question.

We were in this Chamber yesterday and heard, in the Speech From the Throne, a firm indication that the development and design of mental health campus to observe Islanders to meet pressing needs to come up with 21st Century solutions to concerns and challenges in the health system and with mental health, will be addressed through that facility. I look forward to hearing more about that in the course of this session.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: Hon. Leader of the Opposition, a reminder to everybody, which I forgot earlier, I do have the stopwatch; 40 seconds. It's not a prop.

Go ahead, the hon. Leader of the Opposition.

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

What I hear from Islanders is that we need action now. Action now for better access to mental health services, this is something our caucus has been advocating for, for years.

Again, question to the Premier: Why haven't you shown leadership as Premier and demanded a quicker timeline for replacing the Hillsborough Hospital with a mental health campus?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Mr. Speaker, our government takes entirely seriously all of the ways in which we, as a province, are called on to serve the needs and mental health. Indeed, it is the number one priority for our government. I believe that's true in this Assembly and working with community partners and professionals in the health care system across the province.

We, indeed, and I repeat; it's front and centre in the throne speech of yesterday. I think that's a pretty good indication of exactly the priority that our government gives.

We look forward to the resources and the efforts and the design and the new campus facility being developed as a top priority.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

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

Moving fast wasn't an issue for this Premier this past winter when he tried to close rural schools. Moving fast wasn't an issue for this Premier while he started paving fields out in farmers' fields out in Cornwall.

Government was told in 2013 that the Hillsborough Hospital needed replacing.

Again, I say: enough of the studies. Enough of the lectures, we need action now.

Again, question to the Premier: After 10 years in office, how is it that replacing the Hillsborough Hospital only warrants three sentences in your throne speech when we have a serious mental health issue here on PEI?

Mr. Myers: Good question.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Mr. Speaker, the work that is underway, and that will be further brought forward through the Capital Budget that we will hear very early in this session. Indeed, will be one of the high points of our work and then our consideration as an Assembly in this session, in this sitting, will indeed be an opportunity to see further, the priority, the resources, the commitment and the opportunity.

Let me say, the opportunity to develop and to design 21st Century services that reflect the needs of Islanders, the talents of our workforce in the health care system and the collaboration with communities and with people who care about mental health throughout Prince Edward Island.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

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

It's obvious that this Premier hasn't been listening to Islanders. It's obvious that this Premier hasn't been sitting down and talking to health care professionals and listening to the issues that are out there.

You know what? I have been listening. Our entire caucus has been listening. What they're telling us is about the long wait times for help because of staff shortages. They're telling us about staff burnout from trying to plug huge holes in the systems.

They're telling us that we need to have a better job of finding and keeping mental health professionals here on PEI.

Mental health campus and health care professionals

Again, a question to the Premier: Will you commit here, today, that the new mental health campus will have the teaching hospital component to help recruit and retain health care professionals?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

We've got great leadership in the professional team that provides mental health services to Prince Edward Island.

Indeed, they have, under the leadership of Dr. Heather Keizer, developed a plan that has been presented here in committee that would, indeed, see the evolution of a team that would be committed, that would have an expertise where professionals would locate and want to be, would have a desire that Prince Edward Island become a destination for health professionals.

Let me say, that in addition to that, and I think it's very important to see it in its fullness – we committed in our spring Budget, our operating Budget, 35 million extra dollars for health care, the largest increase in more than 10 years.

With those resources, we are already rolling out and developing in a collaborative way, effective programs to serve the mental health needs of Prince Edward Islanders.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

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

Not only does this Premier have a hard time following the direction and listening to Islanders, he doesn't seem to be able to follow your instructions, either because I

don't think he has kept it under 40 seconds yet, this afternoon –

Ms. Biggar: (Indistinct)

An Hon. Member: (Indistinct)

Leader of the Opposition: – having a –

Ms. Biggar: (Indistinct) that.

Leader of the Opposition: – teaching hospital –

Speaker: Carry on, hon. Leader of the Opposition.

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

Having a teaching hospital component in our mental health services will help recruit and retain skilled workers and for once, we can show leadership on this file here on PEI.

I think that this crisis, actually, is an opportunity to take a leap forward. When it comes to mental health services, why is this government shying away when they could be showing true leadership?

I think, I believe, it's time that we listen and we act.

Mental health crisis on PEI

Again, question to the Premier: Why is your government so reluctant to think outside of the box about addressing the Island's mental health crisis?

Mr. Myers: Good question.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Myers: There's a leadership (Indistinct)

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

An Hon. Member: Oh!

Mr. Myers: Tuck and roll.

Mr. Henderson: Thanks very much, Mr. Speaker.

Indeed, as the hon. Premier mentioned

earlier, mental health is a high priority for myself, as minister, as well as ourselves, in government.

Obviously, in the throne speech we've made a significant announcement by stating that we're going to do a – develop the concept of a mental health campus, and I think that's the –

An Hon. Member: Concept.

Mr. Henderson: – the key in that is that we're developing this and we're hiring professionals to develop, to meet the demands and changing needs of mental health as we move forward. This isn't all about institutionalizing individuals with mental health, it's about trying to provide them the potential services so they can reintegrate and be productive in our community in Prince Edward Island, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

An Hon. Member: Great answer.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

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

It was great to see the minister of health up on his feet and talk about how in-depth their conversation in the throne speech was, but I'd like to bring it back to him again.

Three sentences in the entire speech about one of the most serious issues facing Islanders here today.

I think we have a chance to build on our postsecondary institutions to help meet the challenge and leverage world-class research here on PEI with regards to mental health.

It would appear that the Premier and the health minister lack vision and leadership to do what is right for Islanders.

Mental health campus and health care professionals (further)

So, again, to the Premier: Premier, will you commit here today to engaging postsecondary institutions about developing

a mental health cluster focused on research and training here on Prince Edward Island?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Myers: Good question.

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Mr. Myers: (Indistinct) leadership; Tories showing the way.

Premier MacLauchlan: Mr. Speaker, the services that have been developed and implemented, even since this House met, are a great example of the commitment and the resources and the concern that we have as a government for mental health in our province. I would point to the extension and the opening of clinics now in five communities in our province that are open seven days a week that have served more than 500 Prince Edward Islanders in that time.

We can look, as has been pointed out, at the work that's being done to develop the mental health campus. We can look at the work that is being done – and this has been developed, really, in the last two months – for the student wellbeing teams that are serving students in two school families, soon to become all of the families of schools, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Georgetown-St. Peters.

Mr. Myers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I want to thank the Leader of the Opposition for showing leadership on this file. It's long-needed leadership on this file.

Ms. Biggar: (Indistinct).

Mr. Myers: The article from *The Guardian* today proves that this government isn't taking mental health seriously.

Premier, your own minister has refused to call this current situation a crisis.

A question to the Premier: If a third of the police force didn't show up to work on any given day and crime rates increased, would you call that a crisis?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Mr. Speaker, if we had that level of need in the police force and we had the resources, we would recruit, and that is exactly what we are doing in the area of psychiatry and psychology. We are also building multidisciplinary teams that are acting in a positive and a timely way to build confidence, to serve the needs of Prince Edward Islanders, and we have confidence in the health professional team and the community partners that are responding to the mental health needs in this province, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Georgetown-St. Peters.

Mr. Myers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

This Premier fails to understand that he's a third short in the complement, and for 10 years services have been eroded under the people who require them, who need them on a daily basis.

Go back to the Premier again: If we only had a third of the plows – if a third of the plows weren't on the roads after a major blizzard here on Prince Edward Island, and people we stuck in their homes for days and days on end, would you consider that a crisis?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Henderson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I think the realities are – is that yes we have a shortage of psychiatry no different than many other jurisdictions across this country that are facing, but the reality is we're doing some really good work here. We have Dr.

Keizer, Verna Ryan; they've been putting together a plan, and that plan has been unfolding here as we speak.

To the point, we had identified that there may be some significant challenges over the coming months until we can get these position filled, but our recruitment and retention department have been doing great work. And, in fact, we have two letters of offer signed for doctors to psychiatry, and we also have two locums, so we're very confident that once we can get through this phase we're going to be able to provide the services Islanders need.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Georgetown-St. Peters.

Mr. Myers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

This government has not taken this file seriously at all. Services have been eroded under the people who needed them for years and years. There's been zero leadership in this file for 10 years.

Question again to the Premier: If there was a physical illness or a flu that compromised the quality of life of Islanders, similar to how mental health has impacted Island families, would you consider it a crisis?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I said in my response to the leader of the official opposition that this is our number one priority as a government across the whole spectrum of health care and health services in this province, and indeed, we're taking it seriously. We're putting the resources in place, we're putting new initiatives in place.

If I may relate it to my own department, we have the STRENGTH program that's been in operation for two years, a great success. It's diverting people who would otherwise be going to the mainland. We've got the opiate action plan, and we've got the opiate replacement plan. Those are examples.

There are many others, and we're glad to have the opportunity in the course of this session to remind Islanders and remind all the members of this House, that it is a priority to deal with mental health, and we are dealing with it.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Georgetown-St. Peters.

Mr. Myers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

As the Leader of the Opposition pointed out, three sentences in the Speech From the Throne. I sat here for nearly 40 minutes listening to a speech yesterday, and three sentences, so how is that your number one priority when you're only willing to put three sentences in?

You're becoming a joke. You're becoming a joke to all Prince Edward Island.

Your fast, but when you wanted schools closed, you had no problem fast-tracking that. Nobody had time to do anything, no, you were fast-tracking that so quick.

Mental health crisis on PEI

Why do you continue to stigmatize mental illness on Prince Edward Island by refusing to give mental health the action that it needs?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Henderson: Mr. Speaker, I know the hon. member is referring to as the throne speech, but I can tell you that my department, myself as minister and Heather Keizer and Verna Ryan, we presented on the floor of this Legislature to a Standing Committee on Health and Wellness for four hours answering questions and highlighting and outlining our plan –

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Henderson: – for mental health and services that we provided to Islanders, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Morell-Mermaid.

Lack of coverage for psychiatric care

Mr. MacEwen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The minister's right, he was here for four hours. And do you know what? He refused to call it a crisis. He absolutely refused to do that.

Today it's been revealed that the QEH and Hillsborough Hospital have had gaps in psychiatric care; days where there's simply no coverage. It's my understanding that this gap in coverage started September 29th. There was four shifts in October that weren't covered, and there could be eight shifts in November that aren't covered. We've seen this crisis coming for months if not years.

What did you do to plan for this ordeal and this lack of coverage?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Henderson: Mr. Speaker, as Minister of Health and Wellness, it's my responsibility to uphold the values of patient safety. In this particular case we do have a few shifts that we aren't able to cover with the psychiatric situation, so we have basically made some decisions to not fill those particular beds. I think it's very important that we reiterate: It's important that we still have services here to deliver for Islanders who require mental health services and needs, and it is important that we deliver patient safety as the utmost importance.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Morell-Mermaid.

Mr. MacEwen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Minister, if patient safety was of the utmost importance, why did we not have a plan in place to deal with these gaps?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Henderson: Hon. member, we do have a plan in place. In fact, we were here for four hours unfolding some of that plan as we unfold the opportunity to develop a mental health campus in the Hillsborough Hospital. We've got a whole myriad of programs from our behavioral support teams. We have our student wellbeing teams. All of those are developing a plan to service the needs of Islanders, as well as to continue recruiting very hard to fill those vacant positions.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Morell-Mermaid.

Mr. MacEwen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Now we hear that we're closing beds in Unit 9 to deal with this. We also have people who are presenting to the ER who need psychiatric care.

Minister, how is this not a crisis and what are you doing to deal with this?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Henderson: Mr. Speaker, I think it's very important to reiterate to the opposition, as well as other members in the House, when you define terms and use words like crisis, it can precipitate an opinion by different professionals out there.

If you're trying to recruit psychiatrists and health professionals in Prince Edward Island, calling the situation a crisis doesn't enhance our recruiting efforts. If it's a situation where some Islanders may feel that they're not able to access the particular services that they require in their mental health situation, they may not be able to –

we still have two thirds of our capacity here to deliver psychiatry in this province and we'll do our very best to make sure we're seeing the needs of all Islanders, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Morell-Mermaid.

Mr. MacEwen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I'll tell you who thinks it's a crisis: The province's chief of mental health and addiction services has raised the alarm over emergency rooms. Our new leader has been talking about this for years. Psychiatrists are now going public. We've had patients and frontline workers saying this for years: that they think it's a crisis.

When will you and this government come up with a plan to help things improve?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Henderson: Mr. Speaker, indeed we have a plan to help improve the situation and we do see situations where we're going to be able to fill some positions, both with locums and as well with full-time positions coming forward.

I mentioned earlier that we have four positions that people have signed letters of offer. They're working through their papers of immigration and things of that nature and once they're here, I'm sure we'll be able to deliver services in a more timely fashion to what Islanders expect.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Morell-Mermaid.

Mr. MacEwen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, let me read you a few quotes here – one from the minister: I think 'crisis' is a strong word. That's on October 4th.

May 17th, he disagreed that the system is at crisis levels: I think that's probably a little elaborate. He said – that was May 17th.

Back in November of 2013, the former minister admits that access is an issue, but there's no plan to add more psychiatrists right now. Minister, it's time to stop talking and it's time to start acting.

How much longer are we going to keep saying that: No, there's not a crisis – and we're going to keep downplaying this issue?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Henderson: Like I said, Mr. Speaker, this is my number one priority as minister. We're working very hard. We've got some very professional staff. I have to give tremendous credit to our recruiting and retention section within our department. They have found physicians, both locums and others. We're implementing some of the initiatives around tele-psychiatry, some of those initiatives, and, once again, I've had the opportunity to talk to many of my colleagues across the country. They are also facing these same challenges.

We're going to do our very best to compete. I've even asked our recruiting/retention division to make sure that they can look at our salary and compensation, to make sure that's all up to standards, Mr. Speaker.

We are doing everything we possibly can to make sure that we can fill this void.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Third Party.

Resignations and retirements of psychiatrists

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

There's been a lot of talk about number one priorities today. The Premier talks of mental health as the number one priority in the health file. The minister himself has talked about: this is a number one priority. The

opposition has asked nothing but questions on mental health and it will also be the first question from the Leader of the Third Party.

When asked at a recent standing committee, the four hour committee, the minister has already referred to a couple of times in his answers. Dr. Keizer said this, she said: I don't want to be indelicate about that – when she was asked about the departure of psychiatrists – I don't want to be indelicate about that. Those who have exited have exited in response to a performance review.

A question to the hon. Minister of Health and Wellness: Can you please clarify what Dr. Keizer meant with those words?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Henderson: Mr. Speaker, in regards to the staff that we do have a chance to recruit, if they happen to have a situation where they have foreign credentials, they have to go through the College of Physicians to determine that their credentials are valid and they're able to provide the level of service that meets the standards in Canada here and on Prince Edward Island. I guess in those particular cases, the situation was they didn't meet the standards and they weren't able to get their credentials to be affiliated here for Prince Edward Island on a full-time basis.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

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

At the same meeting, the hon. Leader of the Opposition said this: I can understand that if something happens in a performance review, then maybe that individual isn't a candidate for retention.

To which Dr. Keizer responded: Correct.

My interpretation of that exchange is that Health PEI actively encouraged the departure of those psychiatrists.

A question to the minister: Were the performance concerns so significant that Health PEI felt the physicians were putting

patients at greater risk than having no psychiatrist at all?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Henderson: One of the things, Mr. Speaker, that I want to make sure that this House realizes is that it's not my responsibility as minister of health to determine the credentials of an individual. They have to adhere to a college, there's a College of Physicians and Surgeons of Prince Edward Island, and they also have to adhere to the performance reviews by our medical director in charge of psychiatry.

So once again, if the credentials aren't valid or approved by the PEI college of physicians, they have to take the appropriate action at that point.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Dr. Bevan-Baker: My suspicion is that these psychiatrists that who were here, currently working, must have had the credentials that they require to be licensed here on Prince Edward Island, or they wouldn't have been working in the first place.

In this morning's *The Guardian*, Dr. Rob Jay was quoted as saying this: There is nothing that is working properly in this system. We probably need double the number of psychiatrists that we have.

Again, to the minister of health: Could you explain to me Health PEI's rationale for encouraging qualified psychiatrists to resign or retire without having replacements lined up and thus putting patients and medical staff at extraordinary risk?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Henderson: I would hope the hon. Leader of the Third Party takes patient safety as a high degree of importance here in

this province, Mr. Speaker, and we want to make sure that all the health professionals that are delivering services to Islanders that are delivering it in the standards that are pertaining to the particular profession. In that particular case, it's not my responsibility to determine which is more important.

Either the individual meets the standards, or they do not and it's the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Prince Edward Island that would determine those standards, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Concussions in hockey

Ms. Casey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

My question today is to the hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Minister, recently hockey hall of famer, the honourable Ken Dryden, was in Charlottetown to discuss the seriousness of concussions in hockey. Although he wrote the book *Game Changer* after the death of NHL player Steve Montador, Ken Dryden genuinely cares about what is happening to young players who get a concussion, what their life is like following this brain injury, and how this brain injury can be prevented.

Minister: Has there been discussion around the ministers responsible for sport table about concussions in amateur sport and what can we do to prevent life-altering brain injuries for young athletes?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Henderson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Concussions are becoming a very serious issue, especially with competitive sports and combative sports as well.

I was at the national ministers of sport meeting in Winnipeg during the Canada Games and we are talking about trying to make sure that we can put together a national strategy to raise awareness for

parents, coaches, and athletes on concussion treatment. I think the key component of our discussion was to make sure that all our provinces are following the similar and comparable protocols when it comes to determining baseline information for concussions.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Ms. Casey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Minister, Ontario is the first province in Canada to adopt legislation called *Rowan's Law Advisory Committee Act* to provide advice to government with respect to head injury prevention and treatment. Other provinces are following Ontario's lead.

Is this something Prince Edward Island will be doing to protect our amateur athletes?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Henderson: Mr. Speaker, currently our department is working with a number of our combative sporting organizations in the province and we're really opening up a line of communication to look at the particular subject of making sure that we get the baseline information that may be required so we can determine where concussion protocols should be at.

Right at the moment, we're still waiting for some feedback from some of our national sporting organizations who, once again, those provincial organizations want to be comparable in their standards and views when it comes to such a serious matter, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Ms. Casey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Minister, when you received the information from your counterparts in sport departments across the country, would your department be hosting a round-table discussion with

sport organizations, medical professionals, researchers, athletes, educators, and parents to help ensure we all know more about head injuries and concussions; how we can prevent them; how we can identify them, and what we can do about them?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Henderson: Mr. Speaker, as many may or may not be aware that we have developed in 2016 a trauma PEI organization and that organization is working with individuals that have been affected by sports trauma and other head injuries as well.

We're wanting to make sure that they play a role in that. There are discussions already ongoing and I certainly would be open to greater and further discussions around how we deal with this important issue.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Summerside-Wilmot.

Mr. Palmer: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Humble Barber liquor license

My question is for the Minister of Finance.

The Humble Barber has requested to responsibly serve alcohol to customers in his business, similar to how a spa would today. The Humble Barber has locations in Summerside and Charlottetown. Last spring, a comprehensive review was announced to allow the liquor control commission to modernize the act.

Minister: Can you provide the House with an update on the modernization of the act?

Mr. R. Brown: Good question.

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Mr. Roach: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

With respect to The Humble Barber and wanting to have that license, we have advised LCC to look into that. In fact, the process started last spring. It's moving along very well. We've gone out and had contact with a number of different organizations that

have an interest in this and I expect that this will continue over the next number of months, at which time we'll be looking at any changes that we might be able to make in our legislation.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Summerside-Wilmot, your first supplementary.

Mr. Palmer: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Minister: Do you have a timeline on when we will see this modernized act?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Mr. Roach: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

This act really hasn't been looked at thoroughly in a long time and the process is ongoing now. I hope that probably within the next six to nine months that we'll have it completed to ensure that everybody has the opportunity to have their say with respect to it.

As a matter of fact, just recently Restaurants Canada – they travel across Canada and they look at the issuance of licenses – they've given Prince Edward Island a B, second highest in the country with respect to the way our liquor control commissions are run. They've also commented on the fact and recognized that we are looking at legislation to reduce red tape and make it a lot easier for those that are out there in the public (Indistinct)

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. R. Brown: Excellent (Indistinct)

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Kensington-Malpeque.

Large-scale irrigation ponds

Mr. MacKay: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Question to the environment minister: What is your policy on large-scale irrigation ponds?

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

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

Over the last number of years, farmers in the agriculture sector have made use of the practice of irrigation holding ponds. They are usually located in the field for collection of natural runoff and snow melt. In some cases, they top them up from some water supply.

Over the last number of months members of my staff and members of the staff from the department of agriculture have worked with farmers with recommendations on how these ponds can be constructed and built, and maintain things that are aren't a problem, such as leaking and evaporation, and I think there are various ponds that are located all across the province.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Kensington-Malpeque.

Mr. MacKay: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I've been getting a lot of calls from residents concerned about a series of large-scale irrigation ponds being built in my area.

Question to the environment minister: Are you familiar with this development?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Mr. Mitchell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

As I said, yes we are aware that the holding ponds, irrigation ponds, are all across Prince Edward Island. As I said, we work along with those farmers to help them come up with ways that they can construct them to the most efficient manners. Those are recommendations. They're not regulations and we work with farmers every day to come up with best practices they can use.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Kensington-Malpeque.

Mr. MacKay: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Over the last two years, there have been a series of developments of these irrigation ponds, each one bigger than the last.

Question to the environment minister: What licenses, permits or approvals were required from you, as minister, before these large-scale irrigation ponds were built?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The Minister of Communities, Land and Environment.

Mr. Mitchell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Currently, there are no licensing methods that are needed for a holding pond. There are no permitting for the drilling of low-capacity wells.

I would like to mention that when the new Water Act comes into force there will indeed be a need for permitting for wells that may be used to feed these holding ponds, or any other agriculture purpose. It is important –

Mr. Myers: We figured that out. So did everyone else.

Mr. Mitchell: It is important that Islanders know where water withdrawals are occurring, and things of this nature, and of others, will be a very important part of the Water Act moving forward so that we can identify and publicly, and transparently, show Islanders where water is being withdrawn and used all across the province.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Kensington-Malpeque.

Public information meetings re: ponds

Mr. MacKay: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

There's a lot of confusion about this in the community from residents who feel they're in the dark about what's going on.

Question to the environment minister: Was there any requirement to hold a public information meeting for the community before these ponds were built?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Mr. Mitchell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

As I said, there is no licensing. There are no regulations. There are no permits that are needed for the holding ponds. There are other practices the farmers use on their own farms and they do not hold public meetings on those as well.

So, as we move forward the Water Act will certainly highlight that permitting is needed. If there is a pond that is going to be fed from a water supply, those levels will be online so that all Islanders can see, and every pond will be noted where they are across the province.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Kensington-Malpeque.

Mr. MacKay: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Question to the environment minister: Do you think there should have been a public meeting held to put your cards on the table before these irrigation ponds were built?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Mr. Mitchell: As I said, Mr. Speaker, there are all kinds of practices that go on on farms every day, whether it could be clearing land, whether it could be the growing of crops. They don't hold public meetings on things of that nature. There is no mechanism for a public meeting regarding a holding pond.

But as I said, as we move forward with the Water Act, there will be permitting

requirements involved and farmers – we'll be working with them, support them when they need to drill a well of any nature so that what they're going to use for withdrawal levels are recorded and it will become part of the big parcel of how the Water Act will move forward in PEI.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Kensington-Malpeque.

Mr. MacKay: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

So no approvals were needed and no public information session was held. Now people are seeing industrial irrigation ponds built that are basically man-made lakes powered by dozens of well pumps.

Question to the environment minister: Is there anything in your much-delayed Water Act that would deal with this type of situation?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

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

I will be very pleased when we are able to get the Water Act completed and brought to the floor of the Legislature.

Mr. Fox: It's not completed yet?

Mr. Mitchell: The purpose of the Water Act is to protect the quality and quantity of our water.

As we move forward with this new Water Act; the first time for Prince Edward Island where the policies in place to protect our water, its extraction levels and where it's being used on PEI. Water supplies that are now being used to feed irrigation ponds or holding ponds, will all need to be permitted, and that's for the ones moving forward and the ones that are in existence today. We will have a really good control and handle on where water withdrawals are happening across the province.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Kensington-Malpeque.

Mr. MacKay: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

To a lot of people in my district it looks like a loophole has been exploited.

Question to the environment minister: Do you think that projects like this are skirting the spirit of what's trying to be accomplished with the Water Act?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

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

As I said earlier, any wells that are being drilled in the future will need a permit, but those that are in existence will also need a permit. So as far as skirting any of the laws or policies that will be coming forward, that would not be possible. All of those wells will be permitted. We will know where they are. They will be documented. They will be put online for all Islanders to see.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Kensington-Malpeque.

Wells drilled for irrigation ponds

Mr. MacKay: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some of the calls I've been getting on this are saying that these irrigation ponds are being powered by as many as 30 wells that are basically going at all times.

Question to the environment minister: Can you confirm how many wells were drilled to power these irrigation ponds in Spring Valley? Is it more or less than 30?

Mr. Trivers: Good question.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Mr. Mitchell: Mr. Speaker, unlike the hon. member from across the floor. I do not think members of our farming industry are trying to find loopholes –

Some Hon. Members: Oh! Oh!

Mr. Mitchell: – and ways of skirting what's going on in Prince Edward Island.

They are very good stewards of the land –

Leader of the Opposition: More or less?

Mr. Mitchell: – they are trying to grow crops. They are trying to run businesses. They want to be part of how water is protected and how we are watching it in the future.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Kensington-Malpeque, final question.

Mr. MacKay: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Folks in my area are calling these ponds manmade lakes because they're so big. All the secrecy around this development has some people asking me if this is why the government keeps delaying the Water Act.

Question to the environment minister: Is part of the reason for all the delays in the Water Act to give a chance for some of these farms to get these irrigation ponds before the act comes in?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Mr. Mitchell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

It certainly – I don't buy into this sinister plan that the hon. member brings from across the floor. The Water Act is a significant piece of legislation of Prince Edward Island –

Mr. Fox: How many wells per pond?

Mr. Mitchell: It's a piece of legislation that has been asked for by Islanders for a number of years now.

We are taking our due time and due diligence to do this thing right. As we brought our recommendations across PEI for the second round of consultations, we were brought new ideas; new methods from the first round that we wanted to incorporate. We wanted to take our time, fully, and we wanted to have the very best legislation we can have.

When we do have that and it's all in place we will bring it to the floor of the Legislature. Hopefully, that will be in the very near future, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

[End of Question Period]