

HANSARD

NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY

HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY MANAGEMENT COMMISSION

Wednesday, January 14, 2026

Committee Room

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HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY MANAGEMENT COMMISSION

Hon. Danielle Barkhouse (Chair)

Marco MacLeod (Vice-Chair)

Hon. Brendan Maguire

Hon. Scott Armstrong

Adegoke Fadare

Lisa Lachance

Susan Leblanc

Hon. Derek Mombourquette

James Charlton, Chief Clerk of the House of Assembly
(Non-Voting Member)

[Hon. Scott Armstrong was replaced by Hon. Dave Ritcey.]

In Attendance:

Gordon Hebb
Chief Legislative Counsel

David Hastings
Assistant Clerk of the House of Assembly



House of Assembly
Nova Scotia

HALIFAX, WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 14, 2026

HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY MANAGEMENT COMMISSION

4:22 P.M.

CHAIR

Hon. Danielle Barkhouse

VICE-CHAIR

Marco MacLeod

THE CHAIR: I call this meeting of the House of Assembly Management Commission to order. Let's begin by having the members of the Management Commission introduce themselves. I will start, and then we will move counterclockwise. My name is Danielle Barkhouse. I am the Speaker of the House, and I am the MLA for Chester-St. Margarets.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: I would like to also acknowledge the presence of James Charlton, Chief Clerk of the House, and Gordon Hebb, Chief Legislative Counsel, and Karen Howard, Acting Director of Operations and Administration. Oh, taking off the Acting, I'm sorry. You are no longer Acting; you are the Director. (Laughter) Printer error.

The first item on our agenda is the approval of the minutes of the last meeting of the Management Commission, which occurred on October 22, 2025. The draft minutes were circulated in advance of today's meeting. Are there any questions, comments, or changes to the minutes?

Would someone like to move that the draft minutes of the meeting of the Management Commission on October 22, 2025, be adopted? So moved by MLA Maguire. Will someone second the motion? Seconded by MLA Mombourquette.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

The second item on the agenda is the 2024-25 Audit Report. The report was reviewed by the Audit Committee on May 27, 2025.

I recognize the Chief Clerk to speak to the report.

JAMES CHARLTON: This was the audit report from the last fiscal year. This should have been brought forward at the October meeting last year. In our excitement to convene that meeting, we accidentally left it off the agenda so we're bringing it forward now.

I'm pleased to report that the audit report contains two opinions as follows: An unmodified opinion that the House of Assembly's expenditures complied, in all significant respects, with the specified requirements established in Section 22(5)(b) of the House of Assembly Management Commission Act for the year ended March 31, 2025; and

An unmodified opinion that the Chief Clerk's assessment of the effectiveness of internal controls of the House of Assembly is, in all material respects, fairly stated and that the internal controls were operating effectively for the year ended March 31, 2025.

So it's a clean report. I'll just mention that in Appendix C there were some other observations from the engagement. The Auditor General helpfully found a few little hiccups in our processes. They weren't the sort of thing that affect the opinion, but they were suggestions for some things that we could do better. The report shows what management's response was to remedy these things, and all of these have been implemented.

One was related to MLA computing and communications devices. There was no process in place for wiping them. Now, mind you, all of that it's not government information. It's the MLA's information. But there was a feeling that it would be better to have a process in place to ensure that that information is wiped. That's being done now with the help of CSDS.

There were some issues regarding the calculation of amounts owed from outgoing MLAs who purchased computing devices. That was due to a spreadsheet error. The error was corrected and additional oversight has been built into the process. I think there were one or two items - it was a fairly small number that were affected in there. That's been remedied.

The last part was tangible capital assets. That's our asset tagging. That was due to an issue with the government system where it went down. It was offline temporarily. A

decision was made at the time to not set up an interim tracking, because it was only supposed to be offline for a short period that extended out for longer than expected and led to a gap. There's no issue with capital asset controls, but these issues have been remedied and a plan has been put in place so that if the government's system ever goes down again - has to be taken down for modifications, upgrades - we will have an interim tracking system in place, no matter how short a period is projected for that outage.

It's a good report from our perspective. The audit committee has already received this and it's being brought forward to the House for your information. I'm happy to take any questions there might be.

THE CHAIR: Is there any discussion of the report or are there any questions?

Would someone move that the 2024-25 Audit Report be accepted as presented?

So moved by MLA Maguire. Seconded by MLA Leblanc.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

The third item on the agenda is the appointment of the auditor. The Management Commission makes that appointment on the recommendation of the Audit Committee pursuant to Subsection 22(2) of the House of Assembly Management Commission Act. At its November 27, 2025, meeting, the Audit Committee passed a resolution to recommend to the House of Assembly Management Commission that the Auditor General be appointed as the auditor of the accounts of the House of Assembly for the 2025-26 fiscal year. Would someone move that the Auditor General be appointed as the auditor of the accounts of the House of Assembly for the 2025-26 fiscal year?

So moved by MLA Lachance. Will someone second the motion? Seconded by MLA Mombourquette.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

The fourth item on the agenda is a proposal to amend Section 33 of the House of Assembly Management Commission Regulations. I will ask that the Clerk speak to the proposed amendment, which governs caucus funding.

The Chief Clerk.

JAMES CHARLTON: This amendment was originally put forward by MLA Leblanc last year for the commission's consideration. I understand people have kind of taken it away and thought about it for a while. The caucus budgets have been effectively frozen for the last decade-plus with no increases. That means a significant decline in the real value of those budgets.

[4:30 p.m.]

What this will do is, starting in this fiscal year and subsequent fiscal years, it will change the funding formula to effectively provide for a 20 percent increase to those budgets. That doesn't really put us where we would have been if the budgets had increased in line with inflation, but it is an increase to get us back on track. This also takes out the exceptions. The CPI increase that happens annually on April 1st - there's a provision in the House of Assembly Management Commission Regulations that made the caucus budgets not subject to that increase. This will take that out. So on every April 1st when we have the CPI increase, the caucus budgets will increase to keep in line with inflation. That is what is proposed by the amendment that's before you today for consideration.

THE CHAIR: Are there any questions or comments on the proposed amendment?

Seeing none, would someone move that the proposed amendment to Section 33 of the House of Assembly Management Commission Regulations to amend the caucuses' funding formula and to make the amount set out therein subject to the annual CPI increase be approved?

Moved by MLA Leblanc. Do we have a seconder? Seconded by MLA Lachance.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

The fifth item on the agenda is a proposal to amend Directive #1 of the House of Assembly Management Commission regarding office furniture and equipment. I will ask the Chief Clerk to speak to the proposed amendment.

The Chief Clerk.

JAMES CHARLTON: Directive #1 can be found in the annotated regulations. This is a fairly obscure provision in here, but it provides guidance to MLAs in terms of the kinds and number of office equipment that MLAs may purchase. This directive is old. There are probably other things in here to be updated at some point, but what really comes into question is technology around cameras and audio and video recording equipment. Specifically, it relates to computer equipment that costs greater than \$50. That was an important number at the time the directive was established. What it provides is that in a

constituency office, it's appropriate to purchase audiovisual or other equipment to be used to enhance and improve constituency community presentations given by the member.

Since that time, a lot has changed. There are podcasts and there are videos that people may want to put out through their electronic newsletters. We have MLAs who are looking at using different kinds of equipment, such as using drones for photographs for constituency communications. This language is quite narrow. It talks about improving constituency community presentations. If we change this language by amending it to strike out "community presentations given" and substitute "communications provided" so that it reads "audiovisual or other equipment to be used to enhance and improve constituency communications provided by the member," that would make a significant improvement in terms of just updating the kind of equipment that MLAs can get.

It's a bit of a grey area right now because it suggests it can only be used for presentations for what amount to open houses. This would allow MLAs to get some of this updated technology for use in their MLA communications - for social media, for newsletters, for e-newsletters, and things like that. We've been asked some questions around that, so we've put this out there as a possible way to update the directive to take into account modern technology.

THE CHAIR: Are there any questions or comments on the proposed amendment?
MLA MacLeod.

MARCO MACLEOD: Quick question: What was the \$50 threshold there?

JAMES CHARLTON: That relates to an old threshold for asset tagging, which has since been increased. It used to be that every item over \$50 had to be tagged. That's back when \$50 was real money. Sorry, I don't mean . . .

THE CHAIR: The new threshold is \$150 now instead of \$50.

Any other questions or comments? MLA Maguire.

HON. BRENDAN MAGUIRE: We'd like to review it again, take it back, and come back at the next meeting. That's what we're requesting - let our teams look at it and just kind of go through it and come back.

THE CHAIR: Are the other members in agreement with this? Then we will strike this from the agenda for today and look at it on a future day.

The sixth item on the agenda is a question concerning claims involving alcohol. I'll ask the Chief Clerk to speak to this matter.

JAMES CHARLTON: This sort of results from a novel situation here, where a question was asked regarding whether it was possible to expense a ticket under our ticket expensing provisions the cost of which included alcoholic beverages.

It has consistently been the practice of the Speaker's Office - really, it's the practice of the Clerk to whom the Speaker's Administration Office has delegated the day-to-day management of this - the practice to disallow claims involving alcohol. Although this is not explicitly prohibited under the regulations, the reasoning for this is that most requests around claims have been claims for, let's say, an open house or something. We've always viewed that that doesn't fall within the meaning of the general opening words of the regulation, which is office expenses - claims in relation to the running of a constituency office.

This question presents a novel situation, and that is a component of the cost of the ticket expense, which really is not a direct claim for alcohol. My instinct is to disallow, but I honestly think that given the fact that the management commission regulations really are silent on the matter and the novelty of the situation, I think it's a situation where the management commission should at least have the opportunity to provide guidance and decide whether this is something they think could validly be claimed.

THE CHAIR: Clarification: So if you buy a ticket for a turkey dinner, and it comes with a class of wine . . .

JAMES CHARLTON: That's the situation. Yes, that's kind of the situation where we would say we're not sure. We don't recall seeing this before. I think questions have been asked. I'm not sure if a claim has actually ever been submitted, but in terms of "If I were holding an open house, could I buy wine for that?" and the answer we would have given was "no." We haven't seen it come up in the context of tickets before, whether it's buying tickets to a community dinner or to some other event where there's alcohol in the included cost.

As I said, I think our default would be no, but it's not clear that that's what the regulations require. This is why we're throwing it out to the management commission to think about and give us some clear direction.

THE CHAIR: MLA Maguire.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: Can you, again, just give us an example of what this looks like?

JAMES CHARLTON: Sure. The Chair just gave the example of tickets for a community dinner where part of the meal includes a glass of wine. It could be something else. It could be tickets to an event where the purchase price of the ticket includes two drink tickets. It could include something like that.

We're looking specifically in the ticket context. That's really what we're looking at right now.

THE CHAIR: MLA Leblanc.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I guess my question is: How do we know? Unless it explicitly says "This \$25 includes a glass of wine" - we buy tickets to events and galas all the time, and we have no idea. There's a dinner, and who knows what else. I walk in the door and all I know is that I'm supporting a particular event or going to a particular event.

That's the question. Is it about explicitly saying that or - how do we figure it out?

THE CHAIR: The Chief Clerk.

JAMES CHARLTON: It's easiest in the situation where the ticket is explicit about that, and a lot of tickets would be. An MLA, if you buy a ticket and you had no idea when you bought it that it includes drink tickets, you can rectify that by just turning down the drink tickets. The issue is where there's an entitlement up front. I guess the question is if there's guidance from this committee to say no alcohol, but maybe something that gives us the ability to say if there are drink tickets included, the MLA provides the unused drink tickets to show that they haven't done it, then that allows you to expense it. It's just concern around expensing alcohol.

THE CHAIR: MLA Lachance.

LISA LACHANCE: I totally hear that concern - but to the point that we often have no idea what we're walking into. Lots of MLAs don't actually drink alcohol, so we're not actually taking the drinks but show up. The other option would be this fundraiser ticket is \$200, and it includes two drink tickets. I don't know how to square this. It is complicated because we go to lots of events where, in fact, people do have a drink involved.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: This is very complicated and it shouldn't be. I think what it should be is if you're going to a beer fest or if you're going to the scotch thing they have every year, then no, right? I don't drink, but if you go to an event and somebody has a glass of wine, there's no stopping that. I just think if it's specifically an alcohol-related event you're going to, you're paying on your own. I just used the beer fest as an example. It's here every summer. We shouldn't be expensing tickets to the beer fest. It's as simple as that.

THE CHAIR: MLA Mombourquette.

HON. DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: Just to MLA Maguire's point, a beer fest - we have those in Sydney, of course. You don't expense tickets to alcohol events. You might go to an event that is a community event that is an annual event where there may be wine

in the place, but it doesn't mean you're drinking the wine. It's not included in the price of the ticket. I mean, 99.9999 percent of the time, if you're going to have a drink at an event, you're buying it yourself anyway. I just think to keep it cut and dry, if it is a ticket that's related directly to an event that is related to alcohol, then it's out.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: Again, I think it's just simple. I agree with MLA Mombourquette. A beer fest, wine fest, scotch tasting, whatever it is, if that is specifically what it is then we shouldn't be expensing those. If it's the local Theatre Arts Guild in Purcells Cove having an opening and they're serving wine there, I'm not going there to drink their wine, I'm going there to support the local community. I think that's the difference.

DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: Listen, it's an important conversation to have and we want to give as much clarity to staff. As we know as MLAs, our expenses are out of our own personal budgets until we get them back. I think it was a good conversation. I think there's a bit of direction here. I would recommend that staff take it back and then come back with a recommendation at the next meeting. I'll move that motion.

JAMES CHARLTON: I was just about to propose something very similar to what MLA Mombourquette was. I was going to suggest take the feedback from this. We'll probably meet again fairly soon because we'll have another meeting after the Audit Committee meets to receive the Audit Committee's Annual Report and pass our own Management Commission Annual Report. Perhaps I can put my head together with the Chief Legislative Counsel and with the Director of Operations and Administration - actually now it's Director of Finance and Administration; wrong title on there - with some of our colleagues and see if we can come up with a draft directive that encompasses the consensus that appears to have been reached around this table.

THE CHAIR: This will be taken back and come to the committee at a later date. We shall move on.

[4:45 p.m.]

The seventh item on the agenda is a review of the final year-end financials from the 2024-25 fiscal year, and the financials from the first and second quarters of the 2025-26 fiscal year. I will ask the Director of Finance and Administration speak to the matter.

Ms. Howard.

KAREN HOWARD: I'll start with the final fourth quarter report for 2024-25. This was an election year, so given expenses associated with an election, we were over budget for that, but that's completely expected for an election year. Those expenses would be related to salaries, overlap from when there's a big turnover, and also transitional allowance for those members who left and would have been eligible for that.

The other thing to note would be, as per Bill No. 1, the increase in the MLA, minister, ministerial assistant, Speaker, deputy speaker, and leader salaries, effective December 1st. Those were paid out in June, but then accrued back for December to March for the appropriate fiscal year to be accounted for in that. That's all accounted for in those finals for the final quarterly report.

THE CHAIR: Are there any questions or comments? Perfect. There is no motion on this.

The Chief Clerk.

JAMES CHARLTON: We do have two other financials to go through - the first and second quarters.

THE CHAIR: My apologies. Ms. Howard.

KAREN HOWARD: I will move on to the first quarterly. Again, back to Bill No. 1 and the salary changes that were effective December 1st. Those would be impacted in this fiscal for April 1st. They were paid out in June, so they are reflected in the new forecast. That kind of covers the first quarter.

Then on to the second quarter. The only real change was the addition to the forecast for the Electoral Boundaries Commission, which started up in June.

Also, I'd like to just make a note that there is a small error under the minister salaries and expenses. As you will see, that forecast jumped to \$2 million from \$774,000. There was an issue with the forecasting in the new system that was not cleaned up or rectified until just recently. That is an error. The forecast is staying at \$774,000, not jumping to \$2 million. That will be reflected in the future reports back to that. That's just a small error with the new system and familiarizing ourselves with updating forecasts and a delay in getting it cleaned up.

THE CHAIR: Are there any questions or comments? Seeing none, I recognize Ms. Howard.

KAREN HOWARD: That's it.

THE CHAIR: That's it? Thank you for coming.

The eighth and final item on the agenda is an in camera discussion on a human resources matter. This marks the end of the public portion of this meeting. We will adjourn immediately following the in camera discussion.

I will now ask everyone except for the members and House of Assembly staff to leave the room.

[The commission adjourned at 4:48 p.m.]