

# **HANSARD**

**NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY**

**STANDING COMMITTEE**

**ON**

**COMMUNITY SERVICES**

**Tuesday, February 06, 2024**

**Committee Room**

**Supports for Community Centres, Infrastructures, and Facilities**

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## **COMMUNITY SERVICES COMMITTEE**

Melissa Sheehy-Richard (Chair)

John White (Vice Chair)

Larry Harrison

Danielle Barkhouse

Tom Taggart

Carman Kerr

Lorelei Nicoll

Kendra Coombes

Suzy Hansen

[John White was replaced by Dave Ritcey.]

[Kendra Coombes was replaced by Lisa Lachance.]

[Suzy Hansen was replaced by Gary Burrill.]

### In Attendance:

Erin Fowler  
Legislative Counsel

Tamer Nusseibeh  
Legislative Committee Clerk

### WITNESSES

#### Department of Communities, Culture, Tourism and Heritage

Justin Huston  
Deputy Minister

Bill Greenlaw  
Executive Director, Communities, Sport and Recreation



**HALIFAX, TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 6, 2024**

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON COMMUNITY SERVICES**

**10:00 A.M.**

**CHAIR**

Melissa Sheehy-Richard

**VICE CHAIR**

John White

THE CHAIR: Order. I call this meeting to order. This is the Standing Committee on Community Services. I am Melissa Sheehy-Richard, and I am the MLA for Hants West and Chair of this committee. Today we will hear from presenters regarding Supports for Community Centres, Infrastructure, and Facilities.

I'd like to remind everybody to please put your phones on silent, and in case of emergency, we'll be using the Granville Street exit and walking up to the Grand Parade.

I would now ask the committee members to introduce themselves for the record by stating their name and constituency, beginning with MLA Ritcey.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: I also would like to note the presence of Legislative Counsel Erin Fowler and also Committee Clerk Tamer Nusseibeh.

At this point, I would like to welcome the witnesses and ask that they introduce themselves, and then I will welcome you to bring your opening remarks, Deputy Minister Huston.

[The witnesses introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: At this point, I would open the floor to Deputy Minister Huston to bring his opening remarks.

JUSTIN HUSTON: Good morning and thank you for having us. As we were talking earlier, this is my third week in a row, so it's nice to see some familiar faces around the table. I'm here as well, as you know, with Bill Greenlaw here from Communities, Sport and Recreation, and as we were kind of joking earlier, it's a year as of yesterday we were here presenting on a similar topic, so we're really excited to share progress on our community improvement grants and programs.

I'll use my opening time to provide a little bit of an overview, and then Bill will provide some more detail about the programming. Then we'll be ready to answer any questions you may have.

As many of you know, at the heart of the work at Communities, Culture, Tourism and Heritage is our commitment to supporting Nova Scotians and our vibrant communities. We're proud to say that a substantial part of our budget - around \$91 million - is going straight into community projects through our various 77 grants and funding programs. Our programs cover a wide spectrum, from sports and recreation to the arts, specific initiatives for African Nova Scotian and Mi'kmaw communities, supporting language initiatives for French and Gaelic speakers, and promoting active living to foster healthier communities.

For today's topic of discussion - Supports for Community Centres, Infrastructures, and Facilities - we're going to highlight the programs and grants that support these areas. In 2022-23, we provided \$5.8 million for infrastructure programs and helped 180 community organizations. These investments in community infrastructure have social, environmental, and economic benefits. They support the construction of hard assets in communities, like trails, rinks, Legions, and community centres, but they also offer important community benefits that aren't as easy to see, like helping to bring important services to people.

Let's take a look at our Community Facilities Improvement Program, or CFIP, as an example. This program supports projects that are led by the community and improve how people use public spaces. Whether it's fixing up the community hall or making a cultural centre better, the Community Facilities Improvement Program helps make our communities livelier and stronger by funding these projects. In the fiscal year of 2023-24, we got, actually, 141 applications, which is the most we've ever received. This shows that more and more people in communities are recognizing the program and really need this kind of help.

Innovation is key to addressing community needs. Take the Connect2 grant program for example. It champions healthier, eco-friendly transport options like walking, cycling, and wheeling, encouraging people to consider alternatives to driving for short trips. A good example of this initiative is in the Town of New Glasgow which received \$49,000 through Connect2 to optimize paths commonly used by the community. This

project not only increases connectivity for residents of a historically African Nova Scotian community and a senior living complex, but also aligns with the town's active transportation strategy, showcasing the program's impact on local infrastructure and community well-being. For fiscal year 2024-25, we're allocating \$400,000 to push these initiatives further, showcasing our investment in well-being and environmental health of our communities.

Reflecting on 2023, Nova Scotia faced its share of natural disasters, from Hurricane Fiona to wildfires in Shelburne County and Tantallon and extensive flooding. Our department quickly stepped up and mobilized resources, making our facilities, such as museums and visitor information centres, available to support the community needs during these crises. In response to the impacts on our infrastructure, we've ramped up our support to help communities adapt and recover. This includes facilitating access to repair funding through initiatives like the federal disaster financial assistance fund.

Our team is better prepared to act fast in these crises because of the strong ties that we have with community and our flexible way of creating programs. A good example of this is how quickly we started the Community Generator Program after Hurricane Fiona.

The growing effects of climate change have made it essential for us to come up with a planned approach. Working together with the Department of Environment and Climate Change, the department has created a Climate Adaptation Strategy. This strategy is backed by substantial investments in sustainable community infrastructure, highlighted by projects such as the deCoste Centre for Arts & Creativity, Glace Bay Youth and Community Centre, and the new Resilience Centre in Millbrook First Nation.

CCTH not only supports our communities to better withstand and recover from the effects of climate change, but we also search to advance equity, diversity, and inclusion in our grant programming. As a result, we have set up a strong structure that emphasizes fair access and the development of capacities within communities that are actively seeking equity and equality. This commitment leads to specialized grant programs such as the Mi'kmaq Cultural Activities Program, the Diversity and Community Capacity Fund, and the Cultural Communities Identity Fund. Each program is designed to promote the growth of community culture, build capacity to get organized, and celebrate Nova Scotia's diverse cultural identities. The programs contribute up to 75 per cent of project costs. Arts Nova Scotia enhances these efforts with equity-focused initiatives, including the Mi'kmaq Arts Program, and providing access and support for projects by individuals or groups facing barriers.

In partnership with African Nova Scotian Affairs, we're tackling racism and improving access to government programs for African Nova Scotians through initiatives like the African Nova Scotian Road to Economic Prosperity Plan. CCTH has integrated equity, diversity, inclusion, and access, or EDIA, principles throughout our grant life cycle, from application to assessment, ensuring a comprehensive approach to supporting

underserved and equity-seeking groups. This includes embedding EDIA questions and self-identification queries in applications, developing an EDIA framework and lens tool for staff assessments, and compiling resources to build internal and external capacity.

For example, our work in sports and recreation, including anti-racism and safe sport initiatives, is making these activities more inclusive and welcoming for everyone. Bill can explain further.

I would just like to mention that the Province allocated \$18.3 million toward enhancing sports facilities. Of this, \$8.2 million were directed to create a hockey hub for women and girls at the Canada Games Complex at Cape Breton University. This investment aims to boost hockey participation among girls and women and to improve facilities for all users. Part of these investments also includes \$4.3 million for the Cape Breton County Arena for modernizing amenities and improving accessibility and energy efficiency, and \$1 million for repairs to the Colchester Legion Stadium in Truro, affected by Hurricane Fiona - good examples of our commitment to maintaining vibrant community sports and infrastructures.

The department is well positioned to support communities. We use various means to communicate our programs to Nova Scotians. For example, we make sure that constituency offices are aware of our grant programs, when applications are open, and when the deadline is to submit them. We strive to be flexible and adaptable and respond to the needs of our communities, which is at the core of our mission. We're always trying to find the right balance between being consistent and being responsive to their different needs. I'm pleased to say that we've made major progress. We've updated guidelines, applications, and reporting to ensure that applicants link their project to the program's objectives. We've developed tools and hosted training sessions to ensure that we're embedding risk assessment in all of our programs.

There's so much more to say, but I'll turn it over to Bill at this moment. I look forward to your questions.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Greenlaw.

BILL GREENLAW: It's a pleasure to be back here on our anniversary date, I guess. Some of you are a little different, but some of you are the same players around the table. Nice to be back.

As Deputy Minister Huston mentioned, this is my second of - one pretty tied together with going to committees. I'm not fortunate enough to go to three, like he had to go to.

As Deputy Minister Huston mentioned, I'll talk more specifically about our infrastructure grants. We support everything from rinks and recreation facilities to trails, to

community halls, to Legions - fundamentally soup to nuts. I shared in a previous committee appearance that we are in the business of building stronger communities across Nova Scotia, and healthy communities need gathering places that support people's social, emotional, and physical well-being. If there's a place in your community where people come together for a program to participate in sport or be physically active, or even play cards and catch up with friends, there's a good chance that CCTH has helped with that facility meeting its mandate.

We have 77 grant programs across the department that support a wide range of community organizations and projects, but I'll focus on just a few today. The Community Facilities Improvement Program, or CFIP as the deputy minister mentioned, helps not-for-profit organizations make repairs and upgrades with funding up to \$50,000. This program supported 25 projects last year. For example, it funded the Maitland Bridge Community Hall Association in Annapolis County to make urgent exterior repairs to keep the facility safe and open for community use. CFIP also helps facilities become more sustainable so they can better meet environmental standards and reduce operating costs. For example, the program funded the Cranton Cross Road Community Centre in Margaree Centre to install a heat pump and upgrade their electrical system.

We also help facilities become more inclusive in who they serve. Our Community ACCESS-Ability Program grants help organizations become more accessible in five categories: the built environment, transportation, communications, assistive devices and universal design. This year, the program funded 58 projects for a total of \$1 million. The program supported the Savoy Theatre in Glace Bay to purchase hearing loops so patrons who have hearing difficulties can fully enjoy performances. Our grants have gone towards equipment such as accessible exam tables at health clinics or universal design for entrances and washrooms.

We've also shown over the past year, as we dealt with everything from a pandemic to natural disasters, that our staff and our programs can be nimble and responsive to meeting community needs. After Hurricane Fiona in 2022, we quickly stood up the Community Generator Program to help community centres buy and install generators so they can serve as comfort centres during a storm or other power outages.

In 2022-23, we allocated \$5.8 million for 180 organizations under this program. In this fiscal year, we funded another 66 community recipients totalling \$1.9 million. That's nearly 250 generators funded in community halls, volunteer fire departments, food banks and other centres over two years. In fact, the program met the demand so successfully that we aren't offering it as a specific program in 2024-25 and going forward, we will consider generator requests as part of our regular infrastructure funding.

I want to briefly mention our food support as another example of how we're responding to pressing community needs. We know that food security is a growing issue in Nova Scotia, as it is in other places. Through the Community Food Access and Literacy

Fund and the local Food Security Initiatives Fund, we support everything from meal planning and nutrition to local Meals on Wheels programs and food pantries. For example, this year we funded the Bear River First Nation to provide a five-month workshop series that helps 65 community households with food preparation and meal planning on a budget.

In Louisbourg, we're supporting the local Legion branch to offer monthly community meals, bi-weekly seniors' socials and snacks for their youth drop-in programs. Louisbourg is more than 30 kilometres from the nearest grocery store, so these programs are meeting a real need in that community.

It's not just about filling bellies, although that is certainly important. Food is a social connector. A community meal brings teenagers, young families, and seniors together in the same room, creating stronger bonds and a sense of local pride.

[10:15 a.m.]

I want to close with a few words on how we do this work. As most of you know, I'm fortunate enough and the deputy minister's fortunate enough to have an excellent staff in the department, and specifically because I'm here I can say my division, including - and you probably know - my six regional managers. We have six regional offices around the province and they're regularly meeting with community organizations, holding town halls and information sessions, and helping local groups understand their funding options and helping them develop strong applications. Our team members actively work with partners and organizations to help them leverage our funding to build stronger, healthier communities.

I would be remiss if I did not mention that the application period - I've already spoken to one of you about this - our major infrastructure grants close this February 14<sup>th</sup>, and if you know projects looking for funding, hopefully they've already spoken to their local CCTH regional office or one of my program officers. If not, I encourage them to email or pick up the phone. As you know, we're always here to help.

With that, I'll conclude my remarks, and look forward to your questions.

THE CHAIR: We will now move and open the floor to questioning. This committee functions on 20 minutes per caucus of questioning, and I also want to remind everyone to wait until I acknowledge you before you start speaking and your microphone turns red.

At this point, I will turn it over to the Liberal caucus. MLA Nicoll.

LORELEI NICOLL: Thank you, Chair, and thank you for the presentations. I just wonder - there are many community centres and facilities now that have come forward and said that they want to help during the housing crisis by providing shelters to those



experiencing homelessness but are unable to do so without funding. I just wonder: Is the department aware of this, and are you working with the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing to support community centres to help shelter those experiencing homelessness?

JUSTIN HUSTON: Thanks for the question; very timely, and it's a great question. Yes, we are working collaboratively across departments. As you know, housing and shelters are - it's a complex issue. We're able to tap into and community groups are able to tap into resources. For example, starting foundationally, it's very difficult to even consider how to utilize community centres for either day shelters or whatever it might be, if a roof is leaking or they're not accessible.

I'll just underline that some of our existing programs are key in terms of making sure that those facilities are operational and are able to serve the broader community. Then there are conversations that have been happening and are continuing to happen with the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing as well as the Department of Community Services around how we help support communities, meet communities where they're at, and what their priorities are for looking for assisting with the housing and the homelessness issue in those communities.

As you can appreciate - and you would know full well - even within your own constituency, different communities are going to approach things differently. What we're - our focus is really on how we work with those organizations that we have relationships with and leaders in the community to help them meet the needs that they've identified to help address their neighbours and fellow citizens.

LORELEI NICOLL: In that regard, with respect, you spoke about diversity and the certain funds that you have in CFIP. Are you taking into consideration the amount of community supports, like newcomer supports, for helping the unhoused when they're trying to award grants at centres and facilities across the province?

JUSTIN HUSTON: Yes. The short answer to that is yes. To elaborate a little further, our division - particularly with Bill's division, our community section - works very closely with different community organizations, whether that's the Immigrant Services Association of Nova Scotia, provincially or here in the city, or organizations such as up in Cape Breton around - I think of the work that we did a couple of years back or a year ago around bus shelters for international students who were having difficulties getting to and from class from where their housing was available. Something we're very alive to. Again, woven throughout our opening remarks is the need to be flexible, and adaptive, and responsive to what communities themselves are identifying as the key bottlenecks or barriers to meeting those services.

LORELEI NICOLL: Just within your presentation, you mentioned not-for-profits. There were 4,100 applications, and 77 - I think you said that as received. I just wonder: Of the 41 applications, were they all successful?

JUSTIN HUSTON: In that specific program, there were 141 applicants, and I believe that it was 70-something that were successful. We can talk about this in greater detail, but we have different kinds of funding programs with different types of criteria. Some, we have independent panels, which review and provide recommendations. Others are directed through staff review and assessment. Of those, they're typically ranked on a scoring system. It depends on the type of program. It often has to do with maybe the complexity of the issue, the breadth of the community it's serving, or is it a target community that we know needs particular focus? Some of this goes into the assessment. It's different for different programs.

There is also a process where we might deem applications ineligible because they don't meet the criteria, for whatever reason. Then typically of those that are eligible, we will rank those on a scoring grid, and then from high to low we will fund based on what funding is available. If additional funding becomes available through the year - for example, another program we have wasn't fully subscribed - I would think a good example would be the Business ACCESS-Ability grants. Last year it was not fully subscribed. Enough businesses did not apply at that time. That's not the case this year, but last year we were able to move some of that funding into the Community ACCESS-Ability grants, which was able to then fund the programs that weren't previously approved for funding, because we had the available funds.

LORELEI NICOLL: Just back to the not-for-profits, because I know there are recreational grants that are given to municipal units, but this is separate - this is just for the not-for-profits. The municipal units would apply for grants for their facilities in some other form, in some other source - I just wanted to sort of clarify that.

JUSTIN HUSTON: Yes, there are funding programs that are directed toward recreational facilities, whether that's new facilities, new improved facilities, or energy efficiency. Municipalities can be a proponent and apply. They can also be an operator of that - the society, for example, that might operate on behalf of a municipal unit or an organization. It's a little bit of both.

LORELEI NICOLL: Yes. I was a member of one of those societies, so therefore I know, and I don't think it's some - I think it's by design that rinks are the first thing you say when you say, We give grants to. Rinks and pools are big sinkholes, literally, and therefore they require a lot of funding. I just wondered if there is some point, if the asks continue to be from the same facilities wanting to keep the lights on, whether that is deemed as ineligible at some point.

JUSTIN HUSTON: I'll start, and then maybe I can hand it to Bill just to elaborate a little further.

It is something we look at. For example, a lot of these facilities were built decades ago. They're aging. Assessments are done. Typically, before we would invest anything major, we would - let's say it's a major overhaul. We would look at if there's an engineering assessment that could be done to say: Look, if you're just going to repaint this - in five years the steel girders are going to fail anyway, so let's rethink this. But for the most part, these organizations, like you said, it's high-humidity environments. They're heavily used by communities. Often it's - what is it: An ounce of prevention is worth a pound . . . I can't remember the expression. (Interruption) A pound of cure. It's keeping on top of the upkeep. What we see so often, particularly with volunteer organizations, is that if they aren't able to sustain that regular upkeep, it's going to cost the community and all of us a lot more in the end.

The other part - and we can talk a little bit about this too - is around energy efficiency. Some of this is making ends meet. It's also environmentally responsible. Are there ways that we can upgrade the systems - and maybe, Bill, you can talk a little bit about some of the electrification of some of these community grants. There are ways that we can make it - it's a win/win/win across the board, but communities otherwise would just probably need to pay for the lowest common denominator, because they're fundraising, and they might just install the same oil heater or fix it, versus is there a chance to upgrade to heat pumps?

BILL GREENLAW: Let me just begin by saying that community recreational facilities are emotional assets to communities. (Interruption) Decommissioning recreation facilities is a very challenging thing to do across the country. People have grown up going to a certain asset. They love it. I don't know about you, but I've been in quite a - have children who did sports around the province. One was fortunate enough to be a hockey player. I can say that some of the rural rinks in Nova Scotia have got to be the best-kept facilities I've ever seen. You could literally eat off the floor. There's pride from community - the community volunteers - to make sure that facility stays up.

While our assets might be aging - there are a few outliers that are not kept up well - for the majority of them, there's a sense of community pride. We provide the supports that help do those - like, with the Rink Revitalization Fund, big run - if you look at how the grants went out over the last couple of years, it's the time for the chillers and the ice plants to be recycled or renewed, so a lot of investment went into those sorts of assets. A lot of roofs got invested in with that fund.

The other kind of cool - I mean, for me - is the electrification of the Zambonis. I don't know if you've seen the electrification of Zambonis around, but that has also been something that we've invested in to help ensure our green future, and that we're not wearing masks while the Zamboni (laughs) goes around cleaning the ice.

I think it's a bit of both, but the reality is recreation facilities are loss leaders in communities. Yes, they're going to cost us money and they are a public good, but we also know that they're vital to community well-being and sustainability, and we're proud that we're able to support them in the way that we do.

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister Huston, you had something else to add?

JUSTIN HUSTON: Just as a follow-up. While Bill was talking, it allowed me to go through my binder here and find some facts that I thought it would be useful to share, just so folks understand the Rink Revitalization Program. It's a million-dollar-a-year fund. Groups are eligible to receive up to one-third of the total cost of the project to a maximum of \$150,000. Most projects are much smaller than that. The funding that goes out the door, I would say, is between \$20,000 and \$50,000. Over three years, we've funded 65 rink projects: 32 in 2021, 22 in 2022, and 11 in 2023. This speaks to, I think, the need that was present, but also folks are seeing okay, we've made some investments - now let's maybe focus on some other areas of the community. It certainly has been a popular program.

THE CHAIR: MLA Kerr.

CARMAN KERR: The past government, I think in 2017, tabled legislation to get to those targets for accessibility in 2030. I'm just wondering if the department is asking for increased budgets or supports to help meet those targets within our facilities.

JUSTIN HUSTON: That's a great question. I remember thinking of the year 2025, and that seemed like the distant future, but 2030 is sooner than we think. I'm pleased to say that a lot of different organizations are really stepping up. As I mentioned previously, the Business ACCESS-Ability Grant Program - I think this is the first year it will be fully subscribed, and I think businesses were kind of slow to realize that. We've also upped our communication on the issue in terms of working with other departments that are working with businesses, but also directly with the business sector within tourism. Because tourism is now within the department, we have a closer reach there.

Around the funding piece, I think the funding has been adequate to date. I will say that we have been able to - as I was speaking in response to MLA Nicoll's question where we've seen projects that are great projects, but we just don't have enough funds - we have been able to redirect funding, and in some cases get additional appropriations. Because if there's a good project and communities are ready to get it done, and we're able to provide a portion of that and they have the other matching funds, then we want to be a part of that. We've been looking to prioritize that.

Going forward in this fiscal year, I don't see us making an increase in that budget line, but I do think that could be on the horizon, and it's something that we're looking closely at. I think as we get closer to 2030, we're going to have a lot of organizations and businesses that are going to be looking to make sure they get it done.

CARMAN KERR: Thank you for that response. Switching gears, the Recreation Facility Development Grant - I work with a lot of groups, as a lot of MLAs do. These groups are aware of that grant. They're aware of CFIP. They're aware of the RDA grants. But I do have a number of facilities and groups that are barely making the mark. They've got a volunteer group that is above capacity. They've got committees looking at funding and media relations. They've gone above and beyond what most groups would be expected to do, but every year is a gamble on whether they can keep that facility open. I'm curious about the funding formula of those three programs directed at facilities, and maybe the second part of that question could be: Are we missing the mark on any of that funding formula? Is there something we should be looking at or adding to that formula?

[10:30 a.m.]

JUSTIN HUSTON: I'll start with an overall response and then I think Bill knows a lot of these programs certainly better than I. His staff would know even better. There are different programs, as you speak to. Some are focused on facilities development, others around improvement. Facilities development would be like we want to add on a wing that's going to include an open access wait room onto a community hall. Improvement might be around we need to upgrade the electrical so that we can provide wi-fi. Then we have other ones like the Community ACCESS-Ability Program - providing some of those grants.

I will say that we do hear those concerns. Luckily, I think we have staff who work very closely with community organizations. There is no closed door when it comes to CCTH. It may be unsuccessful in a particular funding program, but we want to work with those organizations and groups to understand - maybe there is another way that we can approach this. Maybe it's a different kind of investment. It could be a one-time project fund where we look at maybe it doesn't fit into any of these boxes, but it has a lot of merit, and we want to explore how we make this happen a different way. I would encourage you and the different groups to work with our department and if it serves the community and it's a good idea, then there are ways we can try to make that happen.

BILL GREENLAW: That was a great answer, Deputy Minister, thank you. It's my contract renewal time, so I'll pass around the compliments.

We hear that - finding the matching funding for our grant programs and we are adjusting the ratio going from one-third that we would support to two-thirds of the project, but the community group has to come up with a third. Not putting the burdens on communities, because selling cookies and muffins and things at the front door of the facility - you've got to sell a lot of cookies to raise fifty grand or forty grand. We're aware of that and we're trying to do that. Provincially, we support physical activity, and we promote physical activity and community well-being, et cetera. There's only so much the Province can do in supporting facilities. The community has to think about operating dollars. Our going into operating municipal facilities or funding operating grants for

municipal facilities is just not realistic. That needs to be the responsibility of the municipality.

CARMAN KERR: Good segue. I've got a particular group, the Friends of Annapolis Pool Society. They've got great capacity on operations. They've gone from hiring 3 to 11 lifeguards and staff; they train other staff from Digby and beyond; they've built the committee, as I mentioned before, on media relations, on fundraising. It would take every day a thousand-dollar bean breakfast to make up that gap. They have a pool liner that's broken. Quotes are up to \$500,000 to fix that liner. Otherwise, they've got everything sorted. They've hit their 2030 accessibility targets already.

If that group can't make it work, I don't know what group could. I'm going to table their ask. I also want to mention your regional office in Kentville has been outstanding - the staff there we've met with. The staff in Kentville have done a great job. There's nothing more they can do at their level, so that's why I'm bringing it to committee and asking what we can do for this group that's done everything above and beyond but isn't able to open this year and serve those hundreds of people in the area.

JUSTIN HUSTON: As a former lifeguard - in a Summer job - I certainly am interested in pools. I think like rinks, they serve an important role in the community. This project in particular is a good project that they have been working very directly with our department, and we are looking at ways to make this happen. Stay tuned on that. Thank you for tabling it, and I would just encourage them to keep the conversation going with our staff.

CARMAN KERR: I appreciate a former lifeguard, and as a former lifeguard, I can - and started at that pool in my teenage years. It was a way of getting out of doing farm work on the farm, but I really enjoyed it, and it does serve a number of people outside of our town as well.

Maybe I'll switch gears if I have time, just around - I think last week in Public Accounts Committee, the deputy minister mentioned the events strategy at CCTH. I'd like to know: is it at the beginning, the middle, or the end stage of that strategy?

THE CHAIR: Deputy Minister Huston, 30 seconds.

JUSTIN HUSTON: It is a strategy. I believe that came in a few years back. It's an evergreen strategy, so we continue to follow that strategy in terms of our key focus areas. There's no - I don't foresee us - we're not having conversations around need to do a new one or update it.

THE CHAIR: Perfect timing. I will now turn it over to the NDP caucus, beginning with MLA Burrill.

GARY BURRILL: Well, everybody's thinking about weather and storms. Coming back to the Community Generator Program, I understood your explanation that the program was so thorough in its post-Fiona shot that, really, you can deal with this now by expanding the criteria of other programs, discontinuing the program itself. Can you give us some sense - does that mean that after one year, the need is actually met? Or is there - do you have some sense of their being an unmet need that you would speak to?

JUSTIN HUSTON: It's a good question. I don't want to leave the impression that we are closing the door on any kind of discussions or applications around generator programs for community centres or warming centres. I think the point was that we - the number that we saw - 180 in the first year - we initially had started that fund at, I believe it was \$2 million. Then, we saw that the need was so great. We had contemplated okay, we're going to have this program for a number of years, but there was space in the budget and direction to provide additional funding. So, we were able to provide - I think it was \$5.8 million which was able to address those needs immediately. Last year, we saw a number of applications come in, but it was significantly reduced - about half of that, I think, or so. We were able to prioritize and fund all of those.

From what we're hearing from our staff who are on the ground working with the organizations, the feeling is that the majority of those needs have been met. That said, we remain always open. We have other funding programs - our grant infrastructure facilities funds - and we do want to hear from organizations that are - that see it as a priority. There are a lot of places that can serve that need and are important, like on days like today or over the weekend. We also know that once you have some of these things in place, and as we look at energy efficiency, there are - we don't want groups to come back every year and just upgrade and get the nicest, newest generator. This needs to be really based on need. That's why we're taking this approach where we're waiting to see what comes in this year, but we think - we feel like the need is primarily - has been met significantly.

GARY BURRILL: Does that mean that the criteria for the expanded program - wherever it goes to live now after the discontinuation of the Community Generator Program - are substantially the same as they were in the program itself? Or is there an expansion or a contraction?

JUSTIN HUSTON: I'm not sure I understand the question, sorry.

GARY BURRILL: With the program discontinued but the need being addressed by expanding to include that in other programs, are the criteria in the programs where it is now being located substantially unchanged from the criteria that existed with the original program?

JUSTIN HUSTON: I understand that question now. No, the criteria, for example, under the Community Facilities Improvement Program where folks are able to apply for

energy upgrades and/or energy efficiency work, that remains. It would fall within that, and I don't see that being a limiting factor, if that's the question.

BILL GREENLAW: The remaining infrastructure programs will address that, but they will be prioritized. I believe we've addressed - most of the comfort centres have received generators that were designated by municipalities. One of the unintended consequences - you do a generator program, and everybody wants to be a comfort centre to get the generator. I learned that quickly, that the municipality had to designate it. I think we have that covered. A lot of the community infrastructure was quite successful in getting generator programs.

I just want to be - if there is a facility out there that has an emergency need, we prioritize the emergency needs, and then if we get to generators, we will. I don't want to think that it's going to be an easy access to a generator. It will be scored and based upon need.

The other thing that we - through the Department of Community Services - they gave us funding, and we dealt with all the shelters. The 14 shelters all got generators as well through the last year.

JUSTIN HUSTON: Just two points. One, I want also to mention municipalities. We've been working closely with Mi'kmaw communities as well. Those needs have been met. The message to everybody is that if there is an organization that is needing a generator for the purposes that Bill outlined and is a priority, by all means, don't hesitate to have them contact us, and we will work with them directly to make sure that those needs can be met.

GARY BURRILL: Could it be possible, then, that there could be organizations that may have been deemed ineligible under the old program that, depending on circumstances, may be eligible now?

JUSTIN HUSTON: That's probably unlikely. The Community Generator Program cast a pretty wide net. Given the aftermath of Hurricane Fiona, and we saw how great the need was, and the need for distributed generator systems across the regions, we kept - that was a pretty big net. I don't see that groups that weren't eligible - again, some of this - a great example of what would be ineligible is a for-profit business. That is not eligible, so those were quickly deemed ineligible because we wanted to focus on those non-profits.

GARY BURRILL: I wanted to ask a little about the Community Facilities Improvement Program grants. It used to be - is it still the case that community places of worship were not within the eligibility? Is that still the case?

BILL GREENLAW: Technicality here, MLA Burrill. We would not support the sanctuary, but if the church or the faith facility - I guess I'll be more generic - had a



recreation hall in the basement or a community kitchen and the roof needed repairs, they would be eligible to apply. But if it was just a faith-based experience and not a community asset, it would not be eligible. We would not support repairs to the church - the example would be a church - the altar or the pews. Those would be ineligible, but anything that's downstairs or off to the side.

GARY BURRILL: This has been the case for a long time. I wonder if the department has given any thought to the changing relevance of this rule, given the way that worship spaces are used, particularly in rural communities, more lately. For example, Mr. Greenlaw, you spoke about pews. Pews are rarer than they used to be. That's because sanctuary spaces are now used more commonly as community gathering spaces - very commonly funeral community gathering spaces.

I wonder if those criteria are something that could stand to be looked at from that point of view.

[10:45 a.m.]

JUSTIN HUSTON: Well, the short answer would be, yes, that's something we could take back to have a look at and reexamine. We do try to focus, again, on meeting community needs. There are, for example, some churches that are being reimagined - that might be faith-based on Sunday but are utilized for concerts on other days. There are some angles there. But again, a part of that is limited resources and trying to be able to focus on where some of that need is great. If you have a congregation - I know some congregations or faith-based organizations are volunteer and they're struggling. There is the ability for those organizations to seek other sources of funding - Canadian Heritage, for example, or others. But it is something that we can certainly look at.

BILL GREENLAW: I would encourage community to talk to our regional managers and explain how the facility is being used because if all of the chairs are being removed and it's a community gathering space during the - it would be eligible. It just depends on the description and how the facility is actually used. It's not a hard yes or a hard no. There needs to be a discussion, as the deputy minister said in one of his remarks. He said, We're not here to say no, we're here to figure out how to help you.

We need to know the nuances and the subtlety of how that asset or facility is being used - a faith-based facility - and then we can have a discussion. But if it is purely a faith-based facility, it would not be eligible.

GARY BURRILL: I just would like to suggest about this, if it's being looked at in the department, that the smaller the community, the more this consideration is relevant so that very rural communities quite commonly have no public gathering area other than one place of worship. There are many communities that used to have a community hall and a Legion and a place of worship which now only have a church, and we see smaller places of

worship being remodelled for those purposes. I think it would be helpful for that to be acknowledged in the criteria going forward. Great, thank you.

THE CHAIR: MLA Lachance.

LISA LACHANCE: Deputy Minister, I hope this is not inappropriate, but I enjoyed seeing you contribute to the culture of our province, most recently in a concert at Saint Andrew's United Church. That was a great concert.

I wanted to ask about spending on food. You mentioned the Community Food Access and Literacy Fund and the local foods program. I think there are a couple of priorities for Nova Scotians in there. One is food security and access to food, which is only growing, as we know, and the other is the emphasis on local foods and growing local consumption. I have a series of questions around this.

What was the total spent on food security - I might call it, or you might call it a different bucket, but food security - from the department in past years? Is it all emphasizing local foods, or is some of it broader than that?

JUSTIN HUSTON: Thanks for the question. Thanks for the compliment as well. In terms of - we have two programs that we run through CCTH, and I'll talk a little bit about some of the work that we do with other departments as well.

We have a Community Food Access and Literacy Fund, and then the Food Security Initiatives Fund. The community Food Security Initiatives Fund - this is supporting things like Meals on Wheels, food pantries, hamper programs - that's \$1 million a year. The program also includes an annual investment in the Farmers' Markets of Nova Scotia's Nourishing Communities Food Coupon Program. That's an example where lower-income families can access coupons to use at farmers' markets with no strings attached. The data coming out of that is pretty incredible in terms of how they're directing those resources toward accessing local food.

Then we have the Community Food Access and Literacy Fund which is about \$200,000 a year, and that's something that we do in collaboration with the Department of Health and Wellness. Those are things like supporting community gardens, helping Nova Scotians build gardens. I gave a good example earlier around how to do meal planning, nutritious meals on a budget.

We also work very closely with the library system. Whether it's resources there in terms of books on gardening, or access, or how to access and grow local foods, to actual classes and programs that they run at libraries, we've looked at funding those and supporting those that are coming directly from community interest. We do work with the Department of Agriculture, for example, on the farmers' market piece, and they're doing a

whole bunch of work around buying local and local foods, which we are supporting as much as possible.

I can give you a sense of - in 2021-22, we funded 27 projects; 2022-23, 21 projects; and in 2023-24, 12 projects.

Another one that would be of interest would be the Mobile Food Market that started as a pilot that was bringing food to areas that were being considered a food desert - not easy access, whether it's through driving or public transportation, to supermarkets - and bringing local foods to community. That's proved so successful that that's turned into a permanent - no longer a mobile food market but a permanent food market.

LISA LACHANCE: I was interested to hear the number of projects funded over the past few years. There was actually quite a decrease in the past year. Can you talk a bit about why there was a decrease in the total number of projects?

JUSTIN HUSTON: I don't know if we know that offhand. That's something we can get to you. But often it's not because there isn't a need or an interest. It may just be the scale of some of those projects that are coming forward. I think as - you'll notice that that has kind of happened through time - as in this past year. I think as organizations are becoming more organized and working together collaboratively, we've seen a number of groups team up and put in sort of a joint application for a more substantial project. Based on our criteria, we think that has the most impact.

That is what I would suspect. I will follow up and - why don't we do this - I'll provide a description of what those projects are for the last year so that you can get a sense of what those 12 are.

LISA LACHANCE: I wanted to go back to the Farmers' Markets of Nova Scotia Nourishing Communities Food Coupon Program. The data is incredible coming out of that. I would concur. Everything I've seen about the program and its evaluation outcomes has been very positive.

The total amount available for Nova Scotia families in this past year decreased. I'm wondering if you can talk about what happened and why the Province didn't fill that gap.

JUSTIN HUSTON: That's an issue we know well. I will turn to Bill for some of the detail there. It's a little bit of semantics around money that was provided in what fiscal year. It was seen as a decrease. It actually wasn't a decrease. We maintained the same level of funding. Maybe, Bill, you want to speak to that in a little more detail?

BILL GREENLAW: None of that is exactly what happened. When the farmers' market came in and asked for a funding increase, we listened to the executive director, and

we had opportunities at end-of-year funding to top up and get them to the \$422,400 that they requested.

The farmers' market budgets, I believe, on a calendar year, and we budget on a fiscal year, so our March funding was interpreted as an increase for the Summer, but we were - it was April 1<sup>st</sup> to March 31<sup>st</sup>. Our funding, from the way that we would do accounting, has remained the same. I appreciate the misunderstanding.

JUSTIN HUSTON: If I could just say - we are continuing to have conversations with a variety of organizations, including our partners at the Department of Health and Wellness, the Department of Community Services, and the Department of Agriculture. We see this as a successful pilot, and we're learning a lot. Conversations continue around how we can make additional investments, whether it's through this program or others.

I don't want to leave you with the impression that we don't see the value in this. We absolutely do. We're looking at ways that we can expand or bring lessons learned to other areas of the province.

LISA LACHANCE: I think maybe I'll ask more questions in this area. In terms of the Nourishing Communities Food Coupon Program, was the number of Nova Scotians helped, or Nova Scotian households helped, the same year over year over the past couple of years?

JUSTIN HUSTON: I don't have access to that information in my binder of information here right now, but that is something that we could give you a summary of the results to see. If I could take a bit of time, one of the things that's interesting about this program is providing the coupons that could be used in any way at these food markets. Maybe someone who might be a critic of this idea might say, Well, then you can spend it on - I don't know - mittens or candles or soap. But what we really saw was that folks did prioritize access to good, local food to feed their families.

I think a lesson learned for us is that the more we can give people opportunity and good information, they will make good decisions for their families. We know that. It's good to see how that program played that out.

LISA LACHANCE: I was actually surprised too to hear about funding for Meals on Wheels, just because I assumed it might come through another department, whether that would be the Department of Seniors and Long-term Care or the Department of Community Services. I'm just wondering if you can talk a bit about that role because I think of Meals on Wheels as a very specific service provider, providing a specific service that fills a real food insecurity gap. How did it come to be funded through your department as opposed to other departments?

JUSTIN HUSTON: I don't know the specifics on the intricacies of exactly how, but I will tell you that we work very closely with our fellow departments, the Department of Community Services and the Department of Seniors and Long-term Care. Oftentimes, we will get a call from - I'll get a call from my deputy minister colleague at another department, and we want to figure out how to get - this is a good project, how do we make this happen?

Often, the Department of Communities, Culture, Tourism and Heritage is the way to get it done because we have such direct contacts in community. We have a lot of regional staff who work with these organizations, who work with the volunteers who are, maybe, around Meals on Wheels, but they're also very active on other boards. Our staff are often very closely tied into what's happening on the ground, and we have various - we have 77 different funding programs. For example, it means we have a vehicle through which we can flow funding if it's seen as a priority. In this case, I know it's something that we were able to stand up very quickly, and have that reporting mechanism, and flow the funds, and get that moving quickly.

THE CHAIR: The time for the NDP questioning has elapsed, so I'm going to turn it over to the PC caucus. MLA Barkhouse.

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: I'm wondering if you could please provide details about the Recreational Trail Expansion Fund and its importance to the development and expansion of recreational trails in the province.

JUSTIN HUSTON: We're seeing which of us wants to really answer this one. It's something - it's a great one, actually. We're just kind of like, Who wants to take this one? Just to be clear, we have two different funding programs. We have a Recreational Trail Expansion Fund which is just under a million dollars a year, and this one we've had for quite a little while. We can provide up to a third of the total cost to a maximum of \$150,000, which funds need to be matched by municipal, federal, or community, volunteer, or private. This past fiscal - or this current fiscal - we were able to support up to 16 projects.

An expansion might be that we're looking to increase the distance of a trail, or there's a trail that exists, but it currently isn't accessible, so are there ways that we can expand that to tap into a parking lot so more people can use the trail? Something that we've been hearing about for a number of years from different trail organizations was it's great to have this fund to help us build trails because one of our priorities is active living, but once you build it, the challenge, as we've kind of referenced with community groups is: how do you keep this up? People are willing to put in the time and energy, but how do you, when there's a big flood and a washout, how do you get the gravel to fill it in, bring in a front-end loader and get that work done?

We have a trail operational funding program as well that has been a pilot. It's a three-year funding program, so groups can apply for funding in Year 1, and they'll submit their annual report so we can see the work that's happening. Then, in the Year 3, which is the year coming up, we're going to do an assessment of that program and see if it's achieving the results we want it to achieve? Is the need greater, or is it less?

We were in the news recently, following Fiona and some of the major floods. A lot of trails were washed out, so we were able to step in and figure out how to get things done. As I said, it's one thing for someone to go out with a shovel and do minor repair, but it's a whole other when you've got sections and bridges that are washed out that need major repair.

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: That's something my community suffered from in regard to the flood. Mr. Greenlaw, I'm sorry I call you so often sometimes.

[11:00 a.m.]

I know that - you know, I'm just going to say it because it's fair to say. The previous government really underinvested in our communities. For example, freezing on the museum funding and whatnot. These are my thoughts, but I'd like to hear from you. Why does the CCTH budget tend to increase significantly each year compared to the original budget, and how does the department manage these additional funds?

JUSTIN HUSTON: Yes, we work very closely, as I mentioned. We have all these different funding programs, and we work very closely with community organizations.

Unfortunately, the funding we have, say, at the start of year isn't able to cover all the needs that come in from community. We essentially keep running lists, whether they're within a program or we have ideas that have come up that might be a great idea but don't fit naturally into a funding program. If additional funds become available through the budget cycle, we are able to raise things up, and our minister can bring things forward to colleagues and say, Look, we've got some great projects here that, should funds become available, we'd like to invest in this community infrastructure or these different community programs.

Similar to MLA Lachance's question around, say, for example, Meals on Wheels, we do have the funding programs; they fall within those various funding programs, and we do have reporting structures that we require to report on. We make sure that those investments are sustainable and are accountable to the taxpayers.

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: I'm wondering if you could provide some details on the Blue Route initiative - its expected impact on tourism and community connectivity in Nova Scotia. I'm a big fan of this.

JUSTIN HUSTON: The Blue Route, for those who don't know, is essentially a cycling initiative that really is being led by the Department of Public Works through their transportation division. It's essentially - it's twofold. It's looking at how we connect trails that are used by community for cycling to road systems, in terms of - if anyone, for example, has tried to bike out to Lawrencetown Beach, you would know that the shoulders on that road used to be very narrow. Through some upgrades that happened this past Summer, the width of the road has been expanded to create safe areas for people to bike out that way, that can connect into things like rails to trails.

The idea is to have a comprehensive system that folks can utilize for biking, whether that's for tourist opportunities - and it's great to have the division of Tourism with us now, because they're looking at ways that emphasize that through promotional materials - to folks being able to use the Blue Route for daily commutes, not just here in the city but in other areas across Nova Scotia. Access to rails to trails puts you onto a road that can bring you right to your place of work or wherever you're going.

As of Fall 2023, there are approximately 500 kilometres of Blue Route that are open. As I mentioned, that's about 175 kilometres on road, and the remainder is on trail.

That work continues. The idea is to get Nova Scotia as blue as possible. That's certainly what we're seeing from a lot of tourists that we're trying to attract, particularly in shoulder seasons and off season. They want authentic active experiences in Nova Scotia. That's certainly an area that we see - whether it's the Gran Fondos that happen in Guysborough or down on the Acadian Shore, it's a huge opportunity for us. But it's got to be accessible, and it has to be safe. That's a part of what these road upgrades are all about.

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: Agreed - it is very important. I know that Highway 333 from Tantallon is getting paved shoulders this Summer, but I also have the Blue Route, which is the Aspotogan, that sees a lot of bicyclists throughout the year, and the shoulders have yet to be paved, but we're on it.

What programs and initiatives is the department using to upgrade aging infrastructures in rural communities? There are a lot of us here who are rural MLAs. I know we've talked about it off and on, but I'd like to just narrow it down to a statement by either of you.

BILL GREENLAW: I'm happy to relieve the deputy minister and answer this one. We've talked about the infrastructure programs. That is our main tool to address the aging facilities. We have the Community Facilities Improvement Program, which I mentioned. The Rink Revitalization Fund, the Recreation Facility Development Grant - we have the Community and Business ACCESS-Ability Programs that people are using to upgrade both businesses and public facilities. We have the Legion Capital Assistance Program, which we haven't mentioned yet today. It goes on.

We also, depending on the need and the emergency related to these aging facilities, have been successful in the past in getting additional the additional appropriations to address some of the more urgent needs to help communities with those significant infrastructure pressures.

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: Perfect. Thank you, and yes, three of my Legions managed to apply for that and were successful. I'm going to pass it on to MLA Harrison.

THE CHAIR: MLA Harrison.

LARRY HARRISON: I'm one of the rural MLAs. In certain communities, you see a lot of things going - banks are going, churches are going. The communities - a lot of them - do not have good facilities in which to meet. I'm a great proponent of that because if communities don't have a place to gather for a number of things, they just continue to decline and die. I just want to ask a few questions on the facilities. When you get applications in - I'm not sure how many applications you get in. I might have missed that - how many do come in in the run of a year? Do you have any idea?

JUSTIN HUSTON: There isn't a simple answer to that because different programs have different - but we would get in the hundreds through the year across the various programs. (Interruption) We received about 140 last year, about 75 of which were successful.

LARRY HARRISON: When you get those applications - I assume they're in written form - what happens when you receive them as far as connecting with the community, meeting with people, going to the facility? Do you do that?

JUSTIN HUSTON: I'll give you a general example or just an overall statement. We want communities to have the most successful application they possibly can. This isn't a process of you get something and you're like, Oh, they forgot to cross their t's or they didn't fill this form out. Often what we encourage is even before folks make a written application or apply, we want, for example, you as an MLA to tell them, Pick up the phone and call Mr. Greenlaw or the regional manager in that area. We will work with them to help them figure out what is the best program to which they should apply. We will then work with them on, Okay, look, here's your program, I understand what you're trying to achieve but really for you to be successful, here are some other things you need to think about. You need to work on engaging the broader - just as an example. Then we'll even look at drafts of applications to say, Look, I think there are ways that you - you need to provide us with more information because we can't make a decision based on what you've provided. We will work hand in hand with those organizers and folks.

The other thing is that we try to be very honest. There is nothing worse, I think, than having a group with limited time and capacity spend a lot of time and energy and someone's afraid to say no for a reason and then they get led on. We want to be very clear



as much as we can out front and say, Look, I know there's an interest but here's why this probably isn't going to work. Here's something else you might want to consider. We try to work very closely so that there aren't any surprises for anybody.

Particularly, we want to make sure that we're working with local MLAs. You know your communities best, and we want to make sure that you're helping them connect to us, because probably the most difficult project is we get something at the 11<sup>th</sup> hour the day before something closes and we've never heard of it, staff have never seen the application. It's a very difficult conversation to say, Okay, well, we understand what you're trying to do but you're not going to make it this time. Let's talk about how you can be successful in the next round.

LARRY HARRISON: I'm glad to hear that because it means a lot to community groups who are applying for this to be able to verbalize what the need is and for you folks to actually see the facility. It's really important for you to let them know why they didn't reach the criteria, because sometimes the word gets out - I'm sorry but - they don't really know the reason why. So that would be extremely important and I'm glad you're thinking the way you are in that respect.

JUSTIN HUSTON: I'll make a couple of comments. On that last piece, particularly for some projects that are complex or are major projects, these things don't happen overnight. It may require more detailed analysis - an engineering assessment. We can provide levels of funding to help community groups get Class A or B or D, whatever those class drawings to help us understand if this is a feasible project. Sometimes these conversations might happen over months or years to get to where a project needs to be to be successful. We might need to be collaborating and working with federal partners and municipal partners to share funding and resources.

It's something that - we really encourage groups to talk to us as early as possible. You're also dealing with staff who do this for a living and have seen projects, and what it takes to be successful and can provide good direction and insight.

I will also take this opportunity - I didn't mention it in my opening remarks, but there are a couple of resources that we will make sure you have access to, one immediately and one once it comes out. One is we have a program guide, which is available on our website, but we can send it to all committee members following this. It describes all of CCTH's funding programs - what it's about, who's eligible, who to contact.

We are also going to be able to release - I am hoping, if not the end of this month, early in the next month - a grant-finder tool that we will have on our website. Unlike the program guide, which is a PDF where you've got to go through all the pages, this will be a searchable grant finder where through a drop-down menu of multiple-choice questions, it will say: What are you looking to do? Host an event? Fix a facility? Very plain language.

You can tap on it, say: Are you a non-profit? Are you a business? It will help guide you down to what grant might be the best fit.

If you go through and you realize everything's a no or maybe not, it won't close the door on you. It will say: You might want to talk to one of our staff. We'll give you a staff person to call or talk to because we certainly don't want groups to get discouraged. If anybody's ever tried to navigate your credit card or Air Canada, and you go through this circular thing and you can't talk to anybody, that's not what we want. Once we make that available - we'll be meeting with or desire to share with all caucuses, because it's really critical that MLAs know about this grant-finder tool, and you can share it with your constituents.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Greenlaw, I will make a comment. That's all coming back to me, our year-ago committee when we were talking about that, so that's exciting. Mr. Greenlaw.

BILL GREENLAW: Very rarely is there a no. It's either you're ineligible or we don't have sufficient funds. Our grant programs are extremely competitive. They're scored - they're either done by a peer review panel or an external assessment committee, so it's done as fairly and objectively as we can. I would say that there is a direct positive correlation for those who engage the staff on their application and their success. You can't help people that you don't know are applying, so I would encourage people to use the resources that we have.

It is extremely competitive, and again, as the deputy minister mentioned earlier, if we have some opportunities at certain times of the year to fund those insufficient funds funded - when they get that letter, we try to support them as well. We deal within our budget envelope to begin with, and then we see how the rest of the budgets are evolving during the year.

I guess, too, from my experience, some groups are very persistent. They can be close, and then they apply the next year, and they get it. Don't give up because eventually we get to you.

LARRY HARRISON: Just a comment before I hand it over to my colleague, MLA Taggart. It's good to know that these programs are in caring hands. Thank you.

THE CHAIR: MLA Taggart with 2 minutes and 35 seconds.

TOM TAGGART: I have to reiterate what MLA Harrison said there. I can't say enough about what your folks' department has done for our rural communities, and the way you work to make things work.

I want to make a comment here really. Most of my questions have been answered, but I want to go back to the Community Generator Program, and really how valuable that

was. I think when MLA Burrill was asking, I was thinking that during Hurricane Fiona, almost everybody in Colchester North was out of power from 10 to 14 days. It was on their minds. I'm pretty sure I don't have a fire brigade in Colchester North that didn't take advantage of that. Additionally, if there's one good thing coming out of Hurricane Fiona - it spurred other community organizations to make sure they were prepared next time, like community halls, so they could set up comfort centres and help their fellow residents. That was an awesome program.

[11:15 a.m.]

I think you pretty much answered this question, but quickly, how do you ensure fair and equitable distribution of funding, considering the varying needs of communities?

JUSTIN HUSTON: In terms of the guidelines, folks under that program are eligible to receive up to 100 per cent of the cost to a maximum of \$50,000. It's important to note that the program isn't out there just so people can get the biggest, best generator. They have to get a formal assessment done about what the need is for that facility, what's required to operate that facility, and submit that paperwork. Then they can access up to that amount.

We also have to see that it was installed, to make sure that - again, it's also ranked on complexity and need. For example, if in an area there are a number of facilities that are warming centres that already have generators in place, we might not have prioritized a generator right next door if there are other areas that have none. That is also a big part of the analysis that went into it. But as you said, I think a number of groups realized that not every location needs to be a formal warming centre for it to serve a purpose in the community. Our guidelines around that were that you did not have to be a warming centre, but you did have to demonstrate that you were serving a community need, and that you had the ability to serve the broader public.

THE CHAIR: Perfect timing. We will now move into the second round of questioning. With the time today, we'll allocate 10 minutes per caucus, beginning with the Liberal caucus.

CARMAN KERR: Has the department made a funding ask for an increase on the infrastructure programs for this year going into a budget?

JUSTIN HUSTON: The short answer to that is no, we have not asked for an increase. We've just asked for our budget to maintain.

CARMAN KERR: I don't know if it was answered previously - I don't think in detail. I'm looking at the criteria of those programs. Maybe it's not consistent across all three, but is there more weight given on a heavier population for a program than maybe a rural setting?

JUSTIN HUSTON: I don't have the criteria, obviously, at hand. I think that might be one of the considerations, but isn't - I'm not sure how the ranking goes down, but absolutely an aspect of it would be community need, whatever that might look like. It's not necessarily based on density. It would be based on need, and that can vary depending on where you are. Distance to travel is another good example. It might be a very rural community with less population, but maybe the need is greater because they can't access any active transportation to get anywhere; they need access to facilities there.

BILL GREENLAW: I sort of went there with the government's question. The theme is that if you look at our criteria - the program criteria is pretty clear in our funding applications. That's how we score it. It's pretty much equal through it. Density or ruralness or population doesn't really have a major factor. It's how the facility is used. Is it a lot of community groups? Does it have equitable and fair access to the facility? Those are questions that we would look at.

We look at the mandate of the organization, if you will. What's the purpose and mandate of it? How the facility supports community, their project rationale - what is their proponent saying? Why do they want the funding, and how are they going to go about doing it? The project work and the budget - does it make sense? If it's way out of whack, we have a lot of experience at looking at budgets now with infrastructure. We have a good sense. We would normally go back to the group and say: Hey, you might want to go back - do you actually have an estimate of this one, or did you get an estimate from a contractor about what it would cost to do this work? This looks a little bit low. The worst thing you can do is underfund somebody in this market, because it's really hard to get back in and make sure that they're funded correctly.

What are the community outcomes? What are the intended outcomes and benefits of that facility or that asset that we're investing in? Then we also look at the environmental impact as well, of the improvements.

CARMAN KERR: Does the department help these predominantly volunteer groups measure those outcomes with usage and the data behind the usage or the environmental impact? Would the department have the capacity or the ability to help these groups collect that kind of data or is that data required?

BILL GREENLAW: There are two ways: (a) the discussion. My regional teams live in communities. They know exactly how the facility's used, et cetera, so we have really on-the-ground intel about the purpose and mandate of the facilities. Generally, it's very positive. But if we required specific details, as you said, we have funding programs that we would fund them to do a review or a study of the usage of the facility through one of our planning and assistance programs.

CARMAN KERR: My understanding for those programs is not-for-profits are lumped in with municipal units on the applications. Is that true?

BILL GREENLAW: Correct. Yes.

CARMAN KERR: Given that, is there a benefit of separating those two groups when they apply for that same funding?

BILL GREENLAW: I don't think so. That's a good question. I haven't seen - I don't know if your question is going to, like, there's been a predominance of support for municipal applications as opposed to - no, okay. (Interruption) All right. Okay. I don't trust - I was a lifeguard (laughter) so I want to get my aquatic credentials out there too. Football. (Interruption) I don't think there's a benefit in doing it right now. I haven't seen a weighting go either way. I think if we saw a predominance of municipal units being successful in the grant program, we would probably have a hard look at it. A lot of facilities, particularly outside of Metro, are community-run and -owned, not necessarily by the municipality.

CARMAN KERR: No, it was raised by certain not-for-profits that I work with. I said I would ask that the next chance I had. That's basically the background. Where I am going with it is the difference between rural facilities and maybe HRM facilities. I know rurally the feeling would be often these pools or these rinks are the sole facility or the cornerstone of the community, and I would argue when I lived in HRM and otherwise, there may be more options that way, whether it be at Saint Mary's University or Dalhousie University kind of thing. (Interruption)

JUSTIN HUSTON: It is something that we look at. Certainly, we're working with our partners in HRM on various projects. We don't treat every municipality exactly the same. The ability for HRM - for their own municipal taxes versus a rural area, which has a smaller tax base certainly goes into - and as well, HRM has the ability to identify its own priorities, and pursue its own infrastructure and resources, and sometimes we're asked to come to the table, if we're able to, at the last minute. We do know that particularly for some communities, as you said, there may be one rink or one pool or one community centre versus a multitude. That makes - to some of the comments we've heard earlier - making sure that that facility is accessible and open and in good shape even more important.

CARMAN KERR: I have another group I'm going to give a shout-out to: Annapolis County Outdoor Sports Society, ACOSS. I'm going to table that document, but another world-class facility in Bridgetown. The regional office is well aware of the facility. They're concerned about a number of things, but they're trying to attract bigger events. That's to my previous question about the events strategy, and how rural communities and groups can access that strategy. It makes sense that most larger events go to our capital cities for all kinds of reasons: infrastructure, accommodation, et cetera. How could this group and other groups in rural Nova Scotia access that strategy or that funding to bring larger events to their communities?

JUSTIN HUSTON: Two things: First, I'll just take the opportunity to mention this fund, but I don't think it's what you're talking about. We do have a Festival and Community Event Development Program that groups can apply for. It is typically quite small. We're talking like \$5,000 to \$10,000. It's not what you're talking about, but I just wanted to take that opportunity. I know a lot of different groups do access that, and it is very important, whether it's a small parade or a community concert series.

In terms of some of the larger event investments, it is absolutely something that we're very keen on - shoulder-season or off-season events and outside of just the metro area, or even outside of, say, Sydney. The more we can look at those opportunities, the better. I would encourage that group to keep working with our department.

It often comes with: What's the idea? What's the concept? Again, we can only provide up to so much. Most groups know this, but not coming to the Province looking - we can't be the sole funder. We are looking for the partnership with other partners, either private sector or other levels of government, that can help make a project happen.

CARMAN KERR: I was hoping to see a funding ask this year. I know the department has done a lot of good things. It's affected our community positively in a number of ways. Increasingly, these facilities and these groups have become a source of inspiration and hope, and a distraction from stress and anxiety beyond the health benefits, preventive mental health supports, et cetera.

I just want to thank you for coming today. I'll always push for more funding. I know the value of a dollar. Growing up on the farm, I know the value of a taxpayer dollar. But as I said, for those reasons, there's plenty of support to increase funding to these three programs in particular.

Thank you for coming today.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, MLA Kerr. We will move back to the NDP. MLA Lachance.

LISA LACHANCE: I wanted to circle back to some of the things you discussed in your opening remarks around EDIA and working with diverse communities and responding to the evolution of different communities and different cultures in the province.

Very specifically, I was wondering if you're able to tell us how much across all of the various grant programs has been spent in support of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community in the past year.

JUSTIN HUSTON: I can't tell you that now, but I think there's some work that we could do as a department to start to pull together some things.

We can definitely articulate where that direct projects would - say, coming from a group that is either representative of that community and has applied for funding, or another organization that has applied for programs and services that might be of use to that community.

Then there would be broader things that I think are - we'll focus on getting information for those, because you could lump and you could say, okay, well, a rink, but we won't go there. We'll just focus in on some of those direct programs. We can provide that information to the committee.

LISA LACHANCE: That would be great. I think the direct funding to communities or organizations focused directly on the community would be great.

[11:30 a.m.]

I was really struck in your opening remarks when you talked about healthy communities needing gathering places. In your EDIA work, I'm wondering about how you do the development and the community outreach if that community is not as well represented. I think this could apply to lots of different newcomer communities, for instance. But specifically for the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, we are lacking, I would say, in Nova Scotia, in a lot of the supports that exist in other provinces for the community. For instance, we don't have a community centre here or in Sydney. We don't have a provincial network of organizations and community groups, which exists in lots of other places.

I guess I'm wondering how you ensure that communities who may not be necessarily stepping up - although certainly I assume there will be some funding reflected in the numbers you give me - how do you ensure that we're making a difference in the lives of those communities?

JUSTIN HUSTON: I think a part of it is - well, as much as possible, I think key in terms of as we design some of our programs - we underwent a program review of our various 77 programs and made sure that we wove EDI throughout. A key part of that is first voice. It's having staff who represent community - the 2SLGBTQIA+ - as well as making sure that we're talking with key organizations that represent the community. That's a part of it in terms of overall because whether there are specific programs, like helping support, say, Pride - and we talked last time around opportunities for Pride tourism - there are the broader program initiatives that we have, and how we weave that in to make sure groups who might not have traditionally always accessed the programs know that they can and it is for them.

I think another good example would be around the 2SLGBTQIA+ hockey tournament that was held. That's a great example of something that we would like to support. It's a great point, and I think it's something that we have been focusing on and we will continue to focus on.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Greenlaw, did you want to make a comment?

BILL GREENLAW: I would just say, too, that the department has, like a lot of government departments - a lot of training of staff on bias. That's really crucial - that government or the program officer needs to understand their bias, where they're coming from, when they're meeting with groups that they're not accustomed to working with and how to approach that. I would also say that - just to manage the expectations, getting people to self-identify in our surveys about who we're supporting is a challenge. It's easy to identify, oh, we gave \$50,000 to Pride, or we helped this Mi'kmaw organization, et cetera, but the usage demographics are more challenging to get. I just want to manage that.

LISA LACHANCE: I just wanted to follow up on a couple points. One is this issue around having first voice amongst staff. Obviously, having a diverse and inclusive and representative public service is important. It's something that we've all been working toward for decades. I do think there's a difference between having first voice and having representation as a person versus actually having policy, capacity, and responsibility. I've spoken before about how there used to be a manager position in the department tasked with developing policy knowledge and engaging with the 2SLGBTQIA+ community and developing programs to respond. That position, as far as I understand, no longer exists.

I guess I'm wondering if you can confirm that. Is there a program officer or manager position that actually has this community as part of their work plan, and thus has workplace deliverables, rather than just being a person in your organization? You talked about working with key organizations in communities. Do you have a standing advisory committee around 2SLGBTQIA+ issues with external stakeholders? I'm not talking about the public service employee network.

JUSTIN HUSTON: In answer to your first question, no, we don't have a position now, and I'm not aware - since I've been for four years with the department, we have not had one, and I didn't know of one. So that's helpful to know. Your other point is that no, we don't have a standing committee. Those are two things that I will take back for further consideration, for sure.

LISA LACHANCE: I think that would be great because I think that's what's needed to build capacity. I can certainly tell you that position was in place. Well, actually, I'll have to double check, but let's just say, like, 2010 or 2011 through to at least 2013, and somehow disappeared under the previous government. I do think that was a really positive step, and I almost feel like we've lost ground, actually, in terms of how the community is supported in Nova Scotia.

I'm wondering what other emerging communities that you're engaged with, in terms of looking across Nova Scotia and how Nova Scotia is changing, and who you're just probably - how do you know you're not hearing from folks, and how do you connect with folks?



JUSTIN HUSTON: That is something that we are very aware of, and we have focused on in terms of the changing demographics of Nova Scotia. We are striving to always do better with those historical communities that are in our province, but particularly those who are newcomers. I know that we are programmed, because when I sign off on some of these approvals, it's very interesting and also very positive when I see different organizations that we've never funded before, whether it's community cricket matches to various different cultural festivals. We are seeing an increase in that, and it's certainly something that we are prioritizing.

A part of this government's focus has been on welcoming communities, particularly in rural Nova Scotia. How do we ensure that if we are trying to attract, say, professional health care workers, whether they're from other parts of Canada or international, how are we ensuring that when they are here, they have access to the resources and a welcoming community? That is something that we are seeing more of, and it is something that we are actively working to make sure that we support.

THE CHAIR: MLA Burrill with 34 seconds.

GARY BURRILL: That's fine. Thank you very much.

THE CHAIR: We will move over to the PC caucus with MLA Taggart.

TOM TAGGART: I'm wondering if you could give a few comments on what role our local government or municipalities and the community organizations play in collaborating with the department to ensure funding for our rink projects.

JUSTIN HUSTON: As we've had a chance to discuss a little bit today, it varies across the province in terms of, say, who is responsible for these facilities, whether they're rinks or other recreational or cultural facilities. Not only who, say, might own the property, but who is responsible for operating it, whether it's a not-for-profit society or the municipality itself. Then there are various levels of funding support for projects that we are approached for as a government.

Some of them might be under the Rink Revitalization Fund. It's direct funding from the Province they can apply for. We need to see matching funds, et cetera. Others are more major projects, whether it's a new recreation facility or something of that matter. That's a much broader conversation. For example, some of these projects, over the last couple of years, are a third-a third-a third, so we're looking at federal investment through federal funding programs, municipal investment, as well as provincial.

The other part of this that I think is a very important aspect - and Bill touched upon this earlier - is around operating. In some ways, it's easy to build a facility or expand a facility. It is much more difficult to ensure that you're able to operate that, particularly as operating costs go up, staffing costs go up. One of the things that we do look at, as a part of

our funding, is, Are we immediately creating a burden for communities if we build something? Part of our analysis when we go into making funding decisions is also working with groups to make sure that what they're proposing is sustainable and it's realistic.

As Bill mentioned, we have a lot of experience working with a lot of different groups. Someone in Cape Breton might not know about a project that happened down in Shelburne or Yarmouth, but we do, and we can share with them to say, You're looking to build something similar. Here's what we learned and here's what's proven to be successful in other places in the province. Why don't we look at doing your project a little bit differently to ensure that you can operate this sustainably going forward?

BILL GREENLAW: I'd just add that it's the - if you think of the system, it's a dialogue and a conversation between the program officers and my regional managers, the owner or operator of the facility or who is a proponent for the funding grant, and also with the municipal unit. We do a systems approach. If the municipality is not going to sustain this asset in the future, the likelihood is that they would score lower on our funding scoring grid. It's really a partnership in community and trying to maximize both the scarce dollars that municipal units have with our scarce dollars and the scarce dollars - as I mentioned - from your bake sales or your cookie sales or whatever the case may be. We try to maximize those investments.

Again, we try to always figure out a way to solve a problem, as opposed to looking inside the box and saying, No, that doesn't fit exactly the way it is here. We try to problem-solve and work with community. We know that those things are important, and it is that system networking approach to do it.

THE CHAIR: MLA Ritcey.

DAVE RITCEY: My first question would be around the evolving needs of communities and organizations and specialty groups, for sure. I'm just curious: How does the department adapt its strategy to meet those evolving needs?

JUSTIN HUSTON: It ties in somewhat to MLA Lachance's question too. Things aren't static. Nova Scotia is growing as a province, and the folks who are moving to Nova Scotia are changing as well. Part of our mandate is to make sure that we are serving communities the best that we can. That means really talking to and hearing first voice from community about what is important. It's also important that we're not just hearing from the same organizations that might have traditionally always accessed our programs.

We're seeing that particularly, I would say - a great example would be the influx of Indian students, Bangladeshi students into Cape Breton. The need for them, is not just for, say, things like housing but also recreation opportunities and cultural opportunities. We're also seeing, as population growth continues in the province, and particularly sort of around

Metro but in communities such as Truro and in toward the Valley and Windsor, we're seeing an increased need for capacity within some facilities and organizations.

Where I think for a number of years, what triggered the Ivany report, the depopulation - we're seeing that reversed in some areas. Our job has been to sort of shift our programs from, How do we manage decline? to How do we manage the growth? That means oftentimes it's around that prioritization. We might have 141 applications, but we have to figure out how to best allocate the resources that are there.

DAVE RITCEY: That leads me to my next question, I guess: What role does CCTH play in preserving and promoting culture and heritage through the Mi'kmaw Cultural Activities Program?

THE CHAIR: My apologies, Mr. Greenlaw. Did you have comments to add to the other - I missed that. Or do we want to . . .

BILL GREENLAW: The deputy minister did a great job answering that question. I would just say that in order to activate, we need to develop trust. Trust needs to be earned. That answers part of MLA Lachance's question, that if communities or people don't trust coming to us, then we're not going to hear and we're not going to be able to serve those communities. We're very aware that we need to be open and welcoming and develop a trusting relationship so that all community groups will come in and ask us questions and work with our staff on the projects that they want to deal with.

We have an issue with our historically marginalized communities of trust, let alone newcomers coming to Nova Scotia. This is compounded. I think that under the deputy minister's leadership, we're very aware of our trust relationship and how to try to engage communities and develop that long-term trust. That's just my answer there.

JUSTIN HUSTON: That's a great segue into talking about the Mi'kmaw Cultural Activities Program. This was developed - here's a great example of how - this was designed in 2013. It was designed in partnership with Mi'kmaw partners. The way it's administered is a Mi'kmaw panel reviews applications that come in and makes recommendations back to the government around whether it's artistic or community cultural development activities.

Examples this current year would be around a retreat focused on supporting mental health and well-being for Mi'kmaw fisherwomen through the Confederacy of Mainland Mi'kmaq, and moose camps for Mi'kmaw youth in Cape Breton and in Bear River. For example, erecting teepees at Allison Bernard Memorial High School in Eskasoni. These are projects that came from community, are recommended by community, and are administered there.

[11:45 a.m.]

We have also created a program called the Municipal Physical Activity Leadership Program, and then from hearing from our Mi'kmaw partners, they said: Well, we would like those in our community as well. Luckily, the acronym is still the same, but it's Mi'kmaw Physical Activity Leadership Program, and they work directly in a number of the communities to help develop physical activity programs.

The other one I'll just identify is Arts Nova Scotia has a new Mi'kmaq Arts Program where it's dedicated toward funding Mi'kmaw artists. There's also - last year, I think, was our first year or second year around the Mi'kmaw Community Mawio'mi Fund. Communities can apply for the mawio'mi - or also traditionally sometimes referred to as powwows - that they hold typically every Summer and into the Fall. We now have a fund that can help support them in that regard as well.

The other thing I would just say is that we recently hired Semisel Sa'n who is Mi'kmaw from Eskasoni originally, lives in Millbrook. He acts as our Mi'kmaw cultural liaison officer, directly working with communities to help them understand and access the different funding programs across CCTH.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, deputy minister. You timed that perfectly with 20 seconds left on the clock. I would welcome you, if you'd like to lead right into any closing remarks that either of you have.

JUSTIN HUSTON: I'll keep my closing remarks brief, just to say thank you for the opportunity to come talk about the good work we do at the department. I really appreciate the questions from the members today. Always woven throughout your questions, you know you can really hear the care that you have for your communities and your constituencies, so I really appreciate that.

Again, I'll leave you with if you have any questions or if any organizations have questions or want to work with CCTH, please don't hesitate to have them reach out directly to me, Mr. Greenlaw, or their regional staff. Thank you very much.

THE CHAIR: We do have a couple little items of committee business, but we can take a five-minute recess. Thank you for being here today.

[11:47 a.m. The committee recessed.]

[11:52 a.m. The committee reconvened.]

THE CHAIR: Order. I call the Standing Committee on Community Services back to order. We do have a couple of items on the committee business today. First off, Deputy Minister Melissa MacKinnon has responded with correspondence to the request for

information regarding statistics on food insecurity among seniors and students. I'm just wondering if there's any discussion on that piece of correspondence. As the clerk reminded me today, we will put that piece of correspondence on the website.

Also, the meeting set for March 5<sup>th</sup> was cancelled due to the return of our legislative sitting starting on February 27<sup>th</sup>. The topic and the witnesses have been right now rescheduled until April 2<sup>nd</sup>. Is there any discussion on that item? Seeing none, the next meeting date will be April 2, 2024. The topic is the Provincial Emergency Response System. Witnesses will include the Emergency Management Office, the Fire Association of Nova Scotia, the Nova Scotia Federation of Municipalities, and the RCMP.

If there's no other committee business, I will adjourn the meeting.

[The committee adjourned at 11:53 a.m.]