HANSARD

NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY

HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY
MANAGEMENT COMMISSION

Tuesday, July 5, 2022

Committee Room

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HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY
MANAGEMENT COMMISSION

Hon. Keith Bain (Chair)
Angela Simmonds
Hon. Kim Masland
Hon. Allan MacMaster
Danielle Barkhouse
Hon. Derek Mombourquette
Hon. Keith Irving
Susan Leblanc
James Charlton, Chief Clerk of the House of Assembly
(Non-Voting Member)

[Hon. Kim Masland was replaced by John White.]
[Hon. Allan MacMaster was replaced by Tom Taggart.]
[James Charlton was replaced by David Hastings, Assistant Clerk.]

In Attendance:

Speaker's Office Adviser
Matthew Timmons
Director of Operations and Administration
Office of the Speaker

Gordon Hebb
Chief Legislative Counsel

HALIFAX, TUESDAY, JULY 5, 2022

HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY MANAGEMENT COMMISSION

2:00 P.M.

CHAIR
Hon. Keith Bain

VICE CHAIR
Angela Simmonds

THE CHAIR: I call the meeting to order. Welcome, everyone, to the House of Assembly Management Commission. We're going to start off with introductions so that the members can introduce themselves to the public who are watching. First of all, my name is Keith Bain. I'm the Speaker of the House of Assembly and Chair of the Management Commission. I'll call your names and you can introduce yourselves, please.

[The commission members introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: I'd also like to acknowledge the presence of the following two people: Gordon Hebb, our Chief Legislative Counsel, and Matthew Timmons, our new Director of Operations and Administration. Welcome to all.

The first item on the agenda is the approval of the minutes. The draft minutes were circulated in advance of the meeting. Are there any corrections required before the minutes are approved? Mr. White.

JOHN WHITE: In the inventory control risk fact material or matrix, it looks to me like it's a typo. Again, I wasn't at the meeting prior, but it looks like a typo - just because it doesn't make sense the way it is - where it shows the consequence value, so nominal value, minor being a value greater than $100 but less than $500. Moderate value is greater than $500 but less than $100. I assume that's less than $1,000. Then it says major value greater than $1,000.

THE CHAIR: Matthew, I don't know if you could answer that.

MATTHEW TIMMONS: Those aren't in the minutes. Those are to be discussed later on.

THE CHAIR: That's for further discussion at today's meeting. If there's no further discussion, that's moved by MLA Mombourquette and seconded by MLA Barkhouse that the January 18, 2022 meeting minutes of the House of Assembly Management Commission be adopted. You've heard the motion. Are you ready for the question?

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

Is there any business arising from the January 11, 2022 meeting? One thing that we will note is the passage of the following resolution at the May 4, 2021 meeting. That resolution was that staff provide an analysis of current MLA office rents and of distances of inside and outside members for the review and consideration of the Management Commission at a future meeting.

These materials were circulated in advance of the meeting. I'll turn it over to our Director of Operations and Administration to speak to the item. Mr. Timmons.

MATTHEW TIMMONS: I did circulate a package of materials that looked at the average rents, and we broke it out into HRM, town, and rural. As you can see, the average rents for the three different areas are different. The HRM is relatively higher than the other areas, somewhere between $200 and $340. When you look at the median, which is the middle rent, it does bring the difference down slightly to a discrepancy between $100 between HRM and town, and about $240 for HRM and rural.

On the flip side of that, our town and rural constituents have more travel expenses, whereas the HRM areas have less travel. That would make up some of the difference between the higher rents in the HRM area, and the less high rents in the town and rural areas.

After that analysis, I did present about four options at the bottom of that page that look at ways to either smooth out or charge average rents to each member. The four options basically try to have the same effect of trying to smooth out the rents for each member, whether that's charging the average rent for all areas or charging a flat rent of $1,000, smoothing out the rents.

Each of those options below kind of have the same end effect in mind, but different ways of getting there. I'll turn it back over to the Chair.

THE CHAIR: Are there any questions or discussion? Mr. Taggart.

TOM TAGGART: I had meant to look this up last night before I came down here. Our allowable expenses - I think it's $50,000 overall annually. Is there a limit within that that says how much you're allowed to claim for your office? Is there a limit now on office, or are we talking about adding more to that $50,000 or whatever?

MATTHEW TIMMONS: No, there is no limit to the office rents.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Leblanc.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I'm just wondering, in your calculations - your second point about the amount of travel that outside MLAs will do kind of balances off the expense in rent. When you calculated that, did you take into consideration that they have a higher travel allowance? That is true, right, that there is a bit more?

MATTHEW TIMMONS: They have an additional amount in their constituency budget for the larger areas to compensate for that. I don't know if it compensates dollar for dollar, but they would have, yes.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Right, okay. I'm just curious to know if it actually balances out or if that extra compensation makes it not balance out.

TOM TAGGART: On that point, I'd gladly show you my last month's expenses and what I spent on gas and travel. I'm not complaining, I'm just saying it doesn't really come close.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Mombourquette.

HON. DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: This kind of came up in our previous discussion. You're looking at some scenarios and logistically, I try to determine how you would have to do this.

If you go to a blended model or if you smooth them out - however you want to do it - what does that look like for staff, because then this becomes a whole new world of you guys adjusting accordingly to MLAs and their rents and everything else. I'm just curious.

I know there are some suggestions here, but at the same time, logistically this could be very interesting.

MATTHEW TIMMONS: It wouldn't be impossible. It would be something that would take time up front to figure out how we were going to do it. Depending on what the recommendation is from this commission, we would take that back and we would make whatever the decision was work - depending on what that decision was. But there would be some additional work up front to change the process and how rents are charged, depending on the outcome of this proposal.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Irving.

HON. KEITH IRVING: I wasn't at the meeting in which this motion was put forward, so I just want to clarify. This issue is on the table because of the significant increases in rent, particularly in the HRM, and a large proportion of their constituency budget is being eaten up by the larger rents of HRM. That's my understanding of the issue here, and we're trying to figure out a way to get around this or deal with it.

THE CHAIR: That's correct.

KEITH IRVING: I note in the motion that there was to be a committee, and I think the only person here from that committee who had agreed to kind of take a deeper dive at this is Ms. Barkhouse. I don't know if that committee had an opportunity to digest these options or whether this is late breaking.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Barkhouse, would you like to comment?

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: This is late breaking. I just received this when you guys received your package. The problem is that I haven't had enough time, because I take a look at it and some of these don't work for me. I'm rural and my rent is higher than most everybody's here, plus I still have a six-hour drive to go through all of my constituency.

It all comes out in the wash, the way I read this report - whether you're town or you're city or you're rural, it's basically the same. That's how I read it. I also phoned a clerk - not James, of course, sorry, David - and my perspective of it was correct, from what I understand. I don't see - I see either they're tabling it, or just leaving it the way it is now.

DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Through you to Ms. Barkhouse, if the committee needs more time, that's something that I'm okay with. I know this represents a bit of a shift, right, especially for folks. Maybe it's a more Halifax-centric issue for the rents. However you want to proceed, if the committee needs more time to look at it, then I'm more than happy to support that.

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: I would prefer it be pushed to the other committee so that they have time to speak about it as well. It needs more discussion, is what it needs.

SUSAN LEBLANC: As an urban MLA who has very high rent - and actually just moved offices because my rent was going to be even higher than it has been for the last four years - I think that for me, and I think for many who have higher rents, the issue is that we have this amount of money that we have to run our offices and, through that, serve our communities and use to support organizations in our communities. If we have a big discrepancy in rents, then each of us MLAs have different abilities to serve our communities financially.

Now that Ms. Chender is no longer on this committee, I'm happy to take her place on this working committee if we want to continue to take a look at it. I'd love to sit around and really digest the information. If the other parties are willing to do that, I'd be happy to do that.

THE CHAIR: So no one is willing at this point to propose a motion?

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: I say we defer this so we have more time for discussion.

THE CHAIR: So we will table the matter for future consideration, if everyone is agreed. Is it agreed?

It is agreed.

So that's more work for operations again.

KEITH IRVING: I just wanted to help clarify the issue for those who are watching this, just to define what the issue is here. If you take an MLA with the lowest rent at $652 per month and an MLA with the highest rent at $2,663, they're spending $2,000 of their budget per month more than that other MLA. That's $24,000, so there's a huge difference in what the MLA can do with the $24,000 that the other MLA can't.

We're asking this committee to try to come up with a proposal that would create some equity and fairness. I just want to make that clear for people.

THE CHAIR: We've agreed, then, that we will turn it back to the committee for further discussion and bring forward a recommendation at our next meeting.

The next item is the appointment of an auditor. I'm going to recognize the Assistant Clerk to speak to this item.

DAVID HASTINGS: This is a pretty straightforward item. Section 22 of the House of Assembly Management Commission Act requires an annual audit of the commission's account and that the commission must appoint an auditor on the advice of the audit committee.

On May 31st, the audit committee, by resolution, recommended 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 2022-23 fiscal year.

[2:15 p.m.]

This item is now up for you to consider that recommendation from the Audit Committee to appoint the Auditor General as the auditor.

THE CHAIR: Do we have someone to make a motion that the Auditor General be appointed as auditor of the accounts of the House of Assembly? Moved by Ms. Barkhouse. Seconded by Mr. Irving.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

The next item is the House of Assembly Management Commission Regulation amendments, and a revised form for constituency office lease agreement. The copy of the proposed amendments to sections 3, 18, 19B, 23, 24, 27, 42, 43A, 52, and 55 of the House of Assembly Management Commission Regulations, was circulated in advance of the meeting, as well as a copy of the standard form of constituency office lease agreement that was revised to reflect the proposed amendments.

Having said all that, I'll recognize our Chief Legislative Counsel to speak to this item and the many items that are included in this item. Mr. Hebb.

GORDON HEBB: Before I summarize it, although you've got them in advance, I distributed an additional copy of proposed changes here at the meeting, and just a word of explanation. Following each provision, I have got in red a brief explanation of that provision. If they're in bold, they're significant. If they're not in bold, they're minor things like updating the Department of Public Works, or that sort of thing.

The first change to speak to is the change when a constituency office lease presently runs for three full months from the end of the month when you cease to be an MLA. That's being reduced in these regulations from three months to one month. It will always be one month plus part of a month. Although it's being reduced from three to one, the landlord will still get paid for the full three months.

The next one - at the present time, the Speaker must approve the notice period for the constituency office lease. That's being changed to approving the whole lease.

The third one sets a one-month time limit for an MLA who ceases to be an MLA to deal with the constituency office furnishings and the apartment furnishings.

The next one increases the flexibility for an MLA's constituency assistant claiming travel expenses or an MLA claiming constituency expenses. If you refer to section 50 of the regulations, there are a number of options and they weren't all included in the past. For example, this would now allow the MLA to claim bus fare instead of just mileage or air fare. That's all that does.

The next one - at the present time, the regulations are to be automatically amended for inflation, but it's not automatic. It still has to be approved by the commission. It's suggested since it has to come to the commission anyway, just to repeal those provisions, and in a couple of places add some reference to some newer provisions.

There are some provisions in there to prevent double reimbursement, where you're provided money and you can't also at the same time claim per diem for the same things. There are some newer provisions where that wasn't covered because they don't refer to that section, and those references have been added. The rest of it is just corrections and updates - removal of spent provisions.

If you have any questions about the details on this one, after each section it explains what each one does, but I'm happy to answer any questions.

KEITH IRVING: I have no problems with any of these, I don't think. I am just curious to know what the issue is, and why we are making the change from three months to one month on the vacancy. We're still paying for the space, but is this to ensure that departing MLAs wind up? What was the problem we're addressing here?

THE CHAIR: I think that is one of the main problems. As some members might remember, we had some difficulty at one time with a member and it referred to the lease and moving out of the office space. That's part of the reason.

GORDON HEBB: One of the additional things is the regulations also suggest - it's not mandatory - but suggest that the new MLA take over the existing MLA's position. If you're going to allow three months, that's kind of long for the new MLA to wait to take over that space.

KEITH IRVING: Okay, thank you.

THE CHAIR: Any further discussion or questions on what's been proposed? If not, I would ask for a motion to approve the House of Assembly Management Commission

Regulations and amendments that have been presented this afternoon. Moved by Mr. White? Do we have a seconder? Seconded by Mr. Mombourquette.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

The next item on our agenda is the Inventory Control Risk Matrix. The Audit Committee by resolution recommended to the House of Assembly Management Commission that the Provincial Inventory Risk Matrix be followed by the divisions of the House of Assembly when tagging assets for the purpose of inventory control. This is something that just came in within the last number of years, of course.

A copy of the matrix was circulated in advance of the meeting, and I'll once again recognize our Director of Operations and Administration, Mr. Timmons, to speak to this item.

MATTHEW TIMMONS: The matrix was distributed before the meeting as part of the package. This is the matrix that is used by government departments to consider when to tag assets and to put them into the Archibus system.

The matrix looks at two areas: the likelihood of the item being stolen, and the dollar value of that item. The higher the risk of it being stolen and the higher dollar value of the item, that's when the item should be tagged. If it's a low-cost item and not likely to be stolen, then those items wouldn't be tagged.

This is just for the House of Assembly divisions. The Audit Committee discussed the members' dollar threshold, and that was deferred to a later meeting. I'm going to do some more work on that. This is just for divisions like Legislative Television Broadcast and Recording Services, the Legislative Library - those divisions. We are looking to adopt this matrix to be in alignment with government departments.

I will take note of Mr. White's comment - there does appear to be a typo on that sheet - so I will have that corrected so that it reads correctly.

THE CHAIR: Any further questions? Would someone like to move that the Provincial Inventory Control Risk Matrix be adopted for use by the Assembly offices as defined by the House of Assembly Management Commission Act when tagging assets for the purpose of inventory control?

Do we have a mover for that motion? Mr. Irving. Do we have a seconder? Mr. White.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

The next agenda item is the CPI Adjustment. Pursuant to subsection 52(1) of the House of Assembly Management Commission Regulations, the fixed amounts set out in the regulations, except the amount referred to in clause 50(a) for mileage claims and the caucus office entitlements set out in subsection 33(2), are increased on April 1st of each year by the increase in the Consumer Price Index for Nova Scotia or the core Consumer Price Index for Canada, whichever is lower.

The adjustment is subject to the approval of the Management Commission. The CPI for Nova Scotia for the 2021-22 fiscal year was 7.1 per cent, while the CPI for Canada for the same period was 6.8 per cent. The Management Commission must determine whether to approve the 6.8 per cent adjustment.

I'll also indicate a projection of the impact the adjustment will have on the budget, and a copy of the proposed amendments to the House of Assembly Management Commission to reflect the adjustments were circulated in advance of the meeting. I think everybody saw that.

Again, we're going to put Mr. Timmons back on the hot seat. Welcome to your job. (Laughter) Maybe you can just give us an overview of the proposed amendments and we'll go from there.

MATTHEW TIMMONS: Yes, the graph was circulated in advance of the meeting. As the Chair mentioned, the CPI for Nova Scotia was 7.1 and for Canada it was 6.8, so the calculations were based on the 6.8 per cent.

The items are itemized there. The largest, of course, would be the impact to your constituency budgets. The total budget impact for that would be about $192,000 if they were all raised by the 6.8 per cent.

There are a number of items on the sheet - I won't go through each one - but the bottom line is an approximately $297,000 budget increase if the 6.8 per cent CPI adjustment was approved. If this was approved, we would take that to Treasury Board as a budget pressure and we would go from there.

The increase primarily affects your constituency budgets, as I said: travel per diems and payments that are made twice a year for items such as committee chairs.

THE CHAIR: Any discussion?

DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: Just for clarity, any recommendation that we would make today - this is for people who are watching - would still have to go back to Treasury Board for approval.

THE CHAIR: Not any recommendation, but if something as exorbitant . . .

DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: If there's a change as a result.

THE CHAIR: We're talking close to $300,000. That would definitely have to go back to Treasury Board for consideration.

MATTHEW TIMMONS: Those are legislated, so if you approve them today through the commission, then these would be in effect immediately. Is that correct, Mr. Hebb?

GORDON HEBB: Yes, it's not subject to Treasury Board. On the other hand, without their approval, you might run out of money before the end of the year. (Laughter)

MATTHEW TIMMONS: My understanding is that since these are legislated, if we did come into a position where we were overspent as a whole - as Legislative Services - then they would have to give us the money. That's my understanding.

THE CHAIR: I guess what we have to look at is that the recommendation, if approved by the committee, would be approved. But I think we all know that it still has to go to Treasury Board. It can't become law, because we have to show responsibility if we're going to raise a budget by $300,000. I think that's the important thing to keep in mind.

Again, that's only my opinion that I'm stating for the meeting.

DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: It's a difficult decision to make. Regardless of who's sitting here making the decision today, ultimately Treasury Board's going to have to decide. We can make the recommendation today, but they very well could come back and say no. So ultimately - this is different for me, because we're making a recommendation, and maybe the legislation says that it's binding. But ultimately we make the recommendation but Treasury Board could come back and reject it.

It puts the committee in kind of an awkward position to make a recommendation, not knowing the will of government, really. If Treasury Board comes back and says no, then our approving any change would be for naught. That's just a point I wanted to make. It's an awkward position, as I see it, that we're in right now, but I'll leave it there and open it up for discussion for the commission.

THE CHAIR: Just for clarification, are you saying that we should not be making a recommendation at this point, we should be asking government through Treasury Board whether or not it would even be considered? Is that getting around to your point?

DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: Listen, this is a great conversation, because this is something that we need to discuss as a commission, and it's something that, quite frankly, MLAs are dealing with, as the rest of the world is, when it comes to the costs of doing business.

[2:30 p.m.]

In the organizations that I've worked for prior to government, we had the budgets and we made decisions based on the money that we had, but we had access to it. In this case, we're making a recommendation but we don't know whether it's going to be approved or not, because Treasury Board ultimately will be the ones that will decide whether we do it or not.

I guess I am saying that there are important things that we need to talk about in this report, and a huge thank you to staff. We asked you to go out and do this and do jurisdictional scans and everything else. I look forward to the comments from other commission members, but it's something that I never really thought of until I got in here now and we're talking about it: any recommendation we make may or may not be approved.

It would be in the best interest of this committee if we knew where the will of government was and where the will of Treasury Board was to look at making some sort of increase in the budget.

THE CHAIR: Before I recognize Ms. Leblanc, being new to this position myself, has it always been that the - I'm going to say the caucus office budgets. Have they always received that CPI increase regardless?

MATTHEW TIMMONS: No, that's not correct. They have not received CPI.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I just want to clarify. Is what Mr. Mombourquette saying what you just said? (Laughter) It feels like you're both saying two different things.

MATTHEW TIMMONS: It's kind of a chicken and egg thing. I will say that Legislative Services as a whole is typically under budget by more than that $300,000. As things stand, even without going to Treasury Board - if we went to Treasury Board first, they would come back and say, you guys are underspent. It would be a decision made at this commission, and then we would implement that decision, and all things being equal, we would still be under budget year over year.

If we ever got to the point where we were over budget or we were forecasting to be over budget, we would go to Treasury Board and point out that this is legislation. If we were truly over budget, then they would have a hard time not to approve the appropriation to bring us back under budget.

THE CHAIR: Does that give you some clarification, Ms. Leblanc?

SUSAN LEBLANC: Was there ever a scenario where different amounts of an increase were considered? The Canadian CPI to date is 6.8 per cent, but there hasn't been an increase since 2012. Is there a scenario where there's a split-the-difference or other number-crunching that has been done?

MATTHEW TIMMONS: No, I don't believe so. I think the regulations specify the CPI to be the lower between Canada and Nova Scotia, so no. As you can see, the last time a CPI adjustment was approved was in 2012.

TOM TAGGART: Is this something different? Is this something for the past two, four, six, eight, 10, 12 years - this is done annually? Annually this comes to this committee, this committee makes a decision, it goes to Treasury Board and they make their decision. We're not doing anything different, is that correct?

GORDON HEBB: The change doesn't require Treasury Board approval, as Mr. Timmons pointed out. It's just if they're going over the budget, and there may be room for these. Having said that, as Mr. Timmons has pointed out, this commission has said no to any change for the last several years.

As Mr. Timmons has correctly pointed out, it's all or nothing under the present regulations. With these changes, once they come into force, there would be more flexibility for the commission.

TOM TAGGART: Having said that, Mr. Timmons has already said that even if we did approve the increase, it could still be within the current budget, because typically we've been under budget. We have been under budget annually for more than the $200,000, I guess.

I just think that we should do what we decide and let Treasury Board decide what they decide. I don't see why we're doing it any different today than we would have done it last year or the year before, or whatever, other than this is a higher-than-usual recommended CPI increase. Am I right about that? No?

SUSAN LEBLANC: Did you say it's a recommended higher-than-usual CPI? I missed what you said, sorry.

TOM TAGGART: No. Well, I'm trying to determine why this is any different than this has been done annually - why we just don't make a decision. The reason that it's been raised that we should go to Treasury Board is because CPI is higher this time than it was other years? Is that correct? I'm trying to figure out why this plays in.

THE CHAIR: As Mr. Hebb has mentioned, there's been no increase at all in the previous number of years.

TOM TAGGART: I got that.

THE CHAIR: I guess Mr. Timmons has said that if he uses $300,000, we're still going to be under our budget, and our budget must have already been approved by Treasury Board in the first place. Am I correct in saying that, Mr. Timmons?

MATTHEW TIMMONS: Yes, that's correct. If we were still under budget, then there would be no issue. If we were forecasting that we would be over budget, that's when we would have to go to Treasury Board and tell them that this was a legislated increase, so our budget is now over budget. They would - I wouldn't want to say have to, but they would be inclined to give us the additional appropriation to bring us back under budget.

THE CHAIR: I'm going to recognize Mr. White, then Ms. Barkhouse.

JOHN WHITE: First off, I want to thank you for preparing the report. I know that a lot of work went into this, so I appreciate that much, I've got to say straight up, the PC caucus is not going to make any recommendations for a CPI adjustment.

Given where we are in the times - and I know we are a part of that, as well. I'll be the first to tell you that I'm struggling financially as much as anybody in the public - I really am. But if something doesn't taste right or feel right, it's probably not right. I do not feel right to sit here and say yes to a vote that is going to positively impact me financially. Our caucus is going to say no to any adjustment that you make.

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: Well, he pretty much took the words out of my mouth, although mine were a little different.

I'm just wondering - and you'll have to excuse that I do not know the history from this - if we're always under budget, then why are we even putting ourselves through this, really? To me, that's the crux of it all. I mean, it doesn't make sense to me. If we're always under budget, why? I was looking over, and a lot of MLAs don't spend their whole budget.

That's all I have to say. Thank you, Johnny. You said it well as well.

DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: Listen, I appreciate your honesty. We're all kind of in the same boat here. It's a difficult time for families, and any time you're looking at this stuff as we're mandated to do - regardless of who sits on what side of the House, this is part of what we do. Decisions were made over the years by previous governments whether to increase or not. I feel like we're really all on the same page. Ms. Barkhouse through Mr. Speaker, you're right. It's a case of - for many of us, we don't spend our budgets completely. I've never done it in seven years, but some do. I think this is why we go through this exercise.

I don't think we should shy away from talking about it. Ultimately, we make decisions, but you're making decisions in a very difficult time for people. I appreciate the honesty from the member for Glace Bay, and I'll stop there and pass it through to the committee members.

TOM TAGGART: I absolutely agree with what MLA White said. Where I was trying to go was, this committee, we're charged with making a decision. If we're going to make a decision, we just make it. We don't worry about whether - that's Mr. Timmons' problem once we make the decision. The idea that we were going to lay that decision back to Treasury Board is really not, in my view - this is our job to do, is to make a decision.

KEITH IRVING: I was going to raise the points that Ms. Barkhouse made. Clearly, the information that I'm aware of is that most MLAs have not spent their budget. So even though we have not applied CPI for the last 10 years except for once - which over that period of time is roughly 25 per cent - we still have not needed that. If the problem that was before us is 75 per cent of the MLAs have run out of money at the end of the year, then maybe that's when we look at it.

The one issue there that I think is percolating, and I don't have any data, is the rents that people are paying for apartments as outside members. I'm an inside member, so I don't know the facts on that, but there's been, clearly, large inflation there. I know a number of MLAs are topping up with personal funds for that. That may be an issue that we want to dig into at some point, but I don't think we're going to do that there.

The other point that I was going to raise is these issues that affect the top-up salaries for the various positions. I just don't feel comfortable that we should be doing that as elected officials. That should be something done independently. We have an independent review going on of the base MLA salary - why they're not looking at these additional funds for the additional workload of those positions. In my mind, that should be done completely independent of MLAs.

I think that's where the public gets very uncomfortable with us, if we are approving - even if they're marginal, you're voting for your own money, and I think we don't want to be there. I think that's why we have an independent committee looking at MLA salaries that have been frozen for 10 years, and these positions are top-ups for those - should be looked at independently. Those are my comments on this, and I agree with the committee that I don't think we're in a position to accept this at this point.

THE CHAIR: Well, I will say that your last comment, I will take that under advisement for further discussion.

One thing we did decide was the review that is presently taking place at this point is for MLA base salary and nothing else. That was something that we stressed right off the bat. It doesn't include constituency expenses, it doesn't include office rent, it doesn't include pension. It is just the base salary amount that an MLA will receive, but I will take that under advisement. We can have further discussion on it.

KEITH IRVING: One additional thought I had is if this committee is going to be responsible for the non-salary items and doing a review when it's necessary - it may not be necessary this year as we've determined, but in future years. At some point, we will get to a point of exceeding budgets.

It might be helpful to have someone arm's-length work and recommend back to this committee that they've reviewed the rents of MLAs, and 90 per cent of them are using their personal funds to find an apartment in Halifax. What the decision is, who knows, but if we could have that kind of independent analysis provided to this committee in the future - because this will come up again sometime, and it would be helpful, I think, for us that we had some kind of independent analysis.

[2:45 p.m.]

THE CHAIR: I think I'd like to go further and commit to something right now, if I could. That would be that further on, the Speaker, the clerks, Legislative Counsel, and administration could sit down together to look it over and make a report to our next meeting, if all are in agreement with that.

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: I would love that. I tend to agree with what was said here. Although people see that it's almost $300,000, it's that you go from $50 to $52 for your per diem. It's nickelling and diming across the board, but it adds up among 55 MLAs. For us to be the ones in charge of that puts us in a very awkward position.

JOHN WHITE: I just want to comment, MLA Irving. I don't mind being personal. My apartment is $500 per month out of my own pocket. That's exactly what it is. It's outrageous. It is totally outrageous, and every one of you spoke on this. It's not comfortable to sit in a position where you vote for something that you gain in favour of. It's not okay. This needs to be addressed. Sometime down the road, this needs to be changed. I agree 100 per cent.

THE CHAIR: Assuming there is no support and the fact that this was brought to the floor of the meeting, I'm going to ask for a motion that the increase on April 1, 2022, of the fixed amount set out in the House of Assembly Management Commission Regulations by 6.8 per cent, rounded to the nearest dollar, be not approved.

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: So moved.

THE CHAIR: Moved by Ms. Barkhouse. Do we have a seconder?

KEITH IRVING: Seconded.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Irving.

You've heard the motion.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

Now we move on to the financials. The financials were circulated in advance of the meeting. It's the third-quarter report for 2021-22 and the preliminary fourth-quarter report for 2021-22. Once again, I'll recognize the Director of Operations and Administration, Mr. Timmons, to speak to the financials.

MATTHEW TIMMONS: I'll just quickly look at the fourth-quarter report. That's the one in colour that was handed out. This is our preliminary year end. As you know, members are able to incur expenses up to June 30th, so we're almost at the point where we're able to finalize the 2021-22 numbers, but these are the preliminary results, which won't change all that much.

I will just point out the two numbers at the bottom: the spent to forecast and the spent to budget. They are both 98 per cent, so we are 98 per cent spent compared to budget and forecast, which is roughly around $500,000. So that's basically a $500,000 surplus.

I will also point out that 2021-22 was an election year. Typically, our surplus is much higher, but due to the election and the large turnover with people coming in and out, there were some significant additional expenses that are only incurred in an election year - an election year that has a lot of turnover. So that is why the surplus - there was still a surplus, but much smaller than a typical year.

THE CHAIR: Any questions or discussion on the financials?

Hearing none, I want to thank Mr. Timmons for providing that. It doesn't require a motion at this point.

KEITH IRVING: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I see we've come to the end of the agenda. I just wanted to raise one issue that's come up in our caucus that maybe we could have a look at. That is the allotted budget for a community event, which is somewhere around $480.

In my experience you can't rent a hall and bring together a community and serve coffee for that. The times that I've had community recognition events, I've had to use other funds to do that.

It might be worth looking at, considering that all MLAs have now been asked to have an event around the Queen's Platinum Jubilee; some of us may wish to rent a community hall and bring together the community to celebrate those 15 folks. Do we need to have a limit on that? Should we be trusting MLAs to work within their overall budget to spend where necessary, or do we look at moving it to something more appropriate, like $1,000 or something? I'm just wondering if we could maybe ask somebody to take a look at that for us and come back with a recommendation.

THE CHAIR: We'll ask administration to look at that and bring forward a recommendation to committee, agreed? Okay. Thank you for that.

As Mr. Irving has noted, the agenda has been completed. Unless there's anything further to come before the meeting, the meeting stands adjourned. Thank you all very much for your presence today.

[The commission adjourned at 2:51 p.m.]