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PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND

RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS AND ORAL QUESTION PERIOD
(PRELIMINARY PROCEEDINGS)

FOR

WEDNESDAY, 25 NOVEMBER 2020

Response to Questions Taken as Notice

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

Mr. Hudson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Yesterday, the hon. Member from Charlottetown-Belvedere asked me how much money the government spent last year on rent supplements. Last year, the government spent 9.2 million on mobile rental vouchers, an increase from 5 million from the prior year.

This government supports mobile rental vouchers as they keep people in their homes without requiring them to move to another apartment, house, town or city.

Yesterday, the hon. Member from Charlottetown-West Royalty asked me to look into the number of beds at Bedford MacDonald House. I can confirm that there are 10 beds at Bedford MacDonald House, along with two emergency beds on the main floor with double as accessible units.

Yesterday, I stated that there were nine beds at Bedford MacDonald House, and my apologies, that was incorrect. Smith Lodge will be opening in the very near future with nine beds at Smith Lodge.

Yesterday, I also committed to bringing back information for the hon. Member from Charlottetown-Brighton. We have a number of pet-friendly units available in PEI for both seniors and families. In fact, 91.8% of our seniors units are pet-friendly. The exact amount of pet-friendly units for seniors is 1,026. Additionally, 91.6% of our family units are pet-friendly. The exact amount of pet-friendly units for families is 427.

Finally, 57.9% of our seniors units do allow smoking. The exact number of seniors units that allow smoking is 647.

I do appreciate the hon. member's suggestions with respect to different standards for different building sections, yet, Mr. Speaker, it is important to keep in mind that having smoking and non-smoking units in close proximity, or in the same building, can be triggering for those who have health

issues, allergies, and those with young children living or visiting these units.

Thank you.

Questions by Members

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

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

Our essential workers – teachers, grocery clerks, health care workers – are groups – mostly made up of women, I might say – that this government knows have been greatly impacted by this pandemic. Of course, we talk about it all the time. We refer to these people as our heroes, which they absolutely are, but it's not enough to call these people heroes. We need to show that we appreciate them in how government spends money.

As president-elect Joe Biden said the other day: it's not enough to praise essential workers. We have to protect and pay them.

Underspending versus overspending on pavement

A question to the Premier: What does underspending and under-delivering in health, housing, and education while overspending on pavement say to these workers?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier King: Mr. Speaker, as I've been indicating in here for a number of days now, I believe our government has come to the table with the funds that are necessary to get ahead or to catch back up with some of the challenges that we face here as a society. I believe if you look at the budget – operationally and, of course, with the Capital Budget, which we have just released – that we have been spending money at a rate that needs to be there to serve Islanders. I would agree with the hon. member: our heroes, those people who deliver services here every day are to be commended and we're working every day to make sure they feel appreciated.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Leader of the Opposition: Thanks, Mr. Speaker.

We've all heard at this point that the Capital Budget has a whopping \$190 million laid aside for the next five years for paving – \$190 million.

Paving has long been a way for Island politicians to give out jobs and to benefit their supporters. Meanwhile, you're announcing the same school builds for the third time, delaying these projects by years. It all sounds awfully like the same old tired politics that Islanders have got used to for so long.

School builds in PEI

Question to the Premier: Are these the types of games that you encourage your government to play with Islanders' health, with Islanders' education, and with Islanders' money?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier King: Mr. Speaker, I thank the hon. leader for his question.

I think a lot of Islanders could say a lot of things about me, but I think same old same old may not be one of them.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Premier King: We've been trying very, very hard to do things differently here. I guess as the Premier, you inherit a lot of the challenges that have come from the past. I've never once stood here and blamed others for what we have here in this province. We're trying to work within that and to make it better.

In the terms of these school announcements, all I can tell the Leader of the Opposition is: I have only announced them once and I am going to build them.

An Hon. Member: Yeah.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Leader of the Opposition: It strikes me that those announcements were part of last year's capital budget, too. I was really pleased,

along with the rest of my caucus, to see the announcement, of course, for school renovations and upgrades in this year's Capital Budget. Then, I realized I was equally happy when I stood here last year and remembered that those same promises were made in this very House.

I'm honestly concerned that, come next year, I will see the same announcements once more. It's like Groundhog Day here in this House.

A question to the Premier: Our children's education is not a political game. Premier, you said you were going to be different and I take your comments well. You know, things have changed. However, why do you continue to announce improvements in the education system without any follow-through?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier King: Well, Mr. Speaker, I'm glad that we're discussing these important issues for Islanders. I think this is the place we need to do that.

When you look at a Capital Budget, it's drawn out over a five-year plan. We have set aside the funds to build those schools. What we reannounced this year, if that's what the leader wants to say, is that we now have a stream because the federal government has changed their parameters and they've allowed us to access 80 cent dollars to do it more quickly. I'm excited about doing it more quickly. I don't want to wait five years to build these projects. I want to do them now. That's why I'm excited to do it. I'm glad that we announced it, and I cannot wait until it's open and finished and we can get onto the next ones.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Mermaid-Stratford.

Ms. Beaton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The Minister of Transportation, Infrastructure and Energy has led the public to believe that there will be no delay for the opening of the Stratford high school. In the 2018 capital budget, the school was funded with a completion date of fall 2023.

Completion date of Stratford high school

A question to the minister: Is your department still on track to finish the high school by fall of 2023?

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

Mr. Myers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

It's good to finally have this question so we can clear the air in the proper format. I know the hon. member over there was saying stuff on Twitter that was untrue and saying that my department wasn't working on this, which is embarrassing considering how hard they have worked on this file. We are currently working and waiting on the Town of Stratford to make their final decision on the land so we can go to tender.

To answer the question: we are not behind.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Mermaid-Stratford.

Ms. Beaton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I think I might have missed – I didn't hear the very last statement that the minister just made. Just that last sentence, sorry.

An Hon. Member: It's not behind.

Ms. Beaton: Oh, it's not behind. Okay, thank you for that.

It's important to clearly communicate with Islanders. Planning work is dependent on timing that the funds are allocated in the Capital Budget. I recognize that it comes down to land, as the minister has just said, but it actually doesn't come down to land, it actually comes down to jurisdiction. When it comes down to education, that is actually the provincial responsibility. So, it's not actually the Town of Stratford's responsibility to build the school.

Question to the Minister of Finance: What is the completion date on the new high school for Stratford in your Capital Budget?

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

Mr. Thompson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

What I take from what the hon. member over there is saying is that she doesn't want us to work with the Town of Stratford who has a major plan for where they want to put their soccer complex, where they want to put a rink; they're calling it a campus. They've asked us to work with them; we've agreed to work with them. We're waiting for them to move forward with the purchase.

The hon. member who represents Stratford, just so people are following along at home, can assume that the hon. member over there does not support the plans of Stratford.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Mermaid-Stratford.

Ms. Beaton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

What I don't support is a government that's not actually going to be solid on a date of the completion of the Stratford high school, because that's what they want to know.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Ms. Beaton: There are two high schools in the Charlottetown family of schools and both are projected to be over capacity by the time the new high school is built. Charlottetown Rural will be 297 students over capacity and Colonel Gray by 102. When we talk about overcrowded schools, we're talking about the quality of our children's education and the quality of teaching our hardworking teachers can deliver to our students.

Overcrowding in Charlottetown schools

A question to the minister of education: Where will those 400 students go?

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

Mr. Trivers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I have to say, it really has been a pleasure to work with the Town of Stratford to get to the point we're at, to do it right in the way they want it, to go towards this campus idea. We're working hard to expedite it as fast as we can throughout the entire government to try and close these gaps.

What the member alludes to are projections and really these are updated every year. Right now, we will take whatever steps necessary to ensure that our students' learning is put first. We've seen, for example, we've put mobile classrooms at West Royalty. If we have to do that in the short-term, we will. We'll find solutions. We're about solutions and we're about putting students first.

Thank you very much.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Tyne Valley-Sherbrooke.

Ms. Altass: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

In a CBC article this morning, the Premier was quoted as defending his government's record on both the mental health and public housing files by stating, "That's not the government of Prince Edward Island, that's the industry in general. The construction industry is humming at a level, it's overheated... Our money is there. If fixing these important issues were just about money, I'd have them fixed this morning."

I think it's important to clarify that when it comes to he under spending on the new mental health campus, the state of the construction industry has nothing to do with it. In fact, the blueprints for Lacey House and the community program facility have been ready since before this government came into power and were not acted on until very recently. The blueprints and final plan for the mental health hospital continue to be delayed due to an under resourced master planning team. So building can't actually begin at all.

Dollars for mental health hospital

Question to the minister of health: With blueprints already prepared for two buildings, why did you not immediately begin construction on the mental health campus when you were first elected? How can Islanders trust that the money allocated for the new mental health hospital will actually be spent this year and not further delayed?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

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

Thanks for the question. I think we've had discussion on this issue already in the Legislature, but again, I'll repeat. There's a particular process you have to go through. We had to work with the City of Charlottetown to rezone the property. That took a period of time. Obviously, COVID slowed things down as well. Then, once we got a second reading through town council, then we had to wait for an appeal process to go through and wait that period out.

So, Mr. Speaker, all that has taken place now and we are ready to start construction on the first two buildings.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Tyne Valley-Sherbrooke.

Ms. Altass: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

It's my understanding that rezoning process started in May of this year, still leaving quite a delay there.

But I want to just highlight that –

An Hon. Member: (Indistinct)

Ms. Altass: – transparency and accountability matter. In May 2018, under the previous government, changes to the *Health Services Act* were brought forward and passed in this Legislature that saw several powers shift from the Health PEI board to the minister. The board at the time was so opposed to these changes that the entire membership of the board resigned immediately.

We were told at the time that these changes were based on other jurisdictions, such as Saskatchewan and Nova Scotia. However, this is not the only model in use across the country and many experts suggest good governance would place more authority with the board rather than the minister.

Authority of health minister re: Health PEI board

Question to the minister of health: Why is it important that you have more authority than the Health PEI board?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

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

As the member alluded to, it was the previous government that brought this change in. I'm extremely proud and I'm extremely grateful of the work that we're doing currently with the board and with our new chair. We are meeting regularly, we're having great discussions, we're having dialogue, we have great plans moving forward to enhance health care here on PEI. I thank the volunteers that step forward to sit on the board, and they are doing great work.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Tyne Valley-Sherbrooke.

Ms. Altass: Mr. Speaker, it seems clear that giving final say and veto power to the minister opens the door to potential political interference when decisions about the operations of our health care system should be made on evidence and outcomes.

At a minimum, a critical element of defining the relationship between the minister and the board as outlined in the *Health Services Act* is the creation of an accountability framework to further determine exactly what roles each party is responsible for.

Tabling of accountability framework

Question to the minister of health: Has this accountability framework been created, and if so, will you table it?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

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

Again, I'll repeat: We have a great group of volunteers sitting on this board. We have a brand new board chair who's very engaged, very dedicated to the health care file here on PEI, served for many, many, many years on

the Prince County Hospital Foundation, and did great work there as well.

I can only say that as we move forward, we're going to see great enhancements here on PEI with regards to health service delivery, but the hon. member – if, for some reason, the minister wasn't ultimately responsible, I believe she would have a problem with that, as well.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Tyne Valley-Sherbrooke.

Ms. Altass: Mr. Speaker, thank you.

Respectfully, I will speak for myself and let you know when I have a concern about something, as I do right now.

It sounds like there has not been an accountability framework created.

An Hon. Member: (Indistinct)

Ms. Altass: I will note, though, that I'm glad to hear that the relationship is working well between the minister and the board.

Tabling of recommendations by board

Question to the minister of health: Since taking on your role as minister, has the board ever made any recommendations that you have not accepted or have altered in any way, and will you table all recommendations made by the board during your tenure and resulting actions?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

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

We do have lots of discussions. I consult regularly with the board. Right now, since we have a new chair, we're even more engaged as Mr. Key gets up to speed as chair of the Health PEI board.

Certainly, I'd be more than happy to bring back any discussions – any dialogue – that we've had.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Tyne Valley-Sherbrooke.

Ms. Altass: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

That is great to hear. I'm really glad to hear that and I look forward to that being tabled.

Of course, transparency and accountability are critical to good governance –

Mr. Trivers: How many (Indistinct) –

Ms. Altass: – and earning the trust of Islanders. It's important to know what recommendations have been made and what actions were or were not taken as a result and why.

I believe one thing this pandemic has shown us loud and clear is the importance of listening to our medical experts and following their recommendations based on evidence. We are all so thankful for the expertise of our Chief Public Health Office, who has been able to provide this expertise led by Dr. Morrison.

But I do wonder, and Islanders are wondering too, if Cabinet has altered or ignored any recommendations from the Chief Public Health Office.

Tabling recommendations made by CPHO and Dr. Morrison

Question to the Premier: In the same spirit of transparency and accountability, will you table all recommendations made by CPHO and Dr. Morrison to Cabinet and any resulting actions or decisions of Cabinet?

Speaker: The hon. Premier.

Premier King: Mr. Speaker, thank you for the question.

Absolutely, I believe we have demonstrated that when you follow science, when you follow the best information, you get good decisions, even if they're not popular. We've talked at great length in here about the success we've had with COVID and we hope that continues. Everything that we have done from a health perspective during the time of COVID has been led by the Chief Public Health Office – has been led by the health officials in this province.

But I would add we've been highly criticized here for the last number of days over decisions that were made at the advice of health officials but blamed on the minister, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Summerside-South Drive.

Mr. Howard: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Funds to upgrades to school zones

The minister of education encouraged children to use active transportation to reduce traffic in school zones, yet the government didn't direct the Active Transportation Fund towards upgrades to school zones to accommodate safer and broader active transportation options for those children.

A question to the minister: Why?

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

Mr. Myers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

On top of the 268 kilometres of pavement that we did this summer, we did a number of upgrades and through capital projects on the roads that we own to both widen. If you go over to the hon. member from Stratford's district, the health minister, you'll see along that school zone, we added an active transportation trail.

In the cities, if you come into Charlottetown or into Summerside, those are city-owned. They're city-owned streets and they're city-owned projects. So, we partnered with the City of Summerside, who added to their active transportation trail. We partnered with the City of Charlottetown, who has added to their active transportation trail. It's up to them to decide where they want to put their trail. We don't dictate to municipalities where they should put their active transportation trails. We're here as a partner.

This year coming up, we'll have \$10 million to put towards active transportation trails in this province.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Summerside-South Drive.

Mr. Howard: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

You don't have to dictate. You could maybe even just suggest, minister.

Planning staff in Charlottetown recently recommended rejecting a permit for a developer to build 200 housing units. One of the reasons cited was a lack of active transportation along the route. Paving to help housing is possible here.

Funds for paving re: housing development

Has the minister reached out to see if they can make use of the Active Transportation Fund to help address the issue and help clear the path for a significant housing development?

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

Mr. Myers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Ever since the Capital Budget came down, I heard how much you guys don't like pavement. Now, suddenly today, you like pavement.

Premier King: Yeah.

Mr. Myers: Really, really hard to understand whether or not you like pavement, but over here, we like pavement, so let's talk about pavement.

We have a \$5 million fund that groups can apply to – that municipalities can apply to – to add active transportation to their community. We have \$5 million in this Budget that we're debating here today in the House – the Capital Budget that's going to add \$5 million worth of pavement into government-owned infrastructure to both widen and separate paths for active transportation. That's something that, as a Province, we're very, very proud that we've done.

We're encouraged that there's groups out there that see the benefit of having active transportation pathways to their development, how important it will be and

we will work with any municipality who wants to put forward a plan to us on how they can enhance their active transportation trail system.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Summerside-South Drive.

Mr. Howard: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

During questioning on the special warrant for paving last July, the minister mentioned that he couldn't tell us about the other projects on their agenda until they were funded. His other priorities, sorry.

Later, he told the media about the Sherwood school before he even submitted an application.

Let's have some transparency. Let's have some consistency. Let's see some integrity.

I'll quote the minister's words: In the past, we have announced things without them being approved and then they've been later approved.

Projects approved for funding with TIE

Why don't you share the full list of what you have in development with us so we can see your priorities?

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

Mr. Myers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

One thing I will say is everything that we said we would do, we've done.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Myers: Probably a first for a government on Prince Edward Island in nearly 20 years.

I'm proud of the Sherwood school. I'm proud of what we did. The Sherwood school when I inherited the file wasn't at all a net zero school. It wasn't at all something that we could be proud of. It wasn't something that we would send students to and say: You're going to learn about tomorrow while you go to school in this school.

What Sherwood is getting in the Sherwood school is exactly that. They're going to get something that we're proud of. They're going to get something that's innovative and new for Prince Edward Island. They're going to get something where they can learn about the changes that they're making in their school to help tomorrow while they learn in that school. That's something that we all should be proud of.

I stand by everything that I've ever said. I stand by the commitments that I made to this House. When I said I was going to do something, I did something and that's more than the hon. member over there can say about himself.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Summerside-Wilmot.

Ms. Lund: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Rule 110(9) of this House states: A written executive response shall be tabled in the House during the next seasonal sitting following the adoption of the committee report.

Response to report from climate change committee

Question to the minister responsible for climate change: At what point during this sitting can the House expect your formal response to the last report from the Special Committee on Climate Change?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Environment, Water and Climate Change.

Ms. Jameson: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Actually I was in discussions with my department this morning regarding the report – the recommendations, and you can certainly expect something soon.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from O'Leary-Inverness.

Mr. Henderson: Mr. Speaker, this current government had a campaign promise to fix

and improve health care. Today, on the government website, there are 14,530 Islanders on the Patient Registry. That's up, I might add, by 130 names in just a few days. According to a national report released from the Canadian Institute for Health Information on October 29th, 2020, PEI has the lowest per capita proportion of doctors in the entire country.

Recruitment of doctors for PEI

At the same time, the number of practicing doctors across Canada continues to grow. So why is the minister of health struggling to recruit doctors?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

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

I'd like to thank the hon. member for that question. As he knows from his period of time as minister of health, it is a challenge to recruit doctors here on PEI.

We made a great announcement the other day for Tignish, which was lacking a family doctor for far too long. In the same announcement I mentioned that we had four letters of offer out for four other doctors and we're just waiting for those to be signed to come back in.

I'm very proud of the work that's being done right now between recruitment and retention at the Medical Society of PEI and I'm sure we're going to have more great announcements here in short timeframe with regards to additional doctors that are coming to PEI.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from O'Leary-Inverness.

Mr. Henderson: To point out the new doctor that has been recruited to Tignish, although very good, is replacing a retiring doctor and not one of those patients actually are on the Patient Registry. So that doesn't change anything on the Patient Registry.

The same national report points out that the average income of doctors on the Island is

the highest in Canada, so money is apparently not the issue. It seems to be a recruitment issue and it appears to be a failure of this particular minister.

Speaking of recruitment failures, to date, we have still not seen what recruiting dividends have occurred when the ministers trip to Ireland last March.

Health professionals recruited from Ireland

Since the minister's strange decision to recruit Irish doctors during the first stages of a pandemic, was really nine months ago, can he update this House on the health professionals recruited from Ireland during that trip?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

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

The individuals we met with in Ireland, for the most part, were Canadian citizens who were studying abroad. They're still going to medical school; they haven't even gone into residency program yet.

As the member would well know, you need to plant the seed in advance so that you can develop relationships with these medical students, so that when it does come time for them to choose a province, a jurisdiction to practice in, you're in the forefront of their mind.

I'm very proud to state that the students that we met with have all told us that we were the only jurisdiction that reached out to them, either virtually, by telephone, or in person.

Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from O'Leary-Inverness, your second supplementary.

Mr. Henderson: Well, let's hope we start to see some of these doctors actually sign up and come here, but so far this time in under this minister, we haven't really seemed to recruit much and we're just watching the Patient Registry like a ticker. It just keeps going up and up and up.

Today, as I said 14,530 Islanders without access to a family physician. Per capita, it's actually the worst record in Atlantic Canada. Even this doctors recruiting doctors initiative will need to recruit a doctor to recruit other doctors, which takes a doctor away from providing health care services to Islanders.

Patients on the patient registry

When will Islanders expect to see the patient registry begin to decline, minister?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

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

I think if we went back historically, 11 years ago plus, when this hon. member was in government and, for a short period of time, was health minister, I think we'd see that things weren't too rosy then.

Mr. Henderson: (Indistinct) 8,000 on the registry (Indistinct) –

Mr. Aylward: You know what, Mr. Speaker? It does. It goes up and down, unfortunately, but we've put other initiatives in place as well. We've done the virtual program with Maple. It has capacity for 10,000 patients to be connected to that service. So far, the individuals that have accessed that service have had glowing reports.

But just because we're doing something virtually, it doesn't mean we're taking people off the registry because we still want them to have a doctor in person in place. We are doing –

Mr. Henderson: When will the patient registry drop?

Speaker: Hon. members.

Continue.

Mr. Aylward: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Although we are still creating new initiatives such as virtual programs through Maple, I'm extremely proud of what we're doing as a government to provide health care to

Islanders that are currently unaffiliated with a doctor.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Third Party.

Mr. Gallant: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

My question today is for the minister of health on capital improvements at health care facilities across Prince Edward Island.

Dollars for improvements at health care facilities

Minister, you left a considerable amount of money on the table last year for health care facilities. You had approval to spend \$4 million and only spent 2 million. Why was your department incapable of using these resources you were provided with, Mr. Minister?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

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

In March, if you recall, all of a sudden, we fell into something that which called a worldwide pandemic. That completely changed the landscape of everything. Unfortunately, we had to put the brakes on some things – delay some files – but you know, we were working very hard to move forward, as you’ll see when this Capital Budget comes to the floor for health and wellness and Health PEI. You’ll see there are tremendous plans in place to move forward.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Third Party.

Mr. Gallant: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

For more than eight months, we’ve known there’s issues in our health care facilities, yet the minister chose to leave approved money on the table.

Technology upgrades allow for more efficient delivery of health care services to

Islanders, yet again, you left money on the table. You had approval for almost \$10 million but only spent \$4 million.

Why did the minister choose to cut work that was approved for a year ago?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

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

Again, I’ll use the example of what we’re going through right now: the pandemic. It completely changed the landscape of what we were able to do, but there was great initiatives put forward. As we talked about western PEI, the virtual health care initiatives that were introduced up there through Maple – the unaffiliated program for patients without a doctor right now. That was another great initiative. We’re working through the electronic medical records. There was a slight delay on that, again because of COVID.

But again, when the Capital Budget comes to the floor with regards to health and wellness and Health PEI, you’ll see the tremendous work that’s moving forward and will be completed.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. Gallant: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

We know there are capacity issues and too many people need services and there are too few beds. We saw this with the shutdown of Unit 9. ‘

Unspent dollars in health

Did the millions of unspent dollars go back into general revenue or where did that money get spent?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Mr. Aylward: Mr. Speaker, the decision to shut our Unit 9 with regards to preparations for a potential pandemic outbreak here on Prince Edward Island – that decision was

made to ensure that our hospitals were prepared in the case of such a catastrophe.

But as I've said in the House before, although Unit 9 itself was closed, any Islander – any patient that required hospitalization because of their mental health issue received exactly what they required. They were admitted, whether it was at the Hillsborough Hospital, the Queen Elizabeth Hospital, or the Prince County Hospital.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. Perry: Thank you.

Well, Mr. Speaker, it's that time of year again.

One year ago, I asked the minister of transportation what's being done to address the chokepoint on Route 2 between Portage and West Devon. At that time, he indicated he would instruct his staff to begin looking into the issue and determine what options they have to address this.

This chokepoint is a great concern of West Prince residents and it represents the only ground route to the rest of the Island.

Viable ground link to West Prince

My question to the minister: What options have been presented to the minister to ensure West Prince is not without a viable ground link to the rest of the Island in the event of an emergency closure of Highway 2 at this location?

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

Mr. Myers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

As the hon. member knows, we spent a considerable amount of time in his area this summer and on Route 2, as we paved nearly the whole thing from Summerside to Tignish, which some members are unhappy about. Hopefully, the hon. member over here is at least happy about it because he's talking about projects and how important they are to his community and to western

PEI. I think it's something that the hon. member maybe could have a discussion with the Green Party about later to tell them why this is important.

To answer your question: we have looked at what the options are there. We have looked at what the actual risk is of that structure. That structure is a structure that we constantly monitor and assess to make sure that it hasn't lost any of its integrity. But, as you know, and we used at the Hunter River project this summer, we bought some Bailey bridges and those are bridges that are portable, easy to set up, and they're used as a temporary structure.

Our short-term plan, unless we can come up with a mega project plan to fix that problem, is to use the Bailey bridges to help alleviate any concerns that would happen in the event of a structure failure. That said, we don't feel like there's any great risk of that structure failing. It's not in a tidal area. It's in more or a swamp-type area, so it's not the type of estuary that our staff feels would be affected so much by the rising tides or by a storm. But that said, we do have a backup plan and it's the Bailey bridges.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. Perry: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

It is very important, in case of an emergency – it could be an accident, it could be anything that could take out a section of that highway and that is the only access to and from West Prince; so, the towns of O'Leary, Tignish and Alberton. The residents of those areas would be really affected by that.

The short-term – and it was a suggestion I'd made before was perhaps the Confederation Trail, which runs nearby from Alaska into Portage, could be used as an alternate route in case of an emergency.

Confederation Trail an alternative route

Has there been any progress or any looking into that as a possibility?

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

Mr. Myers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Yes, there is and that is a viable option to use, particularly if we're going to get goods in and out. I don't know if it'll hold the entire daily volume of traffic back and forth, but that's something that we could also look into a little bit deeper.

As the hon. member knows, my deputy in that department is from Tignish so I'm acutely aware of the issues in Tignish. I hear it quite often, so there's lots of voices around the table for you, you can rest assured, in my office. It's not that awful long ago we were looking the map and we were looking at that Portage area and talking about, with our staff, what are some of the things we can do there.

It's widely accepted as being an issue and it's widely accepted that we have to come up with a reasonable solution. At this point we have what we would call a backup solution in the event of a failure. I know you're looking for more of a long-term solution. That's something we'll have to continue trying to work towards.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. Perry: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I do appreciate that, and I do appreciate all the voices that are coming in in respect to this concern. I would appreciate not having to stand up here in a year's time and ask again.

I really want to push the Confederation Trail. I think that is a viable option. It could be widened. It could be paved. It could be gated at both ends and opened in case of emergency. That was something there.

Some Hon. Members: (Indistinct)

Speaker: Order!

Mr. Perry: So with so many people around the table concerned about this, when can we expect construction to begin?

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

Mr. Myers: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I know the hon. member knows I'm not that reluctant when it comes to paving things, so it wouldn't take a whole lot to talk me into it. That said, I think there's a certain number of stipulations and requirements we need for our greenway funding that we received a number of years ago for the Confederation Trail. We might not be able to pave it, but I think we can use it on a temporary basis.

I'll commit to getting you a written response from my department for what the plan is and the timeline by no later than January – whatever day we come back in January; the 4th, let's say. I know my staff listen so they're probably starting to write the letter right now.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Montague-Kilmuir.

Mr. Deagle: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

This morning, I had a constituent contact me and her son and his girlfriend are traveling across Canada back to PEI. They're moving home. They first sent their letter to border approval on November 18th and they received some correspondence back on November 21st that they had to send some more information in, which they did.

It's now November 25th and they haven't received an approval or denial letter and they're traveling across Canada. They received approval to enter New Brunswick but they don't know about PEI – what they're going to do when they get here.

Delays for entering PEI

Minister, why is there such significant delays to find out whether you can enter PEI or not?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice and Public Safety.

Mr. Thompson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

That's a very important question and as soon as this is over, I'm going to get that name from the member and make sure that they

get a response before they hit the bridge. That's very important.

During this pandemic, we all are aware of the certain challenges. This is no excuse, but you know with the bubble bursting Monday and the announcement, our staff has been very challenged. I wanted to say that yesterday, we added six new staff. But to deal with that question, I'd like to get that name so we can address that right away.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Montague-Kilmuir.

Mr. Deagle: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

These two individuals are traveling across Canada as we speak. They said today that they've tried calling. No one's answering the phone. They've tried leaving voicemails but the inbox is full.

Minister, the previous timeframe to receive a response was 72 hours. We are now 168 hours in to when they first contacted the office and they have yet to receive a response. When can they expect to receive a response?

Mr. Henderson: He likes it on this side of the House.

Mr. Deagle: Somebody has to do your job.

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice and Public Safety.

Mr. Thompson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

As everyone in this House, I hope, is aware, when – and most people feel that they can reach out to me. A lot of people in this House have reached out with constituents that are in the same circumstance. I've done my best to help them.

To address the member's questions from Montague-Kilmuir, we are addressing that. We'll be back to 72 hours very soon, because of the – the Christmas holidays are coming up. People are going to be traveling. Islanders want to come home. They want to self-isolate, but we have to keep the Island safe. Our borders right now are of the utmost importance to keep Islanders safe.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Montague-Kilmuir, your second supplementary.

Mr. Deagle: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

You shouldn't have to contact your MLA to find out if you can get approval or denial to enter PEI.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Deagle: Minister, this application was sent in before the bubble popped – a number of days before that happened, and there was still significant delay. Now the bubble has popped since then, and I guess I would have concern that there's – with all the new applications coming in to get into PEI, will there even be more of a delay to get a response back? Are we going to have people showing up at the bridge without any approval documents because they haven't had a response?

Response time to applications to enter PEI

Minister, what are you going to do – I know you said you hired six more staff, but can you go back – look into this to make sure that we can get the response time back down to 72 hours?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Justice and Public Safety.

Mr. Thompson: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Truly, this is a very important question and I hate making politics out of something so important. I sat beside this member in caucus. I wish he had have brought this to me then.

An Hon. Member: Yeah.

Mr. Thompson: Mr. Speaker, I will address this. I want to, first, deal with the people he's talking about, but we'll be at 72 hours very soon. We'll make sure the public safety and the health of Islanders is at the foremost.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Summerside-Wilmot.

Ms. Lund: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Lots of governments have talked about the importance of using economic recovery to build back better, but how well we'll do that really depends on what we invest.

The OECD released a policy brief last month which I'll be tabling later. It focuses on opportunity for economic recovery that are green and inclusive.

The Province has very ambitious climate targets but without a suitably trained workforce, that transition will be impossible. In fact, the Premier suggested yesterday that labour gaps are the reason we've underspent so dramatically on housing.

Ensuring of labour availability

A question to the Minister of Education and Lifelong Learning: Labour shortages are impacting us now. What are you doing to re-skill or up-skill people to ensure an absence of labour availability doesn't stand in the way of government following through on its promises?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Economic Growth, Tourism and Culture.

Mr. MacKay: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you, hon. member.

Certainly, COVID has brought a lot of this to light, the labour shortages of what's happening in our economy right now – construction being one of them.

During this whole pandemic has made us go through all our programs – through SkillsPEI, through Innovation PEI – go through them to see where the gaps are – what we can do. We've been reaching out to industry on a daily basis, getting their input in designing these programs to move forward.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Summerside-Wilmot.

Ms. Lund: Mr. Speaker, at least 30 countries have included measures specifically directed at greening the economy as part of their recovery plan. Now, in fairness, these 30 governments actually have a recovery plan, but I'm sure the minister of climate change would agree

that a handful of net zero buildings, which we may not have the workforce to build in the first place, isn't nearly enough to reach government's targets.

Capital spending on transportation system

Question to the Minister of Finance: The path towards net zero document says that the next five years are critical to get on track for our targets and that's right; when will we see capital spending on an Island-wide public transportation system?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Ms. Compton: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. member, we've looked through every department to ensure that all the decisions we are making are through a green lens and including public transportation is something that we're working on, with possibly through our electric school buses and electric bus transportation. We'll continue to do that, hon. member.

I want to thank you for giving me the opportunity to stand today because I haven't had questions, really, since the beginning of this House, but I'd like to maybe rectify or clarify some of the misinformation and the fear-mongering that's been spread by the opposition.

Some Hon. Members: Oh.

Mr. Myers: Let's hear it.

Ms. Compton: The previous five-year plan for capital spend versus the current five-year plan for capital spend: education is up 219% – \$113 million. Health is up 191% for \$157 million.

Mr. Myers: Wow.

Ms. Compton: Housing is up 885%.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Premier King: Percent.

Mr. Thompson: (Indistinct) why they're not asking me –

Ms. Compton: And I don't really want to share this one because I know the hon. minister will be looking for more, but transportation is only up 6%.

Some Hon. Members: Wow.

Ms. Compton: So, hon. members, I would like to clarify that. This is the capital investment over the last five years versus this coming five years.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition, final question.

Premier King: A pivot, a pivot –

Some Hon. Members: (Indistinct)

An Hon. Member: She's already seen it.

Leader of the Opposition: Facts are interesting. Facts can get twisted. Facts can be real. Facts can be –

Some Hon. Members: (Indistinct)

Leader of the Opposition: I think we all need to read very carefully through the statement that the finance minister, who's obviously been waiting for some time to stand up and make the so-called facts that she used.

The increase in spending: absolutely, there's an increase in spending, only because you didn't spend the money last year. That's why it's such a huge increase in spending.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Leader of the Opposition: If you look at the budget for last year and this year, spending forecasts have gone down. They've gone down in education. They've gone down in health care. They've gone down in housing.

Some Hon. Members: (Indistinct)

Leader of the Opposition: They have gone up 33% in building roads and bridges.

Some Hon. Members: No.

Promises to Islanders

Leader of the Opposition: So, Mr. Speaker, to the finance minister: Can you bring back some real figures to this House that demonstrate how this government is not following through on its promises to Islanders?

Some Hon. Members: (Indistinct)

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Finance.

Ms. Compton: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

It's always very interesting: when the opposition do not hear what they want to hear, it's misinformation.

Some Hon. Members: Oh.

Ms. Compton: I have the facts in front of me. The capital spend for the previous five years from 2017 to 2022 versus the current capital spend for the next five years – education is up in spending 219%, health is up 190%, housing is up 885%, and transportation is up 6%.

Those are the facts and figures coming from the finance department and I am more than happy to share them today with the House.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Myers: Extend Question Period.

Speaker: Okay, hon. members.

End of Question Period