



Session:	2/65
Date:	26 April 2017
No:	54

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
OF
PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND

RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS AND ORAL QUESTION PERIOD
(PRELIMINARY PROCEEDINGS)

FOR

WEDNESDAY, 26 APRIL 2017

Responses to Questions Taken as Notice

Questions by Members

Speaker: The hon. Member from Belfast-Murray River.

Agreement on Mill River deal not tabled

Ms. Compton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

On this side of the floor, the PC team has been working hard the last couple of weeks on the Mill River file and trying to get answers out of the minister of economic development.

We asked for the agreement.

Minister, can you tell us why that agreement has not been tabled?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Economic Development and Tourism.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I think I've stated before, clearly in the House, that the third-party agreement, it's no different than any other agreement that has been asked for in the past, that there's a full cooperation with the third party to release that agreement. If the hon. member would like to contact the third party and ask for the release of the agreement, then so be it.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Belfast-Murray River.

Public release of Mill River documents

Ms. Compton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

We've heard this story before a number of times. We know this Liberal government's track record on backroom deals. Look at the Bell Internet contract. Look at Homburg. Look at PNP. Look at GeoSweep. The Cornwall bypass, Plan B, egaming; they're all gloomy reminders –

Mr. LaVie: Gosh (Indistinct)

Ms. Compton: – on why we must see documents behind this sweetheart deal.

Premier, when will you and your government stop stalling, stop hiding, and publicly release all the documents behind your Mill River deal?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Economic Development and Tourism.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Look, we have a tremendous tourism industry. There's likely over 100 people meeting in Georgetown today to talk about our industry moving forward. I'll be making a statement here shortly on where we're going in 2017 and what the prospects look like for another third year in a row; I might add, the most positive years that we've had in the tourism industry.

We have a world-class tourism sector here with world-class individuals. I think of Tom McMillan, I think of Mel Gass, I think of Linda Lowther, I think of Anne Arsenault in the west, and you just – you consider it as Don McDougall adding to that list as an individual with a business background that is phenomenal.

It can do nothing but help our tourism industry and grow prosperity in West Prince.

Thank you.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Kensington-Malpeque.

New policy on land deals of property

Mr. MacKay: Mr. Speaker, this winter, Cabinet set a new policy for land deals of property valued plus 10%.

Will the minister of transportation tell us what the penalty is for violating this new policy and who is held accountable?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Ms. Biggar: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

As part of our department's policy, we did put a new policy in place, which was taken to Cabinet to improve, and when we are dealing with property owners there is an opportunity for landowners to have an independent assessment of their land value.

We do have internal assessors, but if a property owner wishes to have an independent assessment, that's their choice. And if we cannot come to an agreement, then the agreement is we will offer that plus 10%.

An Hon. Member: Great.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Kensington-Malpeque.

Cost of property for Cornwall bypass

Mr. MacKay: Mr. Speaker, government recently bought their first property for the next stage of the Cornwall bypass. This 65-acre field is assessed at \$125,300.

Minister, what did you pay for this empty field?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Ms. Biggar: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

As part of the new TransCanada Highway extension, we actually have to acquire a number of pieces of land; 24, in fact, have to be acquired. Three of them were acquired by March 31st. By the end of April, we will have had another two, and we have another six under – either under negotiation or starting those negotiations, so those will be ongoing discussions.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Kensington-Malpeque.

Mr. MacKay: Mr. Speaker, according to the agreement signed by the minister, she paid \$823,000 for this empty field.

Some Hon. Members: Oh, oh!

Mr. MacKay: It is assessed at 125,000 and the minister paid 823,000.

An Hon. Member: Unbelievable.

Mr. MacKay: Minister, why have you broken your brand new policy and overpaid for 65 acres of this field?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Ms. Biggar: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Again, when we are looking at acquiring property and when those deals are finalized and those papers are filed for public disclosure, and when we are dealing with different properties, depending on what the assessed value is –

Mr. Myers: Whether or not they have a Liberal membership.

Ms. Biggar: – that is, and the appraised value –

Mr. Myers: Buy dinner tickets.

Ms. Biggar: – then that is how we proceed with our negotiations.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Kensington-Malpeque.

Mr. MacKay: Mr. Speaker, the minister's staff told our standing committee, and I quote: The final offer is market value plus 10%. If that doesn't work out, the minister always has the right to expropriate.

Minister, how did you pay 650% above the assessed value of a 65-acre field?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Ms. Biggar: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

When land appraisals come in, they are factored into a number of pieces of situations in regard to the use of that land, what other uses are in place for that particular property, and what those land values are, and we will continue to have those discussions and to make sure that taxpayers' money is spent on the best value that we can get when we are making negotiations for properties that are needed –

Mr. Myers: (Indistinct).

Ms. Biggar: – to expand our highways across Prince Edward Island to ensure that the travel –

Mr. Myers: You should have gotten Don McDougall to negotiate for you.

Ms. Biggar: – that we are putting in place and our investments we are making in infrastructure are the best investment that we can make for Islanders.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Kensington-Malpeque.

An Hon. Member: Wow.

Mr. MacKay: Mr. Speaker, the minister's recent public comments were, and I quote: There may be people that don't agree, but in the end, between what we offer and what they offer, there is an expropriations act in place.

Minister, once again, why the 650% overpayment for a 65-acre field?

Mr. Trivers: Yeah.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Ms. Biggar: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

When an expropriation takes place –

Mr. LaVie: (Indistinct)

Ms. Biggar: – part of the right of that property owner, if they don't agree with that –

Mr. LaVie: (Indistinct).

Ms. Biggar: – is to move forward, and we will continue negotiations with any property owners that don't agree.

Mr. Myers: And how many dinner tickets (Indistinct)

Ms. Biggar: It's their right to file for arbitration, and we are all part of that process. If we cannot come to a deal and we need a piece of land and we have gone through all the process of having that land assessed, having negotiations –

Mr. Trivers: How much did you pay per acres?

Ms. Biggar: – having looked at all of the factors that are involved in that –

Mr. Myers: How many (Indistinct) MacKinley (Indistinct)?

Ms. Biggar: – then we will move to the expropriation because we have to have that land to develop our highways.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Kensington-Malpeque.

Mr. MacKay: Mr. Speaker, the minister keeps talking about assessed – it is assessed at 125,000; I'll table it when we're done here.

The minister refuses to answer the question because she knows there's not a good answer. The minister told our standing committee this new policy was put in place to provide oversight and ensure no overpayments.

Mr. LaVie: (Indistinct) question.

Mr. MacKay: Minister, why have you gone against your word and your new policy with your 650% overpayment?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Ms. Biggar: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again, our policy is in place. We go out; we meet with the individuals that are going to be affected by the land purchases right across this province. We treat them fairly. We look at what the assessed values are and appraised values are, I should say – of those properties, and we have an independent appraisal of those properties.

We work with the appraisers, and if they –

Mr. Myers: (Indistinct).

Ms. Biggar: – they do not agree with that, then it's all a part of the process.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Kensington-Malpeque.

Mr. MacKay: Mr. Speaker, the minister pledged this would not happen under her watch; a 650% overpayment for 65 acres, \$13,000 an acre for farmland, the most expensive farmland ever sold in Prince Edward Island and the minister, you're to thank for it.

Mr. Trivers: Wow.

Trust in government

Mr. MacKay: Minister, how can we trust anything this tired Liberal government says?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Ms. Biggar: Mr. Speaker, the member across the floor can twist the words all he likes. As a real estate agent, he knows the difference between appraised value and assessed value.

Mr. Myers: Thirteen thousand dollars (Indistinct).

Ms. Biggar: We are working forward on ensuring that when we acquire property for projects across this Island that Island taxpayers' money is spent fairly, and also in

consideration of what that land is appraised at –

Mr. LaVie: (Indistinct) per cent.

Ms. Biggar: – and we will continue to adhere to that policy.

Mr. LaVie: (Indistinct)

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Kensington-Malpeque.

Mr. MacKay: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I'm sure the minister would love to table the appraisal to show comparables of \$13,000 an acre for farmland never seen in history.

The minister told committee and I quote: Especially if you're buying agricultural land and it's priced way beyond what Islanders in other areas are getting for agricultural land. We don't want to impact that.

Minister: Where has there ever been farmland sold on PEI for \$13,000 an acre?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Ms. Biggar: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Depending on where your land is situated across this Island there are different appraised values of our land. The potential value that will come out of that land in the future.

If it's a potato production land, it is assessed at a higher, appraised at a higher value than –

Mr. Myers: No, it's not.

Ms. Biggar: – scrubland–

Mr. Myers: No, it's not –

Ms. Biggar: – so that–

Mr. Myers: – farmland is farmland–

Ms. Biggar: – we will continue though to deal with each property owner–

Mr. Myers: That’s not true.

Ms. Biggar: – we’re moving forward. We are having ongoing discussions with the affected landowners.

We will adhere to our policy–

Mr. Myers: (Indistinct)

Ms. Biggar: – if we have to we will expropriate and we will move forward on our project.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Kensington-Malpeque.

Trust in government (further)

Mr. MacKay: Mr. Speaker, this deal was done on March 29th. The minister’s own signature and seal is on this conveyance.

The minister vowed at the winter that no purchases would occur until after the final approvals in June.

Now, Islanders find out, she broke her policy in overpaying by 650% for farmland at \$13,000 an acre.

Minister: What good are rules and laws when this tired Liberal government just keeps ignoring and breaking them?

Ms. Compton: Follow the rules.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Ms. Biggar: Mr. Speaker, thank you.

Last July, we announced that we were moving forward with the TransCanada Highway Extension.

We started discussing, entering into discussions with landowners as early as last fall. That continued on over the winter –

Mr. LaVie: No, no.

Ms. Biggar: – we came to agreement, with, as I said, by the end of March, three of those landowners, one of which was expropriation. We have since come to agreement with two others that we are signing off on by the end of this month.

We are continuing discussions with the rest of those landowners.

Mr. LaVie: You should be ashamed.

Ms. Biggar: Thank you.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member –

Mr. LaVie: It’s no wonder you dropped seven points.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Stratford-Kinlock.

Treatment of Hughes-Jones Centre

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

Last week we asked this government about their harsh treatment of the Hughes-Jones Centre.

The transportation minister has expropriated the centre while paying \$13,000 per acre for an adjacent field owned by someone else.

Can the transportation minister explain her preferential treatment around this project?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Ms. Biggar: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

As I said, again, we are dealing with individuals on a one-on-one basis based on the use of that land; on the appraised value of that land and I certainly am aware of the Hughes-Jones Centre.

I’m aware of a number of centres across Prince Edward Island that do similar work. Down in South Granville there is a great horse farm that does work for autistic

children. We have a number of those therapeutic centres right across PEI, that are privately-owned businesses and I applaud the work that they do.

In terms of acquiring land for projects we will be moving forward.

Thank you.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Stratford-Kinlock.

Farmland price on PEI (further)

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

It's wonderful that this minister has a sense of some of the services provided here on the Island with regards to therapy.

Last week, the minister of health didn't even know that the Hughes-Jones Centre even existed, or what it even did, and he's the minister of health.

Now, we find that the minister of transportation, what she thinks of the equine therapy centre.

Again, question to the minister: Minister, why did you overpay \$13,000 an acre for the empty field while low-balling and running roughshod over the neighbours?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Ms. Biggar: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I can only reiterate, again, the policy we've been following; the negotiations that have been taking place with all landowners affected –

Mr. Trivers: How can you explain –

Ms. Biggar: – on the Trans- –

Mr. Trivers: – the difference?

Ms. Biggar: – Canada Extension, we will look at each piece of property on an

individual basis and any property owner who does not agree with our negotiation –

Mr. Myers: Can buy dinner tickets.

Ms. Biggar: – can go out, get their own independent assessment and we will –

Mr. LaVie: Thank God the press is here, today.

Ms. Biggar: – work forward from there.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Stratford-Kinlock.

Name of landowner re: property

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

I wonder if the minister could divulge here today the name of the landowner of this 65 acre field that they paid \$13,000 per acre for farmland.

Could the minister divulge the landowner, their name?

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Trivers: Open and transparent.

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

Ms. Biggar: Mr. Speaker, again, every time we sign-off on a deed for a piece of property it's registered in the deed registry office.

Anybody that wishes to go, and I'm sure the member has it right in front of him, can go and look at that information. It's public.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Stratford-Kinlock.

Mr. Aylward: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Once again this minister refuses to answer a question, so I'll give her the answer. The last name is McKinley.

The assessed value of the Hughes-Jones Centre is 2.5 times higher than the \$13,000 per acre field. Two-and-a-half times higher with a custom-built house and a barn, as well.

Again, to the minister: Minister, why then, did you only offer 60% of what you paid for your \$13,000 per acre empty field?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Trivers: Why, why, why, how is that fair?

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

Ms. Biggar: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I did have a question asked to me in this House a while ago, if any of – a former member of this Legislature who had the last name McKinley had any property that we would be purchasing and I said no, then.

I want to make it clear now that that property is not a former member of this Legislature.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Stratford-Kinlock.

Mr. Aylward: Mr. Speaker, I wonder if the minister could confirm yes or no, that the 65 acre field was owned by a McKinley?

An Hon. Member: There's a lot of them.

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

Ms. Biggar: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Again, as I said, any deeds that we negotiate and acquire are all registered in the deeds registry office.

Anybody that is listening, anybody that wishes to go to the deeds registry office can find out that information.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Stratford-Kinlock.

Treatment of Hughes-Jones Centre (further)

Mr. Aylward: Mr. Speaker, more land and two buildings against a smaller empty field. Yet, the minister values this empty field much more. Something obviously is not right here.

Minister: Why do you continue to mistreat and disrespect the Hughes-Jones Centre?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Ms. Biggar: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I'm not about to negotiate land deals on the floor of this Legislature.

I will tell you what we have done is negotiated with each individual property owner. We have gone forward following our policy –

Mr. LaVie: Be careful.

Ms. Biggar: – we will continue to do that –

Mr. Aylward: (Indistinct) per cent over the (Indistinct)

Ms. Biggar: – and I will say again, that any dealings that we have had have been either with an independent appraisal of the property or using our own appraisers. That is the process that has happened before. We are doing it now and we will continue to do it.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Stratford-Kinlock.

Mr. Aylward: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

It's interesting that the minister will say that they're following their policy, when quite clearly the questions asked by the hon. member here beside me exhibited that paying 650% over the assessed value of a

piece of property is not following the policy of her own department.

The Hughes-Jones Centre has applied for judicial arbitration after the minister is taking their home via expropriation.

The minister preferred wielding her legal hammer rather than formal negotiations. She now holds the property and is set to bulldoze it.

Again to the minister: Minister, why are you determined to run this therapy centre out of business and tie their hands so they cannot afford to relocate and reopen in this community?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Ms. Biggar: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Certainly, as part of our discussions with that particular property owner, we offered to relocate them to another location two kilometres away.

We have signed a lease with that property owner to give them time to transition to another location. That lease is in effect until May of 2018, so I expect that there will be opportunity for that land owner to relocate.

Thank you.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Chair: The hon. Member from Stratford-Kinlock.

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

The minister talks about a piece of land that they've offered to this current business owner and the operator of the Hughes-Jones Centre. If one was simply to take a walk down and look at that property, you'd quickly realize that it's not suitable for farming. It's not suitable to run as an equine therapy centre.

In fact, the previous member of the Legislature for this exact district, Mr. Ron MacKinley, once said that this land is only

useful for hydroplaning because it's swamp land.

So again, I ask this minister: Why are you treating the Hughes-Jones Centre in such a disrespectful manner while you're paying 650% over market value for an adjacent, empty field?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Ms. Biggar: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The opposition are throwing around different terminology for real estate dealings across the floor – market value, assessed value, appraised value.

I want to make it clear that we have, in each and every case that we have been dealing with landowners, treated each person individually on a case-by-case basis. If a landowner decides that they do not want to take our offer, that is their prerogative and we will follow forward –

Mr. Myers: After giving away a golf course.

Ms. Biggar: – with our policy and go forward with expropriation.

Thank you.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Aylward: (Indistinct) I'd like to sell you too.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Third Party.

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

Mr. Aylward: (Indistinct) doing the right thing, Minister. It's time you understood that.

Corporate and union donations to political parties

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

Last fall, the Premier backtracked on his pledge to ban all corporate and union

donations to political parties, announcing a new proposal that would allow 80% of current donations to the legacy parties to remain eligible. There was no process during that period to engage Islanders on the issues. I wonder who convinced the Premier to change his mind.

A question to the Premier: Who advised you to change your position?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Mr. Speaker, I met with the hon. Leader of the Third Party, I met with the Leader of the Opposition, and among the people who specifically requested me on two occasions to change the position to enable firms and corporations to donate up to a stipulated limit, is the hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Representation of Parliament

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

The Special Committee on Democratic Renewal has yet to complete its mandate and to make recommendations on a number of issues, including election financing, the role of MLAs, the parliamentary calendar, or on the diversity of representation in this House – whether it be in relation to gender, ethnicity, or age.

The House last night rejected my proposal to lower the voting age.

Does the Premier have any proposals on how to create a more representative parliament across ethnicity, gender, and age?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Mr. Speaker, we have an open-door policy. We have an active interest in seeing exactly the kind of diversity that the hon. Leader of the Third Party mentions.

But let me say, on the question of campaign financing: I wrote to the hon. Leader of the Third Party in December with a well laid out plan for change, inviting comment and feedback, and unless the letter has gone astray or has been mislaid, to date, we have not had a response.

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 very much, Mr. Speaker.

Indeed the letter that's referred to by the Premier was tabled in this House on December the 15th of last year.

Mr. Myers: That's how he delivered it.

Draft legislation

Dr. Bevan-Baker: However, in that letter the Premier wrote that it was his intent to – and I quote: To make the draft legislation available to each of you for comment. There was no other indication whatsoever in his letter that he expected to hear back from us and we've yet to see that draft legislation.

When will the Premier provide us with this draft legislation so I have a reason to reply in an informed matter to his proposal?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier MacLauchlan: Mr. Speaker, it wouldn't have hurt to have a response and we did, in fact, have a meeting prior to the letter, but let me say, in terms of timing – and in particular, given that we had one representation made twice and specifically, from the official opposition which was then not followed up – or to date, we haven't heard a peep from them –

Mr. Myers: (Indistinct)

Premier MacLauchlan: – in support of the very point they asked us to put forward. It's my view that this is something that's better left until the fall session of this Legislature. And it'll still be something that can be

implemented in lots of time for the forthcoming election.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from West Royalty-Springvale.

Mr. Dumville: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, with your indulgence could I recognize a guest?

Speaker: No. We have to wait until question period is over.

Energy Strategy and electrical grid

Mr. Dumville: Okay. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

My question is for the Minister of Transportation, Infrastructure and Energy. Recently at the Standing Committee on Infrastructure and Energy, you gave a briefing on the energy strategy. In that meeting, you discussed the modernization of the electrical grid.

Can the minister inform the House as to what modernization the grid would involve and how it'd benefit consumers?

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

Ms. Biggar: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

We did spend – I think it was two and a half hours, actually, at the standing committee going over our energy strategy and we had a great discussion there with all the members and to share our information.

When I referred to that, I referred to a grid modernization and innovation study – which is to identify changes which will support the principles of our strategy. It will review the PEI rate structure. The province is interested in net metering, net billing, feed-in tariffs.

Other considerations may include: time of day or time of wind rate structure, and how a smart grid can be distributed – distributed generation or storage – and how that can contribute to reducing our peak usage.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from West Royalty-Springvale, your first supplementary.

Modernization of grid

Mr. Dumville: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I understand the grid is owned by Maritime Electric. Would Maritime Electric be responsible for the cost of modernizing the grid?

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

Ms. Biggar: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

When we refer to modernization of the grid, we're not referring to poles and wires within the grid structure or the structure itself, we're referring to how the rate structure should be, what policy and legislation is in place for our electrical system.

We don't expect immediate cost for investments in physical structure – which Maritime Electric do, but we will be looking at implementing strategies as part of our study.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from West Royalty-Springvale, your second supplementary.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Dumville: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Modernizing the grid may require many years to implement. Will a modernization plan be developed that will outline the capabilities for future years?

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

Ms. Biggar: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Yes, once our study is completed and we have examined the implications of those strategies, the province will develop a plan on what we can deliver and the time frames that are associated with changing the

makeup of our grid and the modernization of it.

Thank you.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Brighton.

Parents informed of rezoning results

Mr. J. Brown: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

My question is for the minister of education. Minister, there's reportedly information going out to students and parents today in relation to the changes happening in school zoning.

Minister: How are parents being informed of whether their child will be changing schools as a result of the rezoning?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education, Early Learning and Culture.

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

Great question by the hon. Member from Charlottetown-Brighton. There are recommendations that have been endorsed by the directors of the Public School Board on rezoning to address the overcrowded and underutilized buildings, particularly in the Charlottetown core area.

Over 6,500 letters went home to homes from students to indicate where their child will be attending school for fall of next year.

I do want to commend the Public School Branch and school transition teams for the great that they are doing and they are on the ground and the transition is moving.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Brighton.

Schools preparing for rezoning

Mr. J. Brown: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Minister, how will this information be used and what are schools doing to prepare?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education, Early Learning and Culture.

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

This whole process, as the minister I have been very supportive of the school review process because it is about equity and it is about balance. The issue will be to identify student populations and students that are coming into schools, that may be a changed school, and we will allow the incoming school to identify their numbers for class sizes. But also, it will allow them to work with the Public School Branch to identify the resources that are needed to respond to the needs of students that will be attending that particular school if they are going to be rezoned, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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

Mr. J. Brown: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Minister, will these changes to the zones and the children changing schools be strictly enforced and adhered to?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education, Early Learning and Culture.

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

The reason why the decisions had to be made by the Public School Branch on rezoning was there were approximately 1,100 students that were identified in dual zones. Dual zones have been eliminated as a result of the recommendations that have been presented, put to a public meeting a number of weeks back, and as the minister, we are very supportive of the responsibilities and the role that the Public School Branch has.

One of the most important things and the benefits of the rezoning is that we will be providing better parity and balance to create better learning opportunities not only

in classrooms, but to make sure that extracurricular opportunities will be provided. Like for example, sport teams, band programs, science clubs – challenging times but will create better stability in our system.

Thank you.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Morell-Mermaid.

Psychological assessments in schools

Mr. MacEwen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

You have seen our opposition focus on mental health the last little while in the Legislature and I'm going to continue that today with questions to the minister of education.

Minister: Is the current wait time still over three years for a child to get a psychological assessment in schools?

Chair: The hon. Minister of Education, Early Learning and Culture.

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

I appreciate the question from the hon. Member from Morell-Mermaid and am very aware of what will be coming in the next few questions. I am very concerned about our wait times in respect to school psychologists and have been working very closely with my deputy and the Public School Branch, the director of student services, Julie Gaudet, to not only identify why we're in the situation we're in, but most importantly to identify ways that we can continue to make investments to address the wait times for psycho-educational assessments.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Morell-Mermaid.

Mr. MacEwen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Minister: How many kids are on this waiting list?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education, Early Learning and Culture.

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

I believe that the number is approximately 330 students that are on the wait list. But, I am very optimistic. I have asked the Public School Branch, the director, Julie Gaudet, and her team to look at a draft recruitment and retention strategy to support government to make the appropriate investments.

It's clearly been identified that A: School psychologists are hard to recruit to. There is a supply-demand issue not only in this province, but in the country. Right now, we've got 6.6 psychologists allotment FTEs. We have vacancies due to maternity leaves, but we are very interested in looking at a bigger picture to address the challenge that's in front of us.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Morell-Mermaid.

Wait times for psychological assessments in schools

Mr. MacEwen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Last fall the minister's staff met with the standing committee on education. A number of members asked good questions. They were supposed to bring back this data then. That still hasn't been brought back. I'm asking the minister about these numbers today. He's talking about all of the work that has gone in over the years. Just Google it and you can come up with media stories from 2012: It's a two-year wait list. 2013: It's a three-year wait list. They reported back last fall saying it's a 3.2-year wait list.

Minister: Are we looking at paying private psychologists to reduce the wait times?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education, Early Learning and Culture.

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

Through the conversations I have had with the Public School Branch, yes to the question. There has been outsourcing for private school psychologists to address some of these wait times. But, I think we have identified the problem but we need to look a broader, longer-term strategy.

This is not just only a challenge here in the Province of Prince Edward Island. We have seen it recently in Nova Scotia and I will bring the numbers back, the exact data and the exact list, numbers for the hon. Member from Morell-Mermaid.

Thank you.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Morell-Mermaid.

Mr. MacEwen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Minister: What are the wait time benchmarks for a child psychologist?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education, Early Learning and Culture.

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

I don't have the exact numbers on the benchmarks for across this country. I do know that it is a challenge. I guess most important, I have recognized through the work that's going on in schools, we continue to make investments. As a student is waiting for a psycho-educational assessment, there are also interventions not only on their adapted programs, but students that are modified programs, students that have active IEP.

We are making investments to support those children in school as we speak today. But, still as the minister I recognize that we do have wait times that are unacceptable and we're looking at a longer strategy and a broader strategy to address that list.

Thank you.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Morell-Mermaid.

Filling labour gaps

Mr. MacEwen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Maybe we need to make these benchmarks public so that we have a goal so that we know what we're working towards.

Minister: Just how aggressively are we actually looking to fill these labour gaps?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education, Early Learning and Culture.

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

The feedback that I have been getting and the information from the Public School Branch is they are aggressively looking at adjustments, interventions. They have been to Mount Saint Vincent. They are looking at ways that they can modify the workloads.

One of the challenges with school psychologists is that they require two years after their degrees to focus on time-on-task and interventions, not necessarily working on assessments. It is a challenge, but the complexity of the work that school psychologists do does reflect the reality of the wait times. But most importantly, I will bring all of the data back and information. Most importantly, we need a broader and more comprehensive strategy to address this, which is a challenge throughout the country.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Morell-Mermaid.

Hiring a private psychologist to work wait list down

Mr. MacEwen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

At the standing committee last fall we had the representatives from your department saying that: Yes, we are hiring private to try

and get this wait list down. What they actually said at that time was the hiring privately is just keeping the wait list there.

Why aren't we hiring privately and using private services to reduce that wait list down?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education, Early Learning and Culture.

Mr. Currie: Thank you very much.

As I indicated, the Public School Branch has outsourced to hire a private psychologist, but these are short-term gaps to address the current issue. Not only are we looking at recruiting, we're looking at backfilling the maternity leaves. We're looking at broader recruitment initiatives. We're looking at ways that we can look at a return of service.

But, this is an issue and we're competing with every province in the country. But, we have to be more innovative. We need a longer-term strategy, but in the meantime we're making massive investments.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Morell-Mermaid.

Mr. MacEwen: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

That is a whole lot of buzz words. I have been paying attention to this for a long time. We keep hearing it over and over from this government. It's the fierce urgency of whenever. That's what this government is about. If you want to make this happen, minister, make it a priority. Make it the priority.

Minister: When will these wait times be eliminated?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education, Early Learning and Culture.

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

I just want to remind the hon. Member from Morell-Mermaid that if he's got the magic bullet and the solution to address this issue –

Mr. LaVie: Next leader.

Mr. Currie: – he's going to be a very successful candidate in the leadership for the Tory party of this province. But, I do want to recognize that this is an issue. It's very complex. We're dealing with a challenge in respect to health human resources.

Let's talk about the investments that we're making in additional EAs; the 1.4 million last fall, the additional 1 million that we're making this year to support children, the \$6 million that we announced that we'll be rolling out over three years in communities all across Prince Edward Island.

I've got confidence in the day-to-day work we're doing, but I am confident that we will work towards a strategy that will help address the wait-times for psycho-educational assessments in this province.

Thank you.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

[End of Question Period]