

HANSARD

NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY

COMMITTEE

ON

COMMUNITY SERVICES

Tuesday, October 20, 2009

Committee Room 1

Organizational Meeting

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COMMUNITY SERVICES COMMITTEE

Mr. Jim Morton (Chairman)
Mr. Gary Ramey (Vice-Chairman)
Mr. Leonard Preyra
Mr. Trevor Zinck
Ms. Michele Raymond
Mr. Leo Glavine
Ms. Kelly Regan
Hon. Chris d'Entremont
Mr. Alfie MacLeod

In Attendance:

Ms. Kim Leadley
Legislative Committee Clerk

HALIFAX, TUESDAY, OCTOBER 20, 2009

STANDING COMMITTEE ON COMMUNITY SERVICES

9:00 A.M.

CHAIRMAN
Mr. Jim Morton

MR. CHAIRMAN: I think we should get started. It's a little past 9:00 a.m. There may be some others who show, but we're here and we have a quorum. So I'd like to welcome you here. My name is Jim Morton, I'm the member for Kings North, and have been appointed to chair this committee.

I think maybe what we should do to start is just go around the room and introduce ourselves. I wonder, Kim, if we could start with you.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

We have some staff members in the room with us. This is an organizational meeting, and the purpose of today's meeting is primarily, as I understand it, for us to set an agenda for the near future, over the next several meetings, perhaps, and perhaps also - we do need to determine a meeting schedule, at least confirm the times that we'll meet.

What each caucus was asked to do, in advance of the meeting, was to submit some possible themes or agenda items. You've got in front of you at least an initial list. I know that Mr. d'Entremont added a couple of items this morning, one of which is poverty strategy, if you want to take note of that. Also housing, I think, as it relates to stimulus dollars in particular.

The NDP caucus might wish to add, as a couple of other items for consideration, government review of the Residential Tenancies Act, which I guess is a housing-related issue as well, and also mental health services for children as a couple of other possible ideas.

I'm thinking that maybe it would be useful for us to have just some discussion about what you see in front of you and what this list looks like, and whether there are some other things that we should add to it.

MS. KELLY REGAN: My concern is that we were asked to provide a list of witnesses. We were not asked for themes. We were asked to provide a list of potential witnesses. All I'm saying is, what you're seeing from us is not exactly what we would have provided had we been told that we had the choice of giving themes as well as potential witnesses.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Okay, I hear you. Mr. Leo Glavine.

MR. LEO GLAVINE: I think one of the obvious ones for us all with - the Progressive Conservatives haven't added the poverty reduction strategy. That seems to be one that jumps right off the pages, that we're all interested in getting an update.

MR. CHAIRMAN: It looks like that's a no-brainer.

MR. GLAVINE: Yes, that would be one right off.

HON. CHRISTOPHER D'ENTREMONT: Basically on it is that poverty strategy has basically five sub-settings. You could actually go a number of weeks talking about it and bringing in the different divisions of the department talking about it. Housing is a part of the poverty strategy, IA is another part of the strategy. So you could go through those, rather than just having one quick update. You really should drill down just a little bit into it.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Interesting point. The other thing - and we'll come back to that, but another point that should be made - the Liberal caucus mentioned the Brain Injury Association of Nova Scotia. Just to give out that little bit of context, BIANs was, I understand, on the list to present during the last period of the committee's life, but just didn't make it to the table. They have been canvassed again and they are interested in presenting.

MS. MICHELE RAYMOND: More than interested.

MR. CHAIRMAN: More than interested?

MS. RAYMOND: Specifically advocating to present, try again, yes.

MR. GARY RAMEY: Mr. Chairman, can I ask a question? With regard to what Ms. Regan said, there's no problem adding the items. You mentioned that you would have put some different items on here, had you not . . .

MS. REGAN: Yes, my understanding was that we were asked for witnesses.

MR. RAMEY: So it's not a problem adding those items.

MR. CHAIRMAN: I don't think so.

MR. RAMEY: When you have a chance to think about them and bring them forward, because I want to make sure that . . .

MR. CHAIRMAN: I guess our assumption, too, has been that each one of the items on the list certainly requires some witnesses. Some of them would be quite straightforward.

MR. RAMEY: So is there anything else that would be added to this list at this moment?

MR. LEONARD PREYRA: There seems to be a consensus on housing, however we define it.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Yes.

MR. D'ENTREMONT: You could bring in a guy like Dan Troke or someone like that to really drill down to where housing's going, the new housing agreement, what it actually meant, what kind of dollars are there and where the department's planning on spending their dollars. There is quite a large plan of where some of the smaller homes are going, where the renovations are going and all this stuff so it would be neat to have an update, since I haven't had an update in six months on this one.

MS. RAYMOND: Since it looks as though we're probably going to look at the survey of services as opposed to focusing on a particular theme of Community Services during the year. Under housing, that certainly would have been one of a couple of priorities for me. I wonder whether we might look at having somebody from Residential Tenancies as well?

MR. CHAIRMAN: Yes, actually, one of the things we discussed just before you walked in the door was a planned review of the Residential Tenancies Act.

MS. RAYMOND: Oh, sorry. Good.

MR. CHAIRMAN: One of the things that was suggested by Mr. d'Entremont is, let me canvass you to think about this, the idea of using the Poverty Reduction Strategy as at least an initial theme and then drilling down to various aspects of that so that we wouldn't

be assuming, for example, that a presentation would be the overall strategy, but perhaps several aspects of the strategy over several meetings. Is that an approach that would work?

MR. PREYRA: I think it would work. There are a couple of issues in there, like the Child and Youth Strategy and youth mental health that we were talking about that we might not get to it. That would be a trade-off that we could consider. I think it's a good idea because all of these seem to be connected to poverty, but I wouldn't want to let some issues fall between the cracks because we're following a theme.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Yes. I guess the other question is, to what extent should we be planning in advance? Should we be planning three or four meetings or should we be planning six or seven meetings, I guess is the question I don't have an answer to.

MR. GLAVINE: I've been on this committee since I arrived here. Generally, if there were an issue that arose during the year that really required us to have a look at some emergency type of issue around Community Services, then we just put that on the agenda and looked after that, have the appropriate witnesses come in.

Having spent now three full days - two and then one - looking at the poverty reduction strategy, it's a very, very encompassing document. My preference would be to have November and December's meetings tailored around the Poverty Reduction Strategy and then set the course for maybe the first three meetings of the new year. Then take a look then as to what seems to need more attention or maybe with three remaining meetings, each caucus could put forth their preference for April, May and June. It would be an approach that I think could be reasonable.

MR. PREYRA: I'm not sure what the conventions are in this committee, but it's the expectation that we'll meet once a month. So, we're talking really about two topics. Two days.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Typically, I know I'm jumping ahead, but the usual meeting slot for this committee has been the first Tuesday of the month. When the House is not in session, the committee's met in the afternoons. While in session, it meets in the mornings, like we're meeting now.

[9:15 a.m.]

MR. GLAVINE: Yes and one of the reasons for that is that Gordie Gosse was on the committee, so driving up in the morning on Tuesday was the routine and then we met in the afternoon. It was a little bit of an accommodation in some regard and I think Chris becomes much the same. Alfie as well.

MR. D'ENTREMONT: Well, I'm not five hours, three hours. Alfie has the long drive.

MR. GLAVINE: So it would be in the afternoon, preferably.

MR. PREYRA: Two or three topics is about all we could handle then at this stage. It would take us into January.

MR. CHAIRMAN: If we were to meet - and I know I'm moving into the area of actual scheduling, and then perhaps we can come back to fill in the slots - we're now toward the end, well, I guess the latter part of October. If we were to meet during the first Tuesday of November, that doesn't leave much time to actually arrange a meeting. Would it be reasonable to aim at the first Tuesday of December for our next meeting?

MS. RAYMOND: I was just going to comment, certainly the poverty reduction strategy seems to be the all-embracing framework that we might use, but I'm wondering whether we actually want to devote two meetings to it specifically? Yes, I mean an update is one thing but we don't want the strategy to end up driving the committee as much as anything. I mean we ought to be able to support the strategy as much as anything, and its components, but it might not be difficult to get somebody to come and update on the strategy at fairly short notice and that might be something we could look at in November and then begin looking at the components, at least schedules, throughout December/January.

MS. REGAN: I was going to suggest that the Brain Injury Association seems really keen to meet with us. So I bet we could get them in that first meeting. I know it's short notice for them, but I bet you they would be keen to be here.

MR. CHAIRMAN: From what Michele said, that probably is true. Leo.

MR. GLAVINE: Yes, sometimes we've also felt comfortable doing two topics, having two groups come in of an hour duration each, you know, not meeting while the House is sitting. Most likely, I think we all feel probably that by November 11th the House may very well be finished up, so if we had one session right after - (Interruptions) I would say after November 11th, if we had one close to that date, and then get back on schedule with a first week of December meeting.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Yes. Would there be a possibility, just following the discussion at this point, and Leo's thought that sometimes it may be possible to have two witnesses at a meeting, of offering BIANs an opportunity to speak at the November meeting, but following that with some initial presentation on the poverty strategy - kind of moving from one to the other during that initial meeting.

MR. D'ENTREMONT: I can't remember what the next one is going to be.

MR. GLAVINE: That sounds like a good plan.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Chris, I don't know if you want to make another point?

MR. D'ENTREMONT: No, just that I think that that's good, because BIANs, since they've been waiting for so long to be here, I think give them the first lot and then poverty strategy overview. So you would have someone like Lynn Hartwell or the deputy minister to come in to give you the overall, and then that will sort of point us in another direction, I'm sure, for meeting number two - of which topic, whether it's IA or whether it's housing, you know, sort of the five items.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Does that sound like a way to begin? Is there any disagreement with that?

MR. PREYRA: That takes us into January, then.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Michèle.

MS. RAYMOND: So we wouldn't double up BIANs, so that only takes us to December.

MR. CHAIRMAN: My understanding of what we were talking about was for the next meeting, probably in November, we would ask BIANs to meet, followed in that same meeting with a beginning presentation of a poverty strategy, and the December meeting would focus on the poverty strategy. I'm seeing nods, so I guess we've got consensus on that. If we move from then to, I guess to January and February, should we move to a witness other than the poverty strategy for January? Michele, do you want to speak to that? I see you nodding your head.

MS. RAYMOND: Well, no, as I was saying, I think we want to make sure that the overall strategy part doesn't end up taking over, but I think we could start hashing out our favourite components of it.

MR. PREYRA: Well, I think we have two topics in there. One is housing - that's connected to the poverty reduction strategy, so it's not that far off the meeting track there. Certainly from my point of view, we haven't talked about it, but certainly child and youth issues, youth mental health issues, are probably things we shouldn't let slide.

MS. RAYMOND: We have two topics on youth, two topics on disabilities already.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Any more thoughts on where we should- maybe I could frame it this way, if we were then to choose a topic for January, is there one that maybe has a level of agreement?

MR. TREVOR ZINCK: I would suggest and I would like to see the child abuse strategy and the state of youth health combined, do a combined meeting.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Again, I think that might involve two witnesses, because they are different processes.

MR. ZINCK: Absolutely, and Robert Wright would come in for the child abuse strategy again to give us update and perhaps somebody from the IWK or something on the mental health of youth or youth health centres.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Does that sound like an acceptable plan?

MR. D'ENTREMONT: So that would cover three months.

MR. CHAIRMAN: So that would cover January. Is that enough?

Mr. RAMEY: That's if other things don't intervene and we can always jiggle it around if we have to.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Yes, I think that's what we're talking about an hour and an hour.

MR. PREYRA: Do we have to propose a motion to that effect or what's the practice?

MR. CHAIRMAN: I see Michele's hand but before that, the question on the table is do we need a formal motion to approve the agenda; the schedule that we've created.

MR. GLAVINE: Generally, just a common agreement, but this is so that the staff can actually start calling people.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Great, I just wanted to clarify because I'm new at this role too.

MS. RAYMOND: So, if we have potentially three months on youth issues, then we're saying that the next chunk will be on housing issues, or disability issues or shelter issues?

MR. CHAIRMAN: That's what you recommend, I guess?

MS. RAYMOND: That's what I recommend, not necessarily in that order but how do people feel about making sure that we do at least move on. I don't know, we're getting up to a year of scheduling now.

MR. CHAIRMAN: If I could make a comment, I know Kim and I had a chance to discuss what kind of procedures before the meeting started. One of the questions, of course, that had come up is if someone, for whatever reason, cannot be available to present, it may be useful to have another acceptable backup theme so that we're able to move forward even if procedural things do become a problem. So it might be helpful to have another topic or two that we agree could be put on the table if necessary.

MR. PREYRA: Just to follow up on what Michele was saying, my suggestion was that we not do housing. It would follow the Poverty Reduction Strategy talk.

MR. CHAIRMAN: So I wonder would it be acceptable to add housing to that list, possibly for, I think, February but we can review that as we get a little closer. Again, if we have trouble with scheduling, then housing might get on the agenda sooner.

MR. D'ENTREMONT: Here's my suggestion though when it comes to housing. Housing touches every one of our constituencies and as much as, being a previous Minister of Community Services, as much as we can trust the staff, maybe there are some issues that may not have thought of in our own communities that they might want them to address. So the sooner rather the later because there are going to be a lot of decisions that are going to be made and basically foundations put up by February.

MR. ZINCK: I have to agree. I don't believe we as a committee have discussed housing for about three years now, 2006 was the last time we actually had someone in from the department, specifically on housing. Also it would be good to get a real good overview of the federal stimulus money that has come down. I know some of us have had briefings but it would be nice to get a real good view of where that money is at as far as the co-ops and public housing around the province.

MR. CHAIRMAN: So it sounds like we have a lot of agreement around that too. So we could add that, maybe make that the plan for February and stop there?

AN. HON. MEMBER: Absolutely.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Then I think we have some agreement. So we know what we will be discussing for the next several months. Then the next meeting will be the first Tuesday of November, in the morning, that is November 3rd, when the House is not in session, we will look at an afternoon meeting, yes.

MR. D'ENTREMONT: And don't forget that would be the 3rd of November and there's also an Osteoporosis Canada MLA breakfast. So nine o'clock probably will work. We might take a little bit of - by the time Diane Thériault, I think her name is, yells at us a little bit, I think it would probably a little past 9:00 a.m. before we all get here.

MR. CHAIRMAN: All right, that should still be acceptable, I think. She'll yell in the nicest possible way.

Is there any other business that we should be taking care of that I haven't thought about?

All right, the meeting is adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 9:27 a.m.]