



Session:	1/66
Date:	24 November 2020
No:	62

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
OF
PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND

RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS AND ORAL QUESTION PERIOD
(PRELIMINARY PROCEEDINGS)

FOR

TUESDAY, 24 NOVEMBER 2020

Response to Questions Taken as Notice

in some things getting funded and some things not.

Questions by Members

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

It's by looking at who gets the money that government's true priorities get revealed. Actions, in this case, truly do speak louder than words.

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

Spending priorities to care for Islanders

Last week's budget revealed that this government spent only one fifth of the funds that were allocated for mental health facilities.

To the Premier: When your words say it's about people, what spending priorities do you consider to be at the top of the list to take care of the greatest and most pressing needs of the people we serve in this province?

Funds in Capital Budget re: mental health

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Who on the government side is going to take responsibility for this decision?

Premier King: Mr. Speaker, I believe I have indicated from the very beginning that every decision that we make here as a government, not just me, but governments before me and those that will come after, have to realize that there are people at the end of every one of those decisions. They're your family, they're your friends, they're your neighbours and it's all about those who live in your community.

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier King: I guess, Mr. Speaker, all of that ends up on my desk. So I would, again, reiterate as we have been for the continuation of this session that the mental health and addiction situation in Prince Edward Island is one of the most, if not the most, important issues that we can deal with as a government, and as a Legislature. We are working really, really diligently to try to get things rolling at our Hillsborough facility.

What we try to do within our Capital Budget envelope is to address those needs, the infrastructure needs and that's essentially what a Capital Budget is. I believe we've had record spending, for the last two years within the Capital envelope, for a reason. When we spend money on infrastructure, it puts money in the pockets of Islanders. That keeps the economy going and that allows us to make the investments we have to make from an operational standpoint.

But this isn't about one individual building or bricks and mortar, and that's why we've identified within our Capital Budget that we're trying to come up with a pan Prince Edward Island approach where individuals can be helped and served within their communities as they deal with these important issues.

I'm here for people. That's what I'm all about and that's what we try to do every day.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Leader of the Opposition: Thanks, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Governing has sometimes been described as meeting unlimited needs with limited resources; in other words, not having enough money to do everything that you'd like to do. That's why government's have to make tough decisions all the time, resulting

Leader of the Opposition: Thanks, Mr. Speaker.

Every member of my caucus understands the importance, of course, of maintaining a road system that, as the budget speech says: allows for the safe and efficient

transportation and movement of goods and people. Critical. Our roads clearly need to be as safe as they possibly can and they need to be properly maintained. Maintenance is a real challenge here on PEI where we already have, by far, the most kilometres of pavement per person of any province and where the weather and the relatively soft base on which we build our roads has caused them to last only half as long as most other provinces.

A public investment in housing will last many decades and provide an essential, basic human right to people. A public investment in mental health now will save the lives of people.

Government cutbacks in housing and mental health

To the Premier: Why are we paving even more kilometres of Island roads while we cut back on investments in public housing and mental health?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier King: Mr. Speaker, I don't believe for one second that we're cutting back in any of those areas. I think you can ask the Department of Finance and the Minister of Finance and they can tell you that the increase that we have made in those two particular areas referenced by the Leader of the Opposition have been record spending here. That's because they need to be.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Premier King: I would reiterate, from the very beginning, from the Minister of Transportation, Infrastructure and Energy, during what has become the COVID situation and as governments have tried to work together, the federal government gave us the ability, encouraged us to try to get some of the envelopes of money going faster to employ Islanders and to get projects done and to even increase their ability to spend. The requirement of that was that the projects had to be shovel-ready and to be completed within the calendar year and because we need pavement, that is why you've seen an increase in paving this year. I believe it's a good investment for Islanders. It creates jobs for Islanders, but in absolutely no way are we picking one against the other and the

numbers, as the minister will present on the Capital Budget, will explain that.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Leader of the Opposition: Yes, the numbers do indeed explain that we've had record spending, as in record underspending in these two areas.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Leader of the Opposition: I spoke earlier about how little of the budget was actually spent on mental health facilities: 25%. If we look at housing, things are actually no better at all. The housing budget was underspent by \$14 million last year – underspent – and \$8 million the year before. That's two terms of this administration, only about a quarter of the funds that were designated for housing actually got spent, but let's look at all the shiny new asphalt.

It's not just this year, Premier. It's last year as well and the budget next year is to increase by 33%.

Housing for homeless

To the Premier: What do you have to say to the people who have nowhere to sleep tonight? The 750 people who are currently on the government's housing waitlist, what about the people who are in crisis tonight, struggling to access the mental health services that they so desperately need? How will paving help them?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier King: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Look, I believe that we've been making record investments in these areas. When you look at housing for example, the incredible rate at which construction has taken place here – and if there's an underspend in that area, it's simply because the Province right now does not have the ability to do anymore. That's not the Government of Prince Edward Island. That's not the Government of Prince Edward Island. That's the industry in general. The construction

industry is humming at a level that's incredibly – it's overheated. Talk to Sam Sanderson. Talk to anybody within that industry. It's a challenge. Our money is there and I've told the Leader of the Opposition many, many times: if fixing these important issues was just about money, I'd have them fixed this morning, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Leader of the Opposition: Thanks, Mr. Speaker.

In my conversations with the construction industry: if the government will and support was there, they would be there, too, to do the construction.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Leader of the Opposition: The Premier's proud to advertise this budget as moving us toward net zero and with good reason, and I might say with the full support of this corner of the House. To govern well, all decisions have to be aligned. They have to sit together comfortably and they have to be moving as harmoniously in the same direction to the same goal. If that goal is indeed to be net zero as soon as is practically possible, as it was announced just a few weeks ago by the Premier, we have to make sure that every single decision and choice we make – whether it be in transportation, in how we build stuff, in food production, in heating our buildings, and where we offer rebates and grants – are coordinated and consistent. Otherwise, we may be taking two steps forward and one step back.

Paving of roads and net zero

To the Premier: Can you explain how paving more roads, which sure looks like a step backwards to me, moves us towards net zero?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier King: Mr. Speaker, I think there is much the Leader of the Opposition and I agree upon and a pathway to net zero and getting there as fast as we can is one thing that we agree on and, I believe as long as we're in here, we will work harmoniously

on. We set goals for net zero which are aggressive, which need to be met, and for the first time in the history of this province, there's a net zero component to each project we put forward in the Capital Budget. That will continue as well. They've been asking me in here for months to put our money where our mouths are. I believe we did that with the Capital Budget.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Belvedere.

Ms. Bell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Not only did this government underspend on the 2021 budget for housing, but it's also allocated less money than the previous year for the next current budget.

Additional units for public housing

Given that there are 750 Islanders on the wait list for public housing, why are you only planning for around 50 additional units? Question to the Minister of Social Development and Housing.

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Social Development and Housing.

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

I certainly do appreciate the concern that the opposition have stated. With regard to the 100 builds that were announced in last year's capital budget, I'll be honest: a year ago, I would have anticipated that we would have been farther along with these as well, but we've had events. Certainly, the pandemic worldwide has impacted things.

But with that, the 100 units that were announced last year are moving forward. For example, the 10 units in Morell, the 10 units in Georgetown – the design work – the award has already been given out for that. We've got units in Summerside that the design is going out for and the balance – the design work will be going out for that shortly, as well.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Belvedere.

Ms. Bell: Mr. Speaker, I could probably do that list from memory by this point. Those Liberal leftovers are so cold, they're practically congealed.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Ms. Bell: I'd also like to point out to the minister that this is not a concern that the opposition is stating about housing. This is a concern that Islanders are stating about housing.

You and your departmental staff have continually pointed to rental supplements as being your solution to the desperate need for affordable housing. In fact, you even count rent supps as housing units, which is completely inaccurate. Supplements help keep Islanders in the housing they have, but do not add any new units to the inventory.

Government spend on rent supplements

Question for the Minister of Social Development and Housing: How much did your department spend on rent supplements in this past fiscal year?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Social Development and Housing.

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

Just to allude to one of the comments that the hon. member made: I agree. We are all here for Islanders. When I had alluded to the concern that the opposition obviously feel, I give them credit for bringing that concern forward on behalf of Islanders. We work on behalf of Islanders; everyone in this House.

But going back to the hon. member's question with regard to rent supplements, I recently had the opportunity to speak with the senior researcher at the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness. Dr. Kaitlin Schwan, I spoke with Dr. Schwan for about an hour thereabouts, talking about the different tools that we need in the toolbox. It's not just one, but Dr. Schwan did agree, 100%, that one of the greatest tools, one of the best tools to have in that toolbox is rental assistance programs like the Province of Prince Edward Island's mobile rental voucher.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Belvedere.

Ms. Bell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Unfortunately, the patent from the minister is that he didn't actually answer the question that I asked.

How much money is this government spending on rent supplements?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Social Development and Housing.

Mr. Hudson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

There was additional 6 million, if I recall correctly, in this year's Operating Budget, as the hon. member is well aware that rent supplements, the mobile rental voucher is out of the Operating Budget, not the Capital Budget.

I would like to add, too, that it's been referenced here by the Leader of the Opposition with regard to rent supplements, with regard to the 750 that are on the registry presently. I have to point out that those individuals are not homeless. Those are individuals, because of their level of income; do need assistance and the rent supplements do provide that.

I'd also like to point out that, in the last very short time – and when I say short time, approximately three to four months – that the numbers on the registry, on the housing registry have dropped down to 750 from over 1,000.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Belvedere.

Ms. Bell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I'll look forward to telling my constituents that they dropped off the registry, because apparently you've solved their housing problem. The constituents I spoke to have been on the housing registry for more than three years without a call back from your department. Perhaps the reason they're not on the registry is because you haven't called

them back to even check if they still need housing.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Ms. Bell: Building houses is more cost effective, in the long run, than spending millions every year just to help people bridge the gap between the rent that they have to pay and the money that they have available for rent. Rent supplements are a Band-Aid for a problem that is not going to magically go away. Rent supplements are not a cost-effective solution; they're kicking the problem down the road.

Cost benefit analysis on rent supplements

Question for the Minister of Social Development and Housing: Has your department ever done a cost benefit analysis on rent supplements versus actual public housing?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Social Development and Housing.

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

I referenced Dr. Kaitlin Schwan here a couple of minutes ago. To me, she is an expert. I put tremendous weight, tremendous credence when she tells me that rent supplements, that the mobile rental voucher that we have here in the Province of Prince Edward Island is an excellent tool to have in the toolbox.

I'd also like to go back to the comment that the hon. member made that she is receiving calls from ones who are not on the housing registry, that have not been called back. Every member across the floor here in the opposition know that when they reach out to me, that it is followed up on.

Ms. Bell: (Indistinct) yeah.

Speaker: Continue.

Mr. Hudson: That it is followed up on and the hon. member who just chuckled about that knows that that is the truth as well.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Belvedere.

Ms. Bell: Mr. Speaker, I apologize for my outburst because, honestly, that was one of the most ridiculous things that I have heard in this House and I've heard a lot over the years.

An Hon. Member: (Indistinct)

Ms. Bell: We are happy to provide the emails that we send on behalf of our constituents to the minister. The answers we get back are 'we're going to look into that' and then our constituents never hear another thing again. We are tired of this department passing these constituents and their problems down into the department, into the black hole that is the Department of Social Development and Housing where the people that are supposed to be working on behalf of Islanders do not respond. It is due time that this minister actually take responsibility for his members that work in his department and actually require that they answer.

Commitment to respond re: housing concerns

I would like to ask the minister: Will you commit that your director of housing will actually respond in an appropriate and respectful way to the members of this House when they forward constituency concerns regarding the housing?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Social Development and Housing.

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

I have tremendous faith in the workers in my department. They do not have an easy job. They are there day in day out for Islanders. The hon. member stated that she would be happy to table emails that have been sent through. Well, I would be happy to table responses as well.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Hudson: With that, I completely respect the confidentiality of the hon. member's constituents, or of any constituents of any member, and MLA in

this House. That is something I think that we always have to be aware of.

Again, I have tremendous faith in my department, in the workers in my department, in the work that they do day in day out on behalf of Islanders.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Victoria Park.

Ms. Bernard: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Teachers, school staff, parents and students are all struggling with the uncertainty of, if and when, we may have to look at closing schools.

Plans for uncertainty of school closure

Question to the minister of education: Can you please tell us about the different plans your department has been working on for schools?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education and Lifelong Learning.

Mr. Trivers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

This is a great question, because the department has really been working on these plans since the first shutdown during the pandemic back in April and they've made great strides. There's been a fall education readiness committee that has formed of the union representatives, the TF, the CUPE, as well as the two education authorities, as well as several staff from the department.

Really there are five stages of openness; one being the normal we had before the pandemic, and then another four that go into that. The second one is where we're at right now with our schools, and there's three phases after that. The department has their i's dotted, their t's crossed, and we're ready to respond to whatever the pandemic will bring us.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Victoria Park.

Ms. Bernard: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I am thrilled to hear that the t's are dotted and the i's are crossed. I would love to know when Islanders will hear about these plans. If we learned anything at all, it's that people need to know what the plan is in advance so that they can plan accordingly. We can see from neighbouring jurisdictions that school closures can happen very quickly. From the lack of communication on this it would seem government has not learned from this lesson.

Supports and resources offered to parents

Question to the minister: In the event of a school closure, what supports and resources will your government be offering to parents of young children to ensure that they are not penalized by their employer while they attempt to balance work and educating their children simultaneously?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education and Lifelong Learning.

Mr. Trivers: Thanks, Mr. Speaker.

First of all, our goal is to keep the schools open and that's what we're going to do. That's that first stage and we're working really hard to make sure that happens. The students have stepped up and they're doing that as well.

I have to give a lot of credit to the PEI Teachers' Federation. During their convention last week, one of the focuses were workshops on remote learning that many, many teachers attended in preparation. We made sure the students are familiar with tools, as well, as teachers are already starting to use some of those remote learning tools so they're familiar with them in case, God forbid, we do have to go to a remote learning situation.

We are going to support students in a one-on-one fashion as much as possible. Our teachers have shown the passion that they use to reach out to parents and students during the previous shutdown during the pandemic, and they'll continue in that mode.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Victoria Park.

Ms. Bernard: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Our teachers are tired, minister. You should know that.

In many jurisdictions, governments are stepping up and providing the needed technology to students and teachers. Given the current state of our internet service, there are significant gaps all around from cost to where you live. This is a cause of great inequity we simply can't afford.

Student access to internet and devices

Question to the same minister: Will you ensure that every student who needs it will have access to internet and access to devices if schools close down again?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education and Lifelong Learning.

Mr. Trivers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

We have thousands of devices, Chromebooks in particular, that are ready for deployment at a moment's notice. We made sure that the staff were there to make sure these devices were ready and they are ready to go.

I'm not going to stand here and guarantee that I can get every single student across this whole Island reliable high speed internet if there is a shutdown, but we will get that to as many students as possible. I know the Minister of Economic Growth, Tourism and Culture already has plans that he's putting in place to support that as well.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. McNeilly: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

There has been a lot of important talk about housing in the recent weeks and months. Today, we all woke up with strong winds and colder weather. I couldn't imagine having no place to go at this time.

Here on the Island, there is a population of vulnerable Islanders who are homeless and the crisis in our province is worsening by the shortage of housing options.

Availability of beds for Islanders in need

A question to the Minister of Social Development and Housing: Between Bedford MacDonald House and Deacon House, how many beds are available for Islanders in need?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Social Development and Housing.

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

I do thank the hon. member for the question.

At Bedford MacDonald House, there are currently nine beds. I cannot comment with regard to Deacon House. I would – okay, six beds at Deacon House. Deacon House is under the ministry of health.

As well though, I'd like to point out that one of the initiatives of this government was the acquisition of Smith Lodge, which is up and operational. I will be providing a bit more information on that in my ministerial comment a little later on this afternoon, but an additional nine beds will be at Smith Lodge, moving forward in the spring of 2021 to 20 beds.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. McNeilly: Just a short time ago, there was 10 beds, plus two emergency beds, so I'm not understanding why there's nine. So, those two emergency beds are usually with people with disability. I'd like the minister to look into that and get back to this House.

Mr. Speaker, these shelters provide essential services to Islanders in need. In many instances, these shelters, aside from providing essential services, are the last place someone can turn to before being left out completely in the cold.

I have heard concern that Deacon House may close very soon and we know that Bedford MacDonald House is closed throughout the day, only open to Islanders at night.

Assurance to Islanders re: Deacon House

Question to the minister: What assurances can you provide Islanders who are worried that the shelter may be limited in the weeks and months to come?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Social Development and Housing.

Mr. Hudson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

With regard to Bedford MacDonald House, when I had indicated the numbers there, one of the reasons that those numbers had to be adjusted over the time period that we're dealing with COVID-19, certainly is to allow for a six-foot distancing from each other.

Just to follow up as well: the hon. member had alluded to that Bedford MacDonald House at this point in time is not open 24/7. It is 16/7. But I do have to reiterate as well that one of the initiatives of our government has been the outreach centre. Any hours that Bedford MacDonald is not open, the shelter is available at the outreach centre. Also, I'd like allude to the fact that – of the 1-800 number for anybody who does find themselves in a homeless situation.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. McNeilly: I'm kind of worried that you're spending money elsewhere. Smith Lodge, even though that was a gap – as early as this morning, there was an altercation down there this morning. So, the shortsighted approach to this is really hurting Islanders.

Mr. Speaker, Islanders are literally being left out in the streets, out in the cold, because this government can't get its priorities straight.

Spending on housing for Islanders

Question to the minister: Do you believe it's acceptable that you, as minister responsible for housing, left \$9 million on the table instead of spending on housing alternatives for Islanders?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Social Development and Housing.

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

I guess if I could go back to my answer in previous questions this afternoon, that money is not being left on the table. It is going to be allocated; it is going to be utilized for the 100 units that was announced in the capital budget of 2019.

In addition to that, let's look at what the five-year plan was in the capital budget that was brought forward in 2019. That capital budget, which was basically historic in dollar amounts, was 23,500,000. The one that my colleague, the Minister of Finance, brought forward here late last week, the five-year capital plan is 36,214,000, an increase of well over \$12 million.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Tignish-Palmer Road.

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

On September the 17th, I wrote the minister of health to bring forward concerns from my area regarding the 811 number. I recognize that it's difficult to make improvements if the minister is unaware of issues. That's why I reached out to him.

Islanders in my community came to me expressing concerns over their calls to 811 not being answered, their calls not being returned and extensive hold times. Eight days later, I received a reply from the minister. The minister confirmed that he was aware of similar concerns and identified the problem as a capacity issue with 811.

Capacity issue with 811

My question is to the minister of health: What was the capacity issue that you were referring to?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

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

Obviously, the capacity issue had to do with the pandemic that we were going through and we're still going through. At the same time, we were returning children to our schools and that certainly increased a lot of calls to 811 with regards to availability for testing or what do I need to do in case my child is sent home with sniffles. Those are the answers, essentially, for the increase in the call volume.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Tignish-Palmer Road.

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

Government is asking Islanders to follow the necessary precautions and steps to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Islanders have been exceptionally compliant. I'll remind the minister that it was your government that's telling Islanders to call 811 when they have symptoms, but when we hear stories of calls not being returned and three-hour hold times, that's not reasonable and it's cause for concern.

Concerns addressed of calls to 811

My question to the minister: What did you do to address these concerns that I brought forward that you were already aware of?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

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

We were involved with the service provider, looking to have additional people trained and put onto those lines so that we could increase the overall capacity.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Tignish-Palmer Road, your second supplementary.

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

As of yesterday, the situation had not improved. Islanders in my community were

still experiencing three-hour wait times and half the time, their calls were not returned.

Many times, they would go to the emergency room at the hospital for medical attention and, upon arrival, they were told to go home and call 811.

Minister, the situation has not improved. What measures are you taking to correct it?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

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

Once again, as I stated, we are doing everything that we can with the service provider to ensure that the staffing is increased, that the appropriate number of staff is there to answer the volume of calls in an appropriate amount of time, but more importantly, that they're trained adequately and appropriately so that they know how to give the proper information to those Islanders that are calling.

Hon. member, you have my commitment here again today, that I will reach back in. I'll ask my deputy minister right away to find out what's happening. If there is an issue, if we have another glitch with the volumes, it very well could be, because as you fully are aware, we just came out of the Atlantic bubble so that could be creating an increase in calls as well.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Cornwall-Meadowbank.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Question to the minister of health: On Friday, the minister said the following:

From speaking with Dr. Morrison yesterday, right now we are looking between 26,000 and 30,000 doses of COVID vaccine coming in early January.

Number of COVID-19 vaccines for PEI (further)

Today, Dr. Morrison had this to say: I think it's difficult to know exactly how many

doses of vaccine will come because those numbers have not been confirmed yet and the vaccine hasn't even approved yet in our country.

Where did the minister get his information?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

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

The information that I shared on Friday was part of a briefing from CPHO.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Cornwall-Meadowbank.

Mr. MacDonald: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

As we all know and we've learned a lot of lessons in the last nine months about communication and transparency. The minister also claimed that he was speaking to Dr. Morrison about these matters on Thursday. He said that is where he got his information about vaccines.

But today Dr. Morrison said the following – and I quote: So we are trying to make sure that our providers and the minister and the public certainly know the numbers as soon as we do.

I'll repeat part of that: We are trying to make sure the minister knows the numbers as soon as we do.

Is the minister not part of these conversations, and where did he get his numbers?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

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

I will repeat again: the information that I received that I relayed to the House arising from a question from the hon. member was part of a briefing from CPHO.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Cornwall-Meadowbank, your second supplementary.

Mr. MacDonald: Mr. Speaker, on Friday, the Premier called some of these types of questions fear mongering. The minister claims to listen to science. But I will quote from Dr. Morrison again: Those numbers were probably based on per capita population calculations of what has been out in the media.

The public – just be clear and be concise. Part of the issue of some of the things, the phone calls that we're answering is miscommunication. I don't know why this minister continues to mislead in some aspects of his – it's not right and I think the minister – you've got to be more clear and you've got to be more precise just to let the public know and understand where we're at with COVID.

So, I guess, Mr. Minister, are you listening to science or are you listening to the media?

Speaker: Hon. member, there's a word there we don't use in the House. You can review the Hansard and you'll find out the word.

Mr. MacDonald: My apologies, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

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

I've said it in the House before and I'll say it again, we have incredible people helping us, directing us, leading us through this pandemic. We're extremely fortunate to have Dr. Heather Morrison and her dynamic team.

We're committed to sharing everything we know on the science of vaccinations to help make decisions about vaccinations. We have a national program, a national protocol that we're following with all of the other provinces and territories and the federal government. This is being led by a team – not just here on PEI – it's being led by a team nationally and across Canada.

These decisions are being made on a very high level. Science is coming into it. As much as we all think that we might be experts on everything here in the House, we're not. We have experts that are working within the health care system and I will certainly take my direction from them.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Winsloe.

Mr. Bell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Earlier this year, the new mobiles were installed at West Royalty Elementary School to help meet the challenges with the school.

Mobiles at West Royalty school

My question is for the Minister of Education and Lifelong Learning: Have the new mobiles alleviated the pressures on the space at the school?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education and Lifelong Learning.

Mr. Trivers: Thanks, Mr. Speaker.

I'm pleased to say that I did speak with the school administration, the principal at West Royalty and they have said that the mobiles really have done a good job in alleviating some immediate pressures on their space. Of course, the whole expansion is still needed.

I'm really proud to say that, because we were able to get those mobile classrooms in when we did, we actually had a solution in place to alleviate the space pressures a full year in advance of what was originally planned.

Mr. McNeilly: What?

Mr. Trivers: They wouldn't have had anything right now.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Winsloe.

Mr. Bell: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

So adding those mobile classrooms, it was very good and a great step in the future

expansion of the school. I know the Grade 6 wing was very helpful.

Mobile classrooms/larger plan for school

A question to the Minister of Education and Lifelong Learning: Where do those mobile classrooms fit in into the larger plans for the school?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education and Lifelong Learning.

Mr. Trivers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

That is a really good question. When we worked with the home and school and the administration and the staff at West Royalty, and the staff at the PSB, to determine where the mobile classrooms would go, in fact, it was the staff themselves that said: Look, we want to put these in a place where if and when we continue with the expansion, we'll be able to continue to use them.

I'm pleased to say, as far as I know at this point, those mobile classrooms will be able to stay in place and will continue to be a part of the space solutions at West Royalty far into the future.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Winsloe.

Mr. Bell: I think the families at West Royalty Elementary will be very happy to hear that. They're very pleased with the project going forward. I do know that construction projects often can come with some surprises.

Construction of West Royalty school expansion

My question to the Minister of Education and Lifelong Learning: Minister, have there been any surprises encountered with this project?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Education and Lifelong Learning.

Mr. Trivers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

As you know the West Royalty mobiles – it was a real challenge to get them installed in

time for the school year. I would like to commend the Public Schools Branch, especially their team that works in the infrastructure side and the contractors that worked on it. They did get it done and they got it done in time so that they're being used.

There have been a couple of issues in the school yesterday and today. I'm pleased to say that I believe those issues are resolved.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Brighton.

Mr. Hammarlund: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

My district is lucky to have several seniors housing projects that were built back in the old days when the government actually really built seniors housing. The seniors living there, of course, appreciate the quality and affordability of their residences but they still have complaints and suggestions that the government apparently is not hearing.

Pet-friendly seniors housing

A question to the Minister of Social Development and Housing: Why are seniors living in most of our government buildings not allowed to have dogs when it's proven that pets will prolong the life of the owner and generally increase happiness?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Social Development and Housing.

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

I do appreciate the comment, the question coming from the hon. member. I agree 100% that, for seniors, for pretty well anybody, a pet becomes just like a member of the family. If you recall, there was a motion, I do believe, that was brought forward here in the Legislature, I do believe it was last fall, with regard to pet-friendly units within the PEI Housing Corporation. If I recall correctly – and I certainly will bring back, as soon as possible, the exact percentage or number of units under the PEI Housing Corporation that are pet-friendly

but it is, if I recall correctly again, substantially over 50%.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Brighton.

Mr. Hammarlund: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Maybe we are unlucky in our district. I don't believe pets are allowed in the projects in my district.

Many of the large projects, certainly the one in my district, could easily be divided into separate zones. For instance, 501 Queen Street has four wings, each with two floors, so eight sections which could each be treated differently and easily accommodate pet owners, non-pet owners, smokers and non-smokers, for instance.

Different standards for building sections

Question to the Minister of Social Development and Housing: Why not make a point of making all residents happy with a simple and no-cost solution such as having different standards for different building sections?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Social Development and Housing.

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

I do thank the hon. member for those suggestions. When he references smoking and non-smoking units, certainly there is a breakdown within the seniors units across the province with regard to units that are designated smoking or non-smoking.

Having said that though, I think we have to be very careful that there is space differences, different buildings and the like, allocated for those who may be smokers and those who may not. You have allergies; you have various potential health issues that could be triggered by being in close proximity or in the same building or even an adjoining wing of a building that is also smoking.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-Brighton, final question.

Mr. Hammarlund: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Upgrading residences to net zero would be particularly beneficial to seniors. Much of this work can be done from the outside and the benefits are increased comfort, no drafts, improved ventilation, as well as long-term energy savings that will pay for all the work.

Net zero seniors housing

Question to the Minister of Social Development and Housing: What are your department's plan for updating seniors buildings so that they will perform as needed for the 21st century, including meeting your government's net zero goals?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Social Development and Housing.

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

As I'm sure the hon. member, upon review of the Capital Budget, had noted that there are substantial dollars being allocated to upgrades – renovations to our capital builds under the PEI Housing Corporation, which is 1,597 units presently – growing pretty well daily.

With that, too, I would like to point out: as the hon. member may be aware of, the Affordable Housing Development Program was put on pause earlier this year. Just to follow up, I think it is an excellent point that he does bring forward with regard to net zero, but again, going back to the Affordable Housing Development Program, which was recently relaunched with new criteria, and one of the criteria that's in there is that any new builds under the HDP have to be net zero, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

End of Question Period