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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
OF
PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND

RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS AND ORAL QUESTION PERIOD
(PRELIMINARY PROCEEDINGS)

FOR

THURSDAY, 30 NOVEMBER 2017

Responses to Questions Taken as Notice

Questions by Members

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Working for betterment of PEI

Leader of the Opposition: Mr. Speaker, first question is to the Premier: Premier, are you genuinely committed to working collaboratively across party lines for the betterment of PEI?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Mr. Speaker, when we had an election in 2015, we were heard all across the province talking about: let's work together and that's what we've been doing and that's why the province is doing so well and we're proud of it.

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.

In November of 2002, the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights adopted general comment No. 15 on the right to water. Article 1.1 states: The human right to water is indispensable for leading a life in human dignity. It is a prerequisite for the realization of other human rights. Comment 15 also defined the right to water as: the right of everyone to sufficient, safe, acceptable, and physically accessible, and affordable water for personal and domestic uses.

Water Act and comments within UN declaration

Question to the Premier: Do you share my concerns that the *Water Act*, as it currently stands, does not meet the general comments within the UN declaration?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Mr. Speaker, I'm proud of the bill that's been tabled and that's on the floor here for consideration. It's been worked on for upwards of two years, with extensive involvement by the Environmental Advisory Council. There's been a lot of work gone into this – great respect for the work that the minister and department have done on it and it's the first time this province will have a *Water Act* and we are definitely happy to see what is included in that act.

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.

The *Water Act* has been called the most important act for our province. I would have to agree with that. Our caucus, the Third Party, and many Islanders have expressed concerns around gaps in this act.

Loopholes in *Water Act*

Premier: Why has this act come to the floor with what many Islanders view as loopholes and leave so much to Cabinet regulations?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Mr. Speaker, it's not unusual in legislation for there to be provision for what might be considered supplementary action and to do that by regulation and indeed to have that spelled out as fully as it is in the bill.

Let me say that this bill reflects the work and the input and the extensive consultation with many Islanders who do care about water and we're proud to be bringing this forward.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Leader of the Opposition: The *Water Act* gives very large wiggle room to Cabinet to override concerns in the act behind closed Cabinet doors, such as fracking.

Question again to the Premier: Do you share the concerns that many people, including myself, have around these yet to be written regulations?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Mr. Speaker, it's been clear in the development of the bill that the public has a great interest and a part to play and a contribution to make in developing and advancing our work together to protect our Island water and to ensure that we live up to the responsibilities that are spelled out in the purpose section of the bill and through its many provisions. It's been very clear that the work that is done subsequent to the bill or further to the bill in making regulation will also have that element of public engagement.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Leader of the Opposition: Mr. Speaker, these regulations have yet to be written and are not planned to come forward until late next year. The Premier just said that he is in agreement to work collaboratively with everyone. So, in the spirit of cooperation and to ensure these regulations reflect the wishes of all Islanders, I propose that a special standing committee of equal membership across all parties be struck off of them.

Request for *Water Act* regulations committee

Premier, will you agree with me and strike the special *Water Act* regulations committee?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

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

I'm certainly pleased to talk about the *Water Act* in Question Period today, as I was yesterday during Committee of the Whole House. This *Water Act* has been a collaborative production of work from Islanders all across our wonderful province for the last two and a half years in very open, very informative, very passionate discussion.

Obviously, as was stated this morning on CBC by Catherine O'Brien who is the chair of the PEI water coalition, she feels the act has a lot of very good parts to it, which came to be because of the input from the water coalition – because of the input from Islanders from tip-to-tip. This is a very passionate piece of work and we will work with them on regulation moving forward.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

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

My proposal – this multiparty, equal committee would have authority and independence to craft regulations and hear directly from all Islanders, working in conjunction with the Environmental Advisory Council. The issue of access to water and protecting our water resource affects and concerns all of us.

Again to the Premier: Will you join with me and appoint a multiparty, equal committee to lead an open and innovative process to write the *Water Act* regulations?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Mr. Mitchell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

As I said earlier today and yesterday during Committee of the Whole House, as we move forward in the future with the development

of the regulation for our *Water Act* pieces, certainly this is another piece of work that's open to 152,000 Islanders, it's open to all parties of political stripe across Prince Edward Island and I encourage and I hope that all members of this Legislature will be present at each and every one of those meetings to put forward their input, to put forward their vision of how they can help to aid the protection of our water on 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, Mr. Speaker.

I know that meaningful two-way dialogues is the foundation for good public policy. There was much consultation that occurred for this act and I'm proposing an innovative approach to foster the strengths of our people to craft regulations in an open way – two members from each caucus in this Legislature, a standing committee working with the Environmental Advisory Council.

Again to the Premier: Will you act on working collaboratively and strike a balanced all-party committee to write the *Water Act* regulations?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Mr. Mitchell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I have committed as minister to go out across Prince Edward Island once again to have open and public consultation, to have online submissions, to have written letters brought forward as to how regulations should be on Prince Edward Island.

I heard this morning that in Nova Scotia just yesterday, there was some non-governmental organizations that were asking the Nova Scotia government to look at Prince Edward Island's new *Water Act* as a process that they would love to see being formed this week in legislation in Nova

Scotia. So, we're very proud of that as the department. We all should also be very proud of that as a province and I can assure you that this work will continue on Prince Edward Island to the best of its possibility in a positive way.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

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

Again, I go back to the Premier. I've asked him several questions now and he hasn't responded.

I'm asking the Premier: Will you support my initiative to put a special standing committee together to write the regulations for the *Water Act*. Question to the Premier.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Mr. Speaker, the bill that is on the floor has extensive provision and detailed provision for the law that will apply to and protect and enable Prince Edward Islanders to have confidence in the approach that is taken to water in our province. It is not surprising that such a bill would include an ability or a capacity through time and with consultation and with the benefit of further evidence in science to perfect that regime through regulations and we do that in many provisions that come to this floor.

In this case we're going to do that with the input and the consultation and the engagement of Prince Edward Islanders, and we welcome every member of this Legislature to take part in that.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

All-party committee and Water Act regulations

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

Well, this balanced all-party committee could be supported by technical government staff alongside Islanders from all walks of life and the Environmental Advisory Council.

Can the Premier give his reasoning for not agreeing to a balanced all-party committee writing the *Water Act* regulations?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Mr. Mitchell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

What I could commit to as minister – I would certainly keep the first 27 chairs open for all members of this Legislature to be present, to hear from Islanders all across PEI, how they feel. This process has been a wonderful process thus far –

Mr. Myers: (Indistinct)

Mr. Mitchell: – how the next part where we build –

Mr. Myers: (Indistinct) sit and smile but no help –

Mr. Mitchell: – regulation will be brought forward in the exact –

Mr. Myers: Be a good student.

Mr. Mitchell: – same collaborative, productive way and we will give everybody ample time to have their say –

Mr. Myers: (Indistinct)

Mr. Mitchell: – when we move forward for public meetings.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Rustico-Emerald.

Lands Protection Act, PEI being followed properly

Mr. Trivers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The *Lands Protection Act, PEI* is one of the most important laws passed by the Legislature since Confederation. Our small size and unique history, including absentee landlords, have made generations of Islanders passionate about issues of landownership and land use.

Question to the Minister of Communities, Land and Environment: Do you think that the *Lands Protection Act, PEI* is being followed properly?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Mr. Mitchell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Earlier in the member's statement at the first as we opened today, he spoke of a couple of very prominent Conservative members from this House who were very passionate about the *Lands Protection Act, PEI*. All members of this House are very passionate about it, but he forgot to mention one other important member of this Legislature that sat here: Horace Carver, who just back in 2013 put a very substantial report together on land-use protection.

He, himself, toured Prince Edward Island, talked to land owners, talked to Islanders about what they'd like to see. He put together a wonderful report on how land needs to be protected on Prince Edward Island and absentee landowners was one of the very valuable pieces that he made great advances on.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Spirit of Lands Protection Act, PEI being honoured

Speaker: The hon. Member from Rustico-Emerald.

Mr. Trivers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you, minister, for reminding us of Horace Carver and the great work he's done.

Recently, the Standing Committee on Communities, Land and Environment heard concerns around the growth in Island land that's controlled by off-Island corporations. This trend appears to be at least partially responsible for driving up the cost of farmland, making it harder for young farmers to get established.

Question to the minister: Do you feel that the spirit of the *Lands Protection Act, PEI* is being honoured?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Mr. Mitchell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Currently, all land holdings in Prince Edward Island by corporations and individuals are within their holding availability. I know the hon. member has, at committee, talked about sinister approaches. That's not going on in Prince Edward Island. IRAC is watching very carefully. We as a department are watching very carefully and there are a lot of great farmers moving to Prince Edward Island, forming new lives here on Prince Edward Island and moving forward with their agriculture businesses that they love to pursue right here in PEI.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Rustico-Emerald.

Large off-Island corporations exceeding land limits

Mr. Trivers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

We're not saying there's anything sinister going on. We're just hearing, and it's coming to our attention and I'm sure it's coming to your attention across the floor that large corporations seem to be exerting control over parcels of land that exceeds the limits in the *Lands Protection Act, PEI*.

Question to the minister: Just wondering, what work has been done by your department to identify the scale of this problem?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Mr. Mitchell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Any land transactions on Prince Edward Island go through the normal processes. If you're a corporation, the land purchases go through IRAC who do investigations when need be. That information comes back to us through Executive Council, and it's processed that way.

There's nobody on Prince Edward Island that wants to see their land used in any negative fashion. We, as a government, are of the same approach as that, but I can guarantee you that currently all land transactions, or all corporations, are within our land-holding limits on Prince Edward Island.

An Hon. Member: Wow.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Rustico-Emerald.

Land sign-off in Executive Council

Mr. Trivers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Indeed, Executive Council plays a very prominent role in looking at land purchases on Prince Edward Island. In fact, close to 60% of all Orders in Council decisions by Cabinet so far this year were land sale approvals under the *Lands Protection Act, PEI*. Now, it seems that there may be a problem here that needs to be given a hard look.

Question to the minister: When these purchases came to Cabinet for sign-off, are you discussing the larger policy issues here or are you really just looking at them on a case-by-case basis and stamping 'yes' or 'no'?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Mr. Mitchell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

We know that there is a certain influx to Prince Edward Island from people from other provinces and, indeed, globally people are moving to Prince Edward Island.

When you talk about land pricing and land values, transactions that have been occurring on Prince Edward Island are within fair market value prices. So, there's no land inflation, as was referenced earlier by the hon. member.

These transactions are occurring across Prince Edward Island. Fair market value prices are being obtained and in fact, people that want to retire from farming have opportunities to –

Mr. Henderson: (Indistinct) fair market value.

Mr. Mitchell: – get fair market value for their retirement plans and to have their farm remain in farmland.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Rustico-Emerald.

CLE and minister meeting with IRAC re: land purchases

Mr. Trivers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

As mentioned by the minister, the Island Regulatory and Appeals Commission play a big role when it comes to review and approval of land purchases on PEI.

A question to the minister: How many times in the last year have you and your department officials met with IRAC to discuss this issue?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Mr. Mitchell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Conversations between IRAC and my department occur all the time. When transactions are being done and they're coming towards us, they give us a call to

inform us of what's going on. These are things that, as a department, we are well aware of. We have them well in hand. We know that there are farmers that want to retire, and they should be able to sell their farms for fair market value to other farmers that are coming here from other areas.

Obviously, the member doesn't think that should be a normal practice. We feel it is, and we'll continue to work with IRAC and others in the community to help aid that process.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Rustico-Emerald.

Ownership and control re: Lands Protection Act, PEI

Mr. Trivers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Our Standing Committee on Communities, Land and Environment has invited three particular entities: Cavendish Farms; Vanco Farms; and the Greater Buddhist Enlightenment Society, really to come forward and to speak to concerns that loopholes in the *Lands Protection Act, PEI* that allow the scale of land, both owned and controlled, to be greater than the *Lands Protection Act, PEI* intends.

Question to the minister: What discussions have you had with these groups about concerns regarding ownership and control of more than intended by the *Lands Protection Act, PEI*?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Mr. Mitchell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Recently, I, myself, had the opportunity to attend the standing committee for discussion on this and we brought forward a lot of great information to the hon. member and the others of the committee.

When you look at entities that have land ownership on Prince Edward Island, and some of the entities are fairly new to the province, we work with them. We work with

them to establish here, to develop their communities. You can look at the Amish community who came in a substantive way over the last number of years, and we continue to work with groups like this and communities like this to make our province a better place, a stronger place with good vision into the future, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Rustico-Emerald.

Mr. Trivers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

That's why we feel it's so important for these entities, really, to come forward to the standing committee and have their say and discuss this issue. It's really about working together and being cooperative, and really getting to the bottom of these issues that Islanders are raising.

As the price of farmland continues to rise, and it is rising, and it's good because farmers are getting good value for their land, but farms are also becoming larger and larger and that means when the young farmers want to purchase land they also have to put large down payments down, often in the range of 40% of the value of the land, and it becomes harder for young farmers to buy land and get into the business. Left unchecked, this trend could imperil the sustainability of many family farms on the Island that go back many generations.

Question to the minister: Has your government done any work to look at the impact that this trend is having on young farmers?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Mr. Mitchell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Certainly, I, as every member of this House, talks to young farmers all the time across Prince Edward Island.

I know, probably, maybe the best person to answer the very question when it comes to young farmers and obtaining financing to

get into the farming today, I know the minister of agriculture has a great program in place that just went into place not that long ago for young farmers to go in and get loans to begin to purchase for lands.

There's also talk about having land holdings that young farmers can get in there. There is a lot of work going on, on Prince Edward Island to help young farmers get started on Prince Edward Island because they are the lifeblood of the future of Prince Edward Island, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Rustico-Emerald.

Future of land ownership

Mr. Trivers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Really what we're hearing out there from Islanders is that people are concerned that more and more land is owned by non-residents. That means people that don't live on Prince Edward Island. More and more land is being owned by corporations that are headquartered off-Island.

Islanders are worried about what that means for the future of our Island. Really, I'm clear, whether, you know, the vision of the government across the way, it wants to see that happen or is that part of the vision?

I have a question for the Premier; I'm just wondering if you're comfortable with really digging in to some of the statistics that your government has access to and compiling reports to help us get to the bottom of this and figure out really what the future of our Island holds when it comes to land ownership.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Mr. Speaker, as the minister commented – indicated there was an extensive report done on this very question in 2013, work led with consultations all across Prince Edward Island by a former member of this Legislature, Horace Carver.

It's an excellent report. It's one that we've acted on. This is something that we're committed to and governments before us have been committed to in this Legislature. We believe Islanders are committed to, as the hon. member indicated in his earlier questions, going back into the 19th Century.

We're respectful of this. We believe in it. We intend to continue to live up to the act.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Third Party.

Government spend on outside legal services

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

On October 10th, I submitted a written question requesting that government provide the total dollars spent on outside legal services by government including; every public body, department, agency, board and commission. That was seven weeks ago and we still have not received an answer.

A question to the Attorney General: How much does government actually spend on outside legal services each year? Is it hundreds of thousands? Is it millions or do you even know?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Mr. Speaker, the staff in our department are, indeed, in the process of compiling the answer to the question that would – that was posed on October 10th, and that answer will come back.

Let me say, that it's something that we do on a basis of good judgment, on the basis of the leadership in legal services in the department of justice, and we believe that we are – where we are spending money, it's necessary to do that. We'll be happy to bring back the answer to the House.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Old fashioned patronage politics

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

In reviewing the list of donors who contributed over \$250 to the Liberal Party of Prince Edward Island during the 2015 election year, you will find that legal firms or individual lawyers contributed over \$78,000 directly to the Liberal Party.

I hope this isn't what the minister meant when he said, in response to an earlier question of mine, that the government has relationships with a number of outside law firms.

A question to the minister: How can you expect the public to believe that in the absence of rules, your government is not practicing old fashioned patronage politics?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Mr. Speaker, the lawyers, who do work for government are engaged on the basis of their expertise and they do the work that they're paid for. This is something that you don't get to predict or judge in advance.

We saw yesterday a criminal accused, then convicted who has appealed a murder conviction; is looking for legal aid. Government has to respond to that. Let me say, on the question of lawyers. I think if you went to the hospital foundations, if you went to the charities, if you went to the churches, you would find those same people contributing to their community and we should appreciate that.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

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

I was not bringing into question the integrity of the individuals.

Some Hon. Members: (Indistinct)

Oversight for future hiring of outside legal council

Dr. Bevan-Baker: During the spring 2017 sitting, I brought attention to the fact the hiring of outside legal services is exempt from Treasury Board's procurement policy and therefore not subject to any oversight at all.

At the time, I tabled the Nova Scotia policy and asked the Minister of Justice and Public Safety to review and adopt it. He responded: I will, indeed, review it and it's something that I will be happy to take under consideration.

A question to the minister: Will you be implementing a new policy that will provide appropriate oversight for the future hiring of outside legal counsel?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Mr. Speaker, let me not take that question as if we don't have appropriate oversight at the present time.

We have a director of our legal services, we have a Deputy Attorney General, we have senior civil servants who deal with these matters and make judgments and give advice as to when it's necessary to get outside counsel. I have entire respect for them. I have to say, whether the Leader of the Third Party meant to or not, about impugning the character of the character of the people that he was mentioning in the first part of his question, when you're talking about patronage.

These are professionals who are rendering a service. They're leaders in our community and we have great respect for them and for what they do professionally and as contributors to our community.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Waitlist for senior housing in Charlottetown area

Ms. Casey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

My question today is to the Minister of Family and Human Services: Minister, affordable housing has been a priority of mine since being elected. I'm very proud of the new Charlotte Court that was built during my first term.

Everyone is aware the waiting list for seniors housing across PEI has been growing with the majority of the waiting applicants desiring housing from the Charlottetown area including Charlottetown-Lewis Point.

Minister: How many applicants are currently on the waitlist for seniors housing, and specifically, how many of those are in the Charlottetown area?

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

Ms. Mundy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. member, thank you for that question. It is no surprise, you have been consistent and persistent in your request for seniors housing for your constituents.

Our Island has benefited immensely with the economic growth and the population growth. However, it has put pressures on certain parts of the Island, as well, Charlottetown being one of them.

As of October of this year, the seniors waitlist, tip-to-tip Island-wide sat at 634 waiting for placement and 296 of those were looking for, their first choice, as being Charlottetown.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Funding from National Housing Strategy

Ms. Casey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Minister, there have been many announcements regarding housing, like the 2016 federal budget and recently the federal government announced a National Housing Strategy. And, you in May of 2017

announced that some of this funding would be used to create new seniors housing in areas of most need.

Is any of this funding going to be used to help provide housing for the 296 applicants waiting for social housing in the Charlottetown area?

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

Ms. Mundy: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Another great question; not a day goes by that you aren't in my ear and asking me when that funding will be coming forward.

Today, hon. member, I can confirm to you that there will be funding going towards creating social housing in the Charlottetown area.

And, as with the Summerside announcement at the beginning of the week, we will be issuing RFPs in the next coming weeks for an additional 30 seniors units in the Charlottetown area.

We're looking forward to partnering with the municipalities, with the developers, with our NGO community and looking for more long-term solutions to housing on Prince Edward Island.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Ms. Casey: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Minister, that's great news. Having 50 new social housing units, I couldn't be more pleased, but what's going to happen to those who remain on the waiting list in the Charlottetown area?

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

Ms. Mundy: Thank you again.

Another great question, hon. member.

The federal funding – the social infrastructure funding that was announced in 2016 and committed by our government to going towards seniors' housing and 50 new units where the most need was, that was a bridge to bridge the gaps while we address longer-term issues.

So, it was to address current need – some of the current needs on Prince Edward Island while we put together our provincial strategy to address the longer-term needs. And as I said, we have already compiled a group of a co-design team that has already met. They are now going to be collaborating with the housing taskforce and they will be looking at innovative and new ways that we can address long-term housing needs on Prince Edward Island and we look forward to and anticipate the provincial housing strategy being complete by 2018.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Summerside-Wilmot.

Repatriation of skilled Islanders

Mr. Palmer: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

My question is for the Minister of Workforce and Advanced Learning. A skilled workforce is key to the province's economic growth. We need to ensure that businesses have access to skilled employees so they're able to grow and expand.

This government is also committed to growth of our population. Mr. Speaker, I know repatriation is a key component to prosperity in our province. If we have more jobs, we have more people paying taxes, which results in more funding available to things that we all know are important like health care, education, and support for seniors.

Minister: What is your department doing to get in contact with Islanders who are living away who possess skills needed in our workforce and would move back if offered an opportunity?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Mr. Gallant: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you, hon. member for the question.

I'd like to start off with, as many people in this House know, our population has increased greatly to 150,000 – the first time in history. In fact, it's 152,021 and we're well on target to meet our 160,000 by 2022. That being said, yes, I know there's more work that can be done as far as repatriation of Islanders and we're always looking for ways to do it. We work with the alumni –

Mr. Myers: (Indistinct)

Mr. Gallant: – of the post-secondary institutions to try and bring people back.

As we all know, most Islanders that are away have a piece of PEI with them and they'd like to come back so if we can do anything to reach out to them. We also do have Work PEI – has a website where we're trying to actively reach out to people.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Summerside-Wilmot.

Mr. Palmer: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I know running a business is hard work and we did not always spend enough time working on the growth of our business because we're caught in the day-to-day operations.

Mr. LaVie: (Indistinct)

Growing skills in local businesses

Mr. Palmer: Minister: How is your department working with local businesses to identify the skills they required to grow their business?

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

Mr. Gallant: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I know very well that this is quite an interest to the Member from Summerside-Wilmot and he's brought some ideas to our

department and we've talked about this in the past and we understand the importance of labour shortages in our business community and our department has worked thoroughly with them to help them expand and train new people. We've just got to talk about the aerospace industry at Holland College has turned out a lot of graduates to that. If we look at MacDougall Steel – there's been welders and pipefitters trained to do that type of work.

We've also expended into Team Seafood where people can get some experience in the seafood sector, construction sector, and trucking sector. The department is working very diligently to see what we can do and we've also reached out and formed a graduate mentorship program which helps students graduate and find a job in their field of studies.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: Member from Summerside-Wilmot.

Number of repatriated Islanders to workforce

Mr. Palmer: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Minister, you are correct. I am eager to identify Islanders living away and match them to opportunities based on their skill-sets so they can move back home.

Minister: Can you tell the House how many Islanders living away have moved home to new jobs based on the data your department retains?

Mr. Trivers: Great question.

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

Mr. R. Brown: Fasten your seatbelts.

Mr. Gallant: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

As I'd mentioned earlier, the department is working as hard as they can and through Skills PEI programs and different programs, we've had about 700 individuals working off-Island –

Mr. J. Brown: Great number.

Mr. Gallant: – connect with local businesses here –

Ms. Casey: Nice.

Mr. Gallant: – for opportunities. We have 19 individuals who came home and started new businesses. We look at the people that were out west – there’s about 3,200 people who migrated back to PEI –

Some Hon. Members: Wow.

Mr. Gallant: – is what statistics have shown. I look forward to working with all Islanders to create more work and bring Islanders back home.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Eastern Graphic headline re: amalgamation

Mr. Myers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

No one from this government seems to care about the unincorporated areas on Prince Edward Island except for us MLAs and the Leader of the Third Party.

Question to the Premier: Does the government believe that headline in *The Easter Graphic* that amalgamation is going ahead without ever hearing from unincorporated areas?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

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

As I begin today, I, too would like to welcome those to the public gallery that are from down in the unincorporated area of the workings of the new Three Rivers amalgamation area. I know many of you I’ve seen at a couple of open public meetings that were held in the region in the past month or so.

Certainly, I did witness democracy in action in a lot of forms in the last number of months. The Three Rivers group – the committee that has been working towards this – it’s driven from the community what’s going on down there. It’s not being driven from the department. It’s phenomenal the work that’s been done. I’d like to commend the steering committee on what they’ve done thus far and to those that were at the meetings and I watched democracy in progress as a petition was being signed.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Mr. Myers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The minister may not understand, but a petition is asking for democracy. It’s the part that you won’t give them, but we’ll get to that.

The question I had asked was whether or not you believe Paul MacNeill’s headline that said amalgamation was going to happen. You didn’t answer that either, which should scare anybody who’s following along today.

This petition that I have has 500 names on it, which is actually more than the number of people who have voted so far in any of the towns – something you should think about.

Question to the Premier: Why has your government put no thought into how you’re going to hear the voice of thousands of Islanders who live in unincorporated areas?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Mr. Mitchell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

As I said, this is being driven by a group that wants to see a bigger, sustainable region for that area of the province, and I commend them for that. As of Monday of this week, three of the municipalities that are involved in this process have had opinion poll surveys done. There was indication from those opinion polls that they want to move forward with this. So, there is a process to

this and I know the hon. Member knows that there's a process to this.

These councils now will take that forward after council meetings and determine if that's something they want to move forward with. There are still three municipalities that are trying to determine what method they will use. There is also the municipality of Georgetown, who I believe I've heard are having some discussion about this and when we get to the point where unincorporated areas – it's important that they are going to have their –

Mr. Trivers: (Indistinct)

Mr. Mitchell: – opportunity to have their say as well.

Mr. Trivers: (Indistinct)

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Plebiscite on Three Rivers amalgamation

Mr. Myers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I'm going to paraphrase for anybody who's following along. What the minister is basically saying is: The only people who have a voice so far are the towns, who have a council, and they're deciding, and they're going to decide whether or not it goes ahead and then, after they've all decided, we'll come back and talk to the unincorporated areas and what? Tell them it's a done deal and it's over? That is completely ridiculous and it's completely unacceptable.

Minister: Will you commit to holding a plebiscite?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Mr. Mitchell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The hon. Member knows that I was at the meeting and took to the mic and said from the mic: This amalgamation involves 7,700 people and I feel it's equally as important that all 7,700 get the information, get the

communication that's involved with this so they have a very good understanding of what this is about.

Mr. Trivers: Have a voice?

Mr. Mitchell: Mr. Speaker, this is about the virtues of a larger region. It's about building economic development, strong local voice –

Mr. LaVie: Give the people a voice. Give them a voice.

Mr. Mitchell: – better consistent land-use measures, funding improvements –

Mr. Myers: If you're not pushing it, why are you defending it?

Mr. Mitchell: – but most importantly, is sustainable futures for our children and their children. I think everybody should have the opportunity to hear about the virtues –

Mr. Trivers: Have a plebiscite.

Mr. Mitchell: – to discuss them openly and then have their say.

Absolutely, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Three Rivers amalgamation

Mr. Myers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Have their say how? Like, I asked him a simple question and he read speaking points from Paul MacNeill about the virtues of how this is going to work and how great it is for everyone. Yet, you don't want to hear from the people, let them tell you themselves whether or not it's great.

You were the one who told this House: We're not in the middle of it; we're not pushing it. Yet, you're speaking right from the talking points of the people who do want it. How come you won't hear from these people as to whether or not they want it? Maybe they do? Maybe you hold the vote and they do want it. Why won't you let them have their voice?

Question to the Minister of Rural and Regional Development because he won't, we're going to have to hold our own plebiscite; will you fund it so that the unincorporated people can have a plebiscite? Will you find the funds for us so we can hold a plebiscite?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Mr. Mitchell: Mr. Speaker, as – in my discussions with people from the region and we're trying to determine ways we can get the information out. Maybe it's holding more public meetings. Maybe it's having opportunities for the representatives that sat, from the unincorporated areas, on the steering committee to organize meetings of that nature. It's so important that the information gets communicated both ways.

I asked: What methods are in place right now for their members of fire districts from existing municipalities. How do their fire dues get determined? They're done in a public meeting. How do their representatives for the steering committee get picked? It was done at a public meeting.

There are opportunities to do this, but it's a process and when we get there, I will assure you that all people involved will have their say on what's going on.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Mr. Myers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

This minister won't commit to a plebiscite, but he's saying he's going to let their voice after everyone else has their voice. They want to have it with everyone. If they're going to be forced to be a part of something, they should also have the right to have their say now. All of the other communities are having a vote. It's not a public meeting; they're having a vote. They're putting ballots in a box and it's a secret ballot.

The question now to the Premier: Premier, you have to help us. Why won't you listen to the voice of the people? Why won't you

allow us to have a plebiscite in rural Prince Edward Island about this issue?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Mr. Mitchell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I know the hon. member on the other side of the House has a vision for his community. He has a sustainable vision, as I do, as all hon. members of the Legislature do.

There is a process involved, or he knows that. Currently, there is a process right now of three municipalities. If they go to their councils and their councils say no. It's not going any further –

Mr. Myers: Why do they get to decide?

Mr. Mitchell: – so that's how the process –

Mr. Myers: (Indistinct)

Mr. Mitchell: – will go. They are elected by the members that they represent. They feel that they have the ability to do that at a council meeting. If it does not go any further than that the issue will not proceed any further.

When the process gets to the point where we will talk to the unincorporated areas, I assure you that they will have –

Mr. LaVie: Too late.

Mr. Mitchell: – that opportunity to have their –

Mr. LaVie: Too late (Indistinct)

Mr. Mitchell: – voice in a very productive, effective manner.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Georgetown-St. Peters, your final question.

Mr. Myers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Obviously, the minister has had his head buried in the sand in Charlottetown for far too long.

What he's saying is that the same people who he won't give a voice as to whether or not they do want it; he will also not give them a voice if they don't want it. Because if the towns don't want it, then they can't have it, if the towns do want it, they have to have it.

Five hundred signatures we have. These people went door-to-door to their neighbours and that's what they came up with: 500 signatures.

Question to the Premier: Why won't you allow democracy in Three Rivers?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Mr. Mitchell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

And I, as I said earlier, I feel equally as important as having their voice, is to have the information put forward in a manner that ensures them this is about the future growth of their area.

This is not the only region on Prince Edward Island I'm doing this work in. I'm doing it in central PEI. I'm doing it in western PEI. I can assure you, I'm not going to do something that is going to jeopardize the work that I'm doing in other areas of the province.

Their voice will be listened to and they will have an opportunity to have their say when the part of the process comes up that will affect them the most.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

[End of Question Period]