

# **HANSARD**

**NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY**

**COMMITTEE**

**ON**

**PUBLIC ACCOUNTS**

**Wednesday, February 1, 2017**

**Legislative Chamber**

**Department of Municipal Affairs  
Sustainable Transportation Programs**

## **Public Accounts Committee**

Mr. Allan MacMaster, Chairman

Mr. Iain Rankin, Vice-Chairman

Mr. Chuck Porter

Ms. Suzanne Lohnes-Croft

Mr. Brendan Maguire

Mr. Joachim Stroink

Mr. Tim Houston

Hon. David Wilson

Ms. Lenore Zann

In Attendance:

Ms. Kim Langille  
Legislative Committee Clerk

Mr. Gordon Hebb  
Chief Legislative Counsel

Ms. Nicole Arsenault  
Assistant Clerk, Office of the Speaker

Mr. Terry Spicer  
Deputy Auditor General

### **WITNESSES**

#### **Department of Municipal Affairs**

Ms. Kelliann Dean, Deputy Minister

Ms. Anne Partridge, Executive Director, Grants, Programs and Operations

Mr. Greg Sewell, Manager, Municipal Financial Performance and Operating Grants



House of Assembly  
*Nova Scotia*

**HALIFAX, WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 1, 2017**

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC ACCOUNTS**

9:00 A.M.

CHAIRMAN

Mr. Allan MacMaster

VICE-CHAIRMAN

Mr. Iain Rankin

MR. CHAIRMAN (Mr. Iain Rankin): I'd like to call the meeting to order and remind everyone in attendance to place their phones on silent or turn them off. I'm Iain Rankin, the Vice-Chairman, filling in today for Chairman Mr. Allan MacMaster. I'm the MLA for Timberlea-Prospect.

I'd like to start by saying that I'll make my best attempt to allow a free flow of conversation, the way that the chairman has. I'll introduce the questioner and then the witness at the start. If I notice that it doesn't work out that way as it has in the past, then I'll go through how other Chairs do - I'll recognize every question and every answer to the witnesses. We'll start with trying to attempt the free flow.

On today's agenda we have officials from the Department of Municipal Affairs with respect to the sustainable transportation programs. I'll now ask everyone to introduce themselves.

[The committee members and witnesses introduced themselves.]

MR. CHAIRMAN: Now we can ask the witnesses to make opening remarks before questioning. Ms. Dean.

MS. KELLIANN DEAN: Good morning and thank you very much for inviting us here today to talk about sustainable transportation. As the 2013 Sustainable Transportation Strategy shows, responsibility for supporting public transit, active transportation, lower emissions and other facets of sustainable transportation are shared among many government departments. The main role we play at Municipal Affairs is supporting public transit in both urban and rural areas. Joining me to talk about public transit today are my colleagues Anne Partridge and Greg Sewell.

Mr. Chairman, local, sustainable public transportation in Nova Scotia is built on a foundation of co-operation and innovation. For many years, the province has worked with municipalities and community groups to offer a variety of public transit options for Nova Scotians in both urban and rural communities.

We have a total of 20 provincially-funded transit systems in the province - 16 of them are run by community groups, four are run by municipalities. Together they provide almost all areas of the province with some type of public transit service. This coverage has grown significantly. In 2001 we had seven community systems and, as I've said, now we have 16.

To be clear, these are not motor coach or shuttle services that travel longer distances, these are beyond the scope of our mandate at Municipal Affairs. The services we fund are mainly county-based. In some cases they span a few counties in close proximity.

In urban areas transit systems tend to be fixed-route services. Four are run by municipalities. They are Halifax Transit, Transit Cape Breton in CBRM, Kings Transit and Town of Yarmouth Transit. Two of them are actually run by community groups: Strait Area Transit, and Antigonish Community Transit.

In rural Nova Scotia traditional fixed-route transit systems are often not economically feasible, given the relatively small populations and large geographic areas. That doesn't mean there is any less need for some form of transit service. With support from the province, people in rural communities are finding creative ways to offer transit service that meets the needs of their residents. It is community groups that have stepped forward to help develop these services to offer door-to-door transportation to local businesses, shopping, appointments, medical services, community events and other destinations that users need to reach.

The Department of Municipal Affairs offers three programs that are designed to help community groups provide service in their areas, in particular for seniors, low-income earners and people with mobility challenges. These programs help community groups move along a continuum of development from studying the feasibility of a service to providing operating assistance and capital for purchasing vehicles.

For example, the Nova Scotia Transit Research Incentive Program helps communities to research options and then develop a business plan for a new transit service. This program provides start-up funding for community groups or municipalities interested in developing new or improved public transit services in rural areas and underserved urban areas. In 2016 this program had a budget of \$169,000.

Once a community group has a solid business plan, it needs vehicles. The Accessible Transportation Assistance Program kicks in to provide funding to buy wheelchair accessible vehicles or to adapt vehicles to accommodate wheelchairs. The budget for this program is \$385,000 in 2016-17.

The next step, of course, is operating assistance. Although some funding comes from municipal sources, the province's Community Transportation Assistance Program helps cover a portion of the operating costs for non-profit community organizations where they want to improve transportation services for everyone - again with a focus on meeting the needs of disabled, elderly, and low-income Nova Scotians. In 2014-15, the budget for this program was increased by \$500,000 to further meet operational needs of expanded community transit services, bringing the budget to \$1.2 million for 16 community transit services.

For the urban services that are mainly run by municipalities, maintaining their fleets, bus shelters, and terminals are typically the priority. To address their needs, we introduced a new program in 2014-15, the Public Transit Assistance Program. That provides \$2.9 million in capital assistance.

In 2016-17, the province is investing about \$4.7 million in transit funding throughout Nova Scotia. The community groups that we support do a tremendous job to establish their transit services and deserve to be congratulated and recognized for their initiative in providing these services for rural populations.

I would like to note that we also have a close working relationship with the Rural Transportation Association, which represents these community transit organizations. Our staff attend association meetings where they hear concerns and offer advice and assistance, and we've consulted with the association on our programs.

I would also like to recognize the contribution of the federal government in supporting public transit. Gas tax funding transferred to Nova Scotia municipalities can be spent on public transit, and in 2015-16, municipalities allocated \$8.7 million of gas tax funding for this purpose. Also, through the new Public Transit Infrastructure Fund announced this summer, our federal partners are investing \$32.2 million this year to upgrade and improve Nova Scotia's public transit systems.

Municipalities also make significant investments in transit to serve larger populations in an economically feasible manner and are able to test innovative ways to reduce costs, increase efficiency, and lower emissions.

We're happy to take your questions about these programs.

MR. CHAIRMAN: We will start with questioning from the Progressive Conservative Party for 20 minutes. Mr. Houston.

MR. TIM HOUSTON: Thank you for the introduction. You mentioned four programs with a total budget of \$4.7 million for the year. Has that budget been used across all those programs?

MS. DEAN: Yes, it has.

MR. HOUSTON: So in every program, each budget was fully exhausted for the year?

MS. DEAN: Yes, it was.

MR. HOUSTON: Starting with the Nova Scotia Transit Research Incentive Program, that had a budget of \$169,000. How many communities accessed that program?

MS. DEAN: In 2016-17, 11 communities had access to this program for a variety of research programs that they undertook. St. Margaret's Bay Community Transportation had a service start-up phase that they were starting for their BayRides community transit service. The Region of Queens Municipality had a public transit feasibility study. CHAD Transit - which you might be familiar with - had two projects: business plan development for their fixed flex route service, which I think they're studying quite intensely, and business plan development for CHAD.

Chester Transportation Society had business plan development for their Community Wheels service. There was a marketing plan implementation project for the Trans County Transportation Society. In Clare, there was a business plan project. There was a strategic planning project for the board of Sou'West Nova Transit. West Hants Dial-a-Ride had a policy manual update. Cumberland County Transportation Service Society did a business plan project for fixed and flex route development. Again, there's a wide variety of projects aimed at testing the feasibility of a new service or enhancing an existing service.

MR. HOUSTON: So there were 11 projects this year. Is that kind of the norm? Every year, does that budget get used?

MS. DEAN: Yes, it does. If there are areas where it doesn't completely get used, what we might do is take that portion and allocate it to one of the other areas where there might be greater demand. We have some flexibility within those program areas to meet the needs depending on the demand in a given year.

MR. HOUSTON: Have you had to turn away any applicants from that program in recent years?

MS. DEAN: No we haven't, I'm happy to say. The only time we may have turned anybody away is if the project was ineligible.

MR. HOUSTON: Then the next step after you do the feasibility is the Accessible Transportation Assistance Program. Was that budget used this year as well?

MS. DEAN: Yes, it was.

MR. HOUSTON: How many vehicles would have been purchased under that program this year?

MS. DEAN: Under ATAP, I believe there were 10 vehicles this year purchased by 10 organizations, so each of those organizations purchased an accessible vehicle and that budget . . .

MR. HOUSTON: Is that kind of the norm that that budget gets used each year as well?

MS. DEAN: Yes.

MR. HOUSTON: Now in terms of the Community Transportation Assistance Program, \$1.2 million, you mentioned that 16 communities access that program. Is that kind of ongoing funding for those programs?

MS. DEAN: Yes, that's operational funding for those programs where they have ongoing services and we provide that on an annual basis.

MR. HOUSTON: Now the Public Transit Assistance Program - that's the big one, \$2.9 million. Is that Metro Transit?

MS. DEAN: A portion goes to Metro Transit but also Transit Cape Breton, Kings Transit, Strait Area Transit, Antigonish Community Transit Society, and the Town of Yarmouth receive funding through that program.

MR. HOUSTON: I'm thinking about rural areas because there's obviously an urban-rural divide. Transportation is an issue in many rural areas, especially for our seniors who are trying to get to town for medical appointments and stuff like that. One thing that I often hear discussed is the school bus network. School buses are buses that are running all the time and half the time they are sitting there idle in the summer and they're not used during the day. Has there been any consideration to using school buses to move residents? Is that something the department has looked at under any of these programs?

MS. DEAN: I guess I would say that isn't something we've looked at under these specific programs, but certainly it would be an area of discussion that I could have with my colleague in Education and Early Childhood Development.

MR. HOUSTON: Are you aware of any community that came forward, like under the Transit Research Incentive Program, with a proposal to say we need some funding to look at this?

MS. DEAN: I understand from Greg that the Region of Queens Municipality did a study - it wasn't done through us - to look at the feasibility of using school buses during off hours. I don't have the details of that but certainly it is something worth exploring that we could look into.

MR. HOUSTON: Is that a program that was funded under one of these, that research?

MS. DEAN: No, it was not under one of our programs.

MR. HOUSTON: So they did it completely independently from your funding programs.

MS. DEAN: It may have been through another department but it wasn't through our department.

MR. HOUSTON: So that was in Kings?

MS. DEAN: In Queens.

MR. HOUSTON: In Queens, okay. Is the department responsible for trying to think of ways to help with transportation in rural areas or just kind of disburse the funds to other people who are thinking about that?

MS. DEAN: I think that in our work with the Rural Transportation Association, we are always looking for ways we can improve service so that we can adapt our programming. The particular issue you are talking about is something that obviously would involve discussions with the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, a much broader discussion.

We do also have a committee that we work with with our colleagues, so Transportation and Infrastructure Renewal, ourselves, Energy and others - the Department of Seniors - to look at other ways and ways we can enhance what we're doing.

This is terrific progress, communities have stepped up to provide services to meet needs of their residents and not every community is the same but there are always opportunities to look for new and innovative ideas.



MR. HOUSTON: It's interesting because we have had the Department of Energy here to talk about basically the same topic, today we have Municipal Affairs to talk about this topic, and you mentioned that maybe the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development should be involved. It's a big issue, particularly in the rural areas where there might not even be a taxi service. I'm just wondering, who is actually thinking about these issues? Is it up to the communities to try and approach the government? Are the departments getting together and thinking about what we can do for people in the rural areas?

You mentioned a bunch of departments talking about these issues, what are those discussions about?

MS. DEAN: There is a working group, as I said, that is related to the Sustainable Transportation Strategy that came out in 2013. I know they meet on a regular basis to take a look at what could be done to improve services. Again, it is a horizontal effort across government. I know as well that the Department of Seniors has recently held some consultations with communities around the province and they have identified transportation as an issue.

Again, we try to work collaboratively with our colleagues in various departments and meet on a regular basis to determine the next steps. I think the information we will get from the Department of Seniors and some of their work with communities will help to inform actions that we take going forward.

MR. HOUSTON: Are you part of that working group?

MS. DEAN: Greg is part of that working group.

MR. HOUSTON: When is the last time that working group met?

MR. GREG SEWELL: I think the last time was probably in late November.

MR. HOUSTON: Do you remember if transportation in rural Nova Scotia was a focus of that meeting?

MR. SEWELL: That is the focus of all the meetings.

MR. HOUSTON: The whole working group is focused on transportation issues in rural Nova Scotia?

MR. SEWELL: Yes.

MR. HOUSTON: Do you remember what types of things were discussed at that meeting in terms of trying to meet the transportation challenges in rural Nova Scotia? I'm

specifically thinking about the school bus issue, is that a hot topic or is that kind of an old idea?

MR. SEWELL: School buses I do not believe were discussed at the last meeting. There's a number of challenges to be able to use school buses for public transportation. The committee has not been directed to look at the use of school buses.

MR. HOUSTON: Who gives that committee direction? Where does that direction come from? Is it just kind of brainstorming or is there actually somebody who sets an agenda for that committee to talk about?

MR. SEWELL: In my opinion it's a bit of an ad hoc committee that was formed probably about two years ago, after a Community Transportation Nova Scotia meeting. They wanted a conduit into government and one of the provincial members at that meeting agreed to form an interdepartmental committee to assist them and look at transit, the broader picture across government.

MR. HOUSTON: Queens did a study on using school buses for rural transportation, at some point - was that years ago, roughly?

MR. SEWELL: I'd say in 2012.

MR. HOUSTON: Other than that, no groups have come to the department asking for funding to research it for their area? That's not something that you've had proposals on?

MR. SEWELL: Correct.

MR. HOUSTON: Is it a good idea, in your opinion, based on your experience in this working committee and trying to think about these issues - maybe you've seen the Queens feasibility study - is it a good idea, from what you know?

MR. SEWELL: The challenge is the mixing of students with adults. Until that issue is resolved and how it can work in our province or other provinces, to me that is the biggest barrier to using school buses.

MR. HOUSTON: I hear that, I don't think it's a real - I mean it sounds like something that somebody somewhere would say well we can't do that because of this. I don't think it's a real barrier, especially when you think of rural areas, where the bus driver probably knows everyone who is going to possibly get on and you could probably clear those people.

I know when I coach hockey I get a child abuse registry check and a criminal record check and all this type of stuff, then I'm cleared to coach hockey and be around kids. You

can probably do that. Is that kind of the main stumbling block that you hear - the whole who-is-getting-on-the-bus issue?

MR. SEWELL: That would be the biggest challenge, yes.

MR. HOUSTON: Okay, maybe that's something that some community will come forward and try to figure out because they are assets, the buses are sitting there, they're running and people need transportation. In the meantime, I guess what I'm wondering, on the \$2.9 million in the Public Transit Assistance Program, did that program fund Metro Transit when Metro Transit purchased those discontinued Access-A-Buses specifically? They purchased 15 discontinued Access-A-Buses for a couple of million dollars, was there funding for that specifically, do you know? It was a very specific issue that Metro Transit had when they purchased these discontinued Access-A-Buses. I'm wondering, would they have had provincial funding for that?

MS. DEAN: We'll have to get back to you on that specific one. I don't think we have that information with us right now.

MR. HOUSTON: When I think about the transportation issues facing the province - and I see four programs here, and there's probably other departments with programs - I just wonder, is it something that has been over-thought? Are there too many programs? Could we just have one program that people can come and apply to and try to solve the transportation issues facing the province? Are there too many programs?

MS. DEAN: From our perspective in Municipal Affairs, there are four. They're very specific, and they kind of build on each other. Whether we separate them or put them all together in one program, obviously that's an option. You always look at your programs and evaluate them on a regular basis to see if there's a better way to deliver them.

In terms of the availability of programming in other parts of government, I don't believe that there are a lot of other programs out there or duplicate programming. They may be for different things, but for the establishment of these rural transportation services and for the ongoing operating and capital requirements, Department of Municipal Affairs holds most of the programming. I'm not aware that there is multiple programming elsewhere that could be combined.

MR. HOUSTON: These four programs have a budget that has pretty much been used every year. Do you have any sense of what the success is of these programs? Is the funding actually producing results and helping people get around?

MS. DEAN: I would say that they're very successful. If you look at the growth in the programming from six services to 16 services over 10 years, I think that's really good progress. The ridership numbers are pretty impressive as well. I think that what you'll find is that they are actually filling a gap in transit services around the province. There were

164,000 rides in 2015-16 meeting the needs of people who otherwise wouldn't have access to transportation. I think that they are very much playing a role.

The other piece of this that I think is really important is that it is a shared effort. It's a collaborative effort, and it's community-led. Communities know best what's needed in their areas. They're designing these services with the community's needs in mind, knowing where residents need to get to, knowing best how to structure it so that the people who need access get access. I think the support that we're providing is helping that along.

There are four areas of the province that currently aren't served by some sort of transportation route, and I know that they are actively looking at the feasibility of that. We have the majority of the province covered right now through the existing programming that we're providing.

MR. HOUSTON: So, 164,000 rides, how would that compare to three years ago? Do you know?

MS. DEAN: It was 150,000, so it's increasing. It has been steadily increasing.

MR. HOUSTON: Okay, thank you.

MR. CHAIRMAN: We'll move to the NDP caucus for 20 minutes. Ms. Zann.

MS. LENORE ZANN: Thank you very much, good to see you here. Sustainable transportation was actually a strategy that was developed in 2013 under the NDP Government. It argued that Nova Scotians' reliance on personal vehicles to move from place to place needed to change, that Nova Scotians needed to be provided with more and more sustainable transportation choices in order to make healthy decisions for themselves and for the environment. I noticed that one of the goals of the Sustainable Transportation Strategy was to get more Nova Scotians out of their cars and into public and community transportation.

This strategy was inherited by the current government, and it hasn't been replaced. It has been about three years now since the government has been taking care of this, yet looking at polling results from DalTRAC, for instance, the number of individuals driving to work alone is increasing. So, too, is the amount of time people are spending in their commute to and from work so it appears that we're not reaching our goals. What is the Department of Municipal Affairs doing to decrease the increase in single occupant driving in Nova Scotia?

MS. DEAN: I guess what I would say is that I'll speak to the role that we have within that framework of sustainable transportation. As I indicated earlier, it's very much a strategy that has the co-operation of various departments. It's led by Energy but it also has representation, as I said, from Municipal Affairs, from Health and Wellness, from Transportation and Infrastructure Renewal, as well as others.

There is this approach around making active transportation something that is more prevalent, programming there to get people out of their cars, on their bikes, or if there is the opportunity to do that and there have been several programs - I think my colleague, Deputy Minister Coolican, was in talking about Connect2 as an example of that type of program.

For us in Municipal Affairs, our mandate is to try to provide services for people who otherwise wouldn't have access to them. They may not have a car so their only mode of transportation is to rely on the service that might be available in their community to get to appointments or to get to necessary services.

In this instance the opportunity here is meeting needs of those who otherwise wouldn't be able - they're transportationally challenged. We are providing opportunities for them to have access to their appointments, to their jobs, to shopping, whatever they might need in their communities. I think that's an important piece within this larger framework that we can't necessarily ignore.

MS. ZANN: I heard my colleague talking about the school buses and yes, I believe that was looked into in the original days when we first started the strategy, there were many things looked at. One thing I'd like to say about that, though, is it seems it might not be particularly great for the environment to be driving a great big bus around just to pick up a few people. It might be better to have a small fleet of vans and things like this, or even an electric bus, something that would be more environmentally friendly, to be travelling around to pick up people in the country.

Yes, as you said, if there is nothing in place, then people can't get around. This is a big problem; they can't get to their shopping. When they were trying to change all the mail to be in little square boxes some people couldn't even get to their mailboxes. A lot of people have mobility issues as well. I'm just hoping that the Department of Municipal Affairs' current funding regimen does help to allow rural Nova Scotian communities to build sustainable transportation systems that will move people from point A to point B in efficient and greener ways.

I noticed that the problem is just as much a problem, really, for residents in Halifax. Many transportation advocacy groups have argued that Halifax's transit budget is not doing enough to increase ridership. How is the Department of Municipal Affairs working with HRM to get more residents to take the bus and the ferry?

MS. DEAN: That's a good point. HRM does invest heavily in transit, not just through our programming but also through their gas tax investments. Historically they have provided a significant amount of money to upgrade their facilities, to look at their routes, to fix the bus shelters, to build new terminals, to try to encourage more people to use transit services.

As an example, in 2014-15 they invested more than \$11 million of their gas tax to improve transit infrastructure; in 2015-16, almost \$12.2 million and then in this fiscal year, 2016-17, and again this is reflective of the new federal programming that came out, the Public Transit Infrastructure Fund, they are investing over \$36 million.

I think that HRM is certainly doing what it can to analyze its system to look for opportunities for improvement, to find ways to connect people. You know it's a challenge with a region that is as large and as dispersed as HRM, with both urban and rural within its boundaries. So there is definitely a unique challenge there, I would say.

MS. ZANN: Actually last week Erica Butler of *The Halifax Examiner* published an article highlighting concerns that Halifax riders have with the new accessible buses: Halifax is expected to have 100 per cent of its fleet with accessible, low-floor technology but unfortunately roughly 40 per cent of the new vehicles have what many consider to be unsafe restraint systems for wheelchairs and scooters. Wheelchairs and scooters are not entirely immobilized when strapped in, so that allows many riders to tip over and fall out.

Sadly, Halifax did not appear to have heard some of the concerns and didn't really do anything to address the situation. There does appear to be a rather chronic problem when it comes to consulting persons with disabilities. We saw this at the provincial level last year with the Accessibility Act as well, where insufficient notice was provided before the initial meeting of the Law Amendments Committee where stakeholders didn't have enough time to review the bill or, in some cases, even to be able to get accessible transportation to get to the meeting.

Does the Department of Municipal Affairs actually have enough tools at their disposal to ensure that sustainable transportation programs provide the accessibility that Nova Scotians really need?

MS. DEAN: Again, I don't want to speak for HRM on this but what I will say is that I know that with the increased funding available to them, they take this very seriously and they're going to use some of that new funding to improve accessibility services.

Also, I think that through our Accessible Transportation Assistance Program we do have resources to provide support. It is incremental every year that we're providing this support to these organizations. Right now there's 84 vehicles, most of them would have been purchased with assistance from ATAP throughout the province in these community organizations. We do the most we can with the money we have and we try to ensure that the organizations have the resources to purchase accessible vehicles.

MS. ZANN: In April 2015, the government cut a \$105,000 commitment to the Ecology Action Centre's Walk to School Program. That program had been in place for 12 years in 24 schools - including eight in Cape Breton - directly engaging over 2,000 students across the province in initiatives which included a walking school bus, data compilation and lobbying efforts for municipalities to improve paths, sidewalks and crosswalks. The

Minister of Health and Wellness was ultimately responsible for the cut. It directly contradicts the sustainable transportation strategy which aimed to get more Nova Scotians using methods of active transportation which inevitably resulted in more Nova Scotians using personal vehicles to drive their kids to school.

How does the Department of Municipal Affairs work with the Department of Health and Wellness to ensure health outcomes from the Sustainable Transportation Strategy are met? Is there any collaboration between the two departments regarding things like this, and are you able to make any recommendations regarding not doing cuts like the one to the Ecology Action Centre?

MS. DEAN: Again, what I would say is that there is a working committee that has been struck in order to try to advance the goals of the strategy that was established in 2013. We certainly do our part with the programming that we have and also look for ways to meet those needs, as I said earlier.

With respect to Health and Wellness, one of the things I would say is that the programs that are being supported through the Department of Municipal Affairs do help individuals who need to get to medical appointments and that type of thing. I know this doesn't speak specifically to active transportation, but within the framework of what we're responsible for at the department, there is an impact and support that does benefit, I guess directly, Health and Wellness because people who need to reach medical services are now able to do that even if they don't have a car or they don't have their own means of transportation to get there. It is very much enabling those people to continue to have access to medical care and necessary services. That's how we would support them.

MS. ZANN: Also, one other thing is accessible transportation vehicles seem to be just one part of the solution for many Nova Scotians on income assistance. Many of them have found that their caseworkers require a certain number of doctor visits per year - in fact, 12 doctor visits per year - in order to still receive bus tickets and bus passes. This was a change a couple of years ago. What is the Department of Municipal Affairs doing in collaboration with Community Services to ensure sustainable transportation is easily accessible for all, regardless of socio-economic status or physical ability?

MS. DEAN: What I would say is that, again, many of these 16 services that are around the province now do provide support for low-income individuals, people who are challenged in finding alternate forms of transportation. I know, too, that the Department of Community Services also does provide some assistance directly to folks who may not be able to access some of these other rural services or public transit systems. Again, for more detail around the role of Community Services, you would have to speak to them, but I know that they do provide additional support as well for their clients who need to reach their medical appointments and who need access to certain services. They are supported financially.

MS. ZANN: Can the Department of Municipal Affairs please update this committee on the current state of sustainable transportation in Richmond County? What are the outcomes like there? If outcomes are getting worse, what is the department doing to consult with the community to find solutions?

MS. DEAN: I can speak about the services that we support through Municipal Affairs. In the Strait area, there is the Strait Area Transit Co-operative, so they do provide transportation service to residents there. In Inverness and Richmond Counties, there has been support over the years for those services. In terms of ridership, I can take a look at that . . .

MS. ZANN: The reason I'm asking is because they had some funding cut there at the Municipality of Richmond County. There was a lack of increased funding from the municipality, and the Strait Area Transit Co-operative was forced to reduce hours of service. This in turn affected the provincial funding - fewer hours of operation a day meant less funding - so the Strait Area Transit Co-operative's Community Transportation Assistance Program funding was reduced for failing to meet the requirements set out in the program guidelines, despite the fact that data showed that their pilot period actually grew demand for community transportation services.

The successful implementation of the sustainable transportation strategy is dependent on the ability of municipalities to afford to support these initiatives as well. I'm just wondering what's going to happen to try and help these people in Richmond County?

MS. DEAN: The specific situation that you're speaking of with respect to the Community Transportation Assistance Program - that's the fixed operational funding that we would provide on an annual basis - we'll speak a little bit about how that works. We try to maintain that level of funding on an annual basis, but it is a fixed budget. So if there is a new service that comes in, oftentimes what might happen is very small reductions may occur in order to accommodate that new service.

In the case of Richmond, I think there was a \$1,000 decrease in their operating program support. They may have accessed other programming in that year. I would have to look and see if they had bought a vehicle.

Again, we're not the only funder. I do want to make that point as well. Municipalities also contribute to these services. It's unfortunate if they had to reduce some of their services, but again, we can certainly work with them.

MS. ZANN: The data showed that their pilot period grew demand for the community transportation services. So basically you're saying that there's not really much you can do to help with the funding and change the funding so that it's more predictable.

MS. DEAN: Actually, I don't think I said that. I said we would be happy to work with them to see what would be possible. We recognize that it's challenging sometimes



and that even a small amount of money can sometimes make a huge difference to some of these organizations. We can certainly look at the situation and work with them next year to see what's possible.

MS. ZANN: I would just like to say, before my time runs out, that I think that would help a lot of Nova Scotians because there are so many municipalities right now that are facing financial hardships. Maybe there is some way you could take a look at that so that if a municipality is having a hard time paying, perhaps the province could step up with a little bit more.

Also, I wanted to know about the Accessibility Act. Are the province's sustainable transportation programs hindered by a lack of an Act right now? How would these programs be altered if an accessibility Act was passed in the Legislature?

MS. DEAN: I think that's actually very difficult for me to comment on at this time. What I do know is that we've been able to support any of the organizations that have been looking for accessible vehicles. I think we'll have to see where this legislation goes and what its final form looks like. When it is passed, we'll have to see what the impact is and how we can adapt, based on the new legislation.

MS. ZANN: There seems to be a heavy emphasis on the more efficient and more accessible additions to public and community transportation fleets, but we know that sustainable transportation goes further than vehicles. When we talk about that kind of transportation, we're also talking about walking paths, sidewalks, bike lanes, public repair stations, car pooling, and telecommuting - all of which seem absent from the government's efforts at this particular point in time. These modes of transportation seem to be absent from the research briefing developed for this meeting. Do you feel that the Department of Municipal Affairs is doing enough to bolster these modes of transportation in our province? Why are we not hearing enough on those fronts as well?

MS. DEAN: What you're hearing from me is what we do at the Department of Municipal Affairs, which is one piece of the much bigger framework that you spoke about. There are many efforts under way through municipalities; through the Department of Energy; through Communities, Culture and Heritage, through their recreation programs; through Transportation and Infrastructure Renewal, looking at the Blue Route and looking at other opportunities for enhancing sustainable and active transportation throughout this province. The narrow focus today is really related to our role, which is one piece of a much bigger strategy and a much bigger approach.

With respect to energy efficiency, within the framework of the work we do, municipalities, in particular HRM, are exploring energy-efficient vehicles and ways to reduce GHG emissions. So those vehicles and that type of work are being supported through some of the financing that's going through . . .

MR. CHAIRMAN: Order. The time has elapsed for the NDP caucus for questioning. We'll now move to the Liberal caucus for 20 minutes. Mr. Maguire.

MR. BRENDAN MAGUIRE: I have to agree with the member for Pictou East on the Stock buses being potentially used as transportation. The drivers of the Stock know our roads and know our side roads better than most. I just think it may be a match made in heaven. It might be something to look into and dig into.

I have a few questions here. I just want to know how much provincial money total has been invested in public transportation and improving public transportation over the last three years.

MS. DEAN: I would say it's \$4.7 million this year from the Department of Municipal Affairs, not including federal investments. It's between \$12 million and \$13 million over the past three years.

MR. MAGUIRE: What kind of outcomes are you seeing from these investments?

MS. DEAN: What we are seeing is increased service, particularly in the rural areas of the province. Despite the fact that some of the funding is going to the urban areas that are much more developed - they're fixed-route services - we are seeing this increase over time in the community-based services. As I said before, those are very important in filling gaps and increasing opportunities and access to transportation for a variety of Nova Scotians who may not have access to other forms of transportation. We've seen the number grow to 16 in our province over time, which is significant, and seen usage grow as well. Again, this is all at a fairly reasonable cost for Nova Scotians. That support has enabled these kinds of services to flourish.

Also, there has been an increase in the accessible vehicles over time. They've grown, and I think we have approximately 84 if I read my information correctly.

The other piece that I would add is that as we help these organizations replace or acquire new vehicles, they're newer and more efficient vehicles. Part of the efforts to ensure that there's greater efficiency and lowering costs to the providers is their access to newer vehicles. That is another benefit that this programming has been providing.

MR. MAGUIRE: It's great to put infrastructure in place and help these organizations purchase new vehicles. What are you doing on the education piece? I think there is a large portion of the general public that may not be aware of or may misunderstand bike lanes and things like that and the impact that it can have on your health and also affordable transportation. Sometimes there's still stigma around taking public transportation, and I think we're getting over it. A large part of this is educating the public. What is your department doing or what are municipalities doing to show people that this is a great way to get around?

MS. DEAN: That's a great question. I think that more and more, this is something that people are becoming acutely aware of. We just have to drive in Halifax to see the number of bikes that are now there. Now we have bike lanes, so I think there's a growing awareness generally wherever there is the ability for people to use alternate forms of transportation.

In terms of municipalities, they do assume the responsibility for that within their municipalities because they're providing the infrastructure for people to be able to use alternate forms of transportation.

With respect to the community organizations that we've been supporting that we've talked about today, there is a rural transportation association that actually coordinates some of the efforts for all of those regional service providers and does education and awareness and promotes the services of these various providers. They're also helping through their efforts to increase awareness and usage of those services that they have. But it is a bigger question, and it's something as well about changing attitudes of people towards how they move and how they get back and forth within their communities. But also, that has to be married with the infrastructure that enables people to do that should they choose to.

MR. MAGUIRE: Does it fall under your department to look at the rail systems? My mother-in-law always says when she was at St. F.X., every weekend, she would take the train home to Cape Breton, and it was a fast, affordable way to get home. Has the department looked into rail, or does it fall under your mandate to look into rail?

MS. DEAN: That hasn't been something that we have actively looked at, although I'm aware that it is becoming something that is being talked about, particularly within HRM. Transportation and Infrastructure Renewal, I would suggest, would be involved with that.

MR. MAGUIRE: Do you feel like sustainable public transportation is a priority for your department?

MS. DEAN: I would say it's one of the priorities of our department.

MR. MAGUIRE: I want to kind of flip the switch and talk about a local issue in my community. HRM announced some changes to the transit system in 2017, and one of those changes is scrapping the 402. I know my councillor, Steve Adams, and I have been very vocal about this. The 402 services the rural part of our community. That would be Sambro and East and West Pennant. We fought hard to get that bus route out there, but without the 402, large portions of that community are without transportation. That affects their ability to grocery shop and to find jobs. When we were younger, the only way to get around was to hitchhike, and we certainly don't encourage that.

What programs are in place to help find a solution to this problem?

MS. DEAN: Yes, I did hear that on the news this morning and thought about how that might impact people in that community in that part of metro. One of the programs we have that I would suggest would be perfect for exploring what alternate solutions might be is the Nova Scotia Transit Research Incentive Program. What that program does is help organizations that might be looking at alternate services to do a feasibility plan and do the research necessary to see what might be possible in a particular area. That actually would help a community determine whether or not there could be a service that could be established to help bridge that gap. Then with the development of a business plan, and if there was a strong enough business case, the next support program would be the Accessible Transportation Assistance Program. That would help purchase a vehicle.

The department has a continuum of support to look at alternate transit service. I think if there was a willingness in the community to take a look at an alternative, this particular program might help them develop that business case and do the study and research necessary to see if it could be feasible.

MR. MAGUIRE: So we're going to need someone from the private sector to step up to bear most of the cost. How much of the cost to run a transportation system out there is on the private sector, and how much of that falls under your department?

MS. DEAN: To do a study, it's \$15,000, which we would pay for completely. Then the support that is provided depends on the cost of the service. Greg, I'm wondering if you may want to give an idea of how that might break out.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Mr. Sewell.

MR. SEWELL: From an operating perspective, the Community Transportation Assistance Program would provide somewhere around one-third of the total operating costs. The remainder would have to be garnered from fares, donations, and perhaps municipal support.

MR. MAGUIRE: You have models like this right across the province. How many of these are actually profitable? How many of these are sustainable?

MR. SEWELL: They are currently all sustainable.

MR. MAGUIRE: Sustainable because of government funding or sustainable on their own?

MR. SEWELL: Sustainable because of government funding. They all submit budgets to us at the beginning of each fiscal year. The budgets have to be at least break-even, and we do get quarterly updates from them to make sure they are meeting their projections.

MR. MAGUIRE: How do you decide which areas or which companies receive funding? If somebody in Sambro decided they wanted to put this forward, how do you decide who receives funding, say, over a company in Lunenburg? You clearly have a budget on how much you are allowed to spend. Do they have to reapply yearly for the government funding or do you supply two, three, four, or five years of funding to give them a bit of stability when it comes to planning? Not that I'm going to try to get into this - I just want to get a grasp of it.

MR. SEWELL: Your first question is, who do we decide is eligible for funding?

MR. MAGUIRE: And how.

MR. SEWELL: We will only fund one organization in each service area. In your example, you mentioned an organization in the Sambro area and an organization in Lunenburg. If they both went through the steps the deputy outlined and wanted to start a day-to-day service in the same area, we would fund both of those services in the same year. There isn't a competition between those two services for funding. They're both eligible for funding. They both would receive funding.

MR. MAGUIRE: But do you have a cap on how much you spend?

MR. SEWELL: Yes, we do. We have a fixed budget.

MR. MAGUIRE: As you get closer to the fixed budget, how do you determine which community or which service receives the funding?

MR. SEWELL: They all receive the funding. Potentially, there could be reductions to the other services to help fund the new service. Or as the deputy mentioned earlier, we might move some funds around in the department to fund those services.

MR. MAGUIRE: And it's up to one-third? (Interruption) Oh, go ahead.

MS. DEAN: I would also say that it's not uniform demand every year. Some years, there may be one or two asks for new services or new studies, so it depends. It's not that every year we have multiple studies going on. So it tends to balance out in terms of the need along the continuum of supports.

MR. MAGUIRE: What is the average lifespan of these services? How long are they lasting? How long would they last without government funding?

MS. DEAN: It varies actually. We have some services that have been in place since 1996 . . .

MR. MAGUIRE: Which services are those?

MS. DEAN: In Digby County, the Transport de Clare. CHAD Transit has been in place since 1996 as well. In 1998, Kings Point to Point started. In 1999, Annapolis County and parts of Kings County as well as Colchester County started service. In 2001, the Municipality of Western Hants and the Town of Windsor - that's West Hants Dial-A-Ride. Then we get into services that have started up in 2006, 2007, and 2008, and then 2015 and as recently as 2016. They have been starting up over time to meet needs in their communities.

MR. MAGUIRE: I'm assuming that there have been companies that have started up and failed since 1998. Have you looked at what CHAD or Digby is doing that has led to long-term sustainability, and are we modelling that? If somebody does step forward and wants to pick up the slack where there have been some changes to the HRM Metro Transit, are they able to reach out to CHAD or Digby, or do you have somebody in your department who knows the ins and outs of what they are doing? Do they have a different business model? Is it just ridership? That seems like a long time for them to still be up and operating.

MS. DEAN: I think it's a testament to the fact that their services are in demand, and they continue to be in demand, and they are a well-run organization. I would say that the model is probably fairly consistent in terms of how they operate: fare-based with community support and municipal support. Some of them have donor support.

As well, I wouldn't underestimate the role of the Rural Transportation Association. In forming that association, they are also there, as well as Greg. He works very closely with many of these organizations that look for support - not just financial support but advice. Advice is also provided by the Rural Transportation Association. They speak with one voice with respect to their membership, and they also provide support to all of their members.

MR. MAGUIRE: So they're not doing anything different. A big part of it is demand in those particular areas.

MS. DEAN: I think so.

MR. MAGUIRE: If somebody wanted to get into this line of business - like I said, not me, no chance - but if somebody wanted to put forward a business plan, how do they start?

MS. DEAN: I would say that to contact Greg would be a great way to start. Everything we offer is online. All our programming is online. I think one of the first things to do would be to look at some examples of feasibility studies that are actually online and talk to some of the other transportation providers about their experiences.

It is mostly not-for-profit organizations that are providing these services in communities, so they are recovering their costs, and they are sustainable over the long term. Again, there's lots of information online around the Nova Scotia Transit Research

Incentive Program, and that would be a great place to start. The way that program works is, it's a phased approach. We like to walk people through each of those phases. By going through each of the steps within that program, there's greater assurance that there will be long-term sustainability and success for the organization because we're looking specifically at different phases of the operation to make sure that there is sufficient support for the service in the area.

MR. MAGUIRE: When you give out the provincial money to these municipalities and these organizations, how much direct input do you have on where this money is being spent? I think you said it was \$12 million over the last three years that the province has given to municipalities and organizations. I know the member for Truro-Bible Hill-Millbrook-Salmon River had some concerns about buses and accessibility and things like that. How much input do you have with, say, Metro Transit or CHAD over where they are spending that money directly?

MS. DEAN: There's a couple of things here. First of all, within the Community Transportation Assistance Program, which is a fixed operating grant, we wouldn't tell them exactly how to spend their operating grant, but we do see their financial statements, and we have reporting requirements. So we know how they're spending their money. We get those reports on an annual basis, and that's a condition of them receiving their financing, of course. That is an operating grant that helps them with the expenses they have in providing the service.

There's a separate grant for purchasing vehicles. That's very specific so we know what type of . . .

MR. MAGUIRE: Sorry to interrupt, but when they purchase vehicles, is part of the approval process that these vehicles have to be fully accessible?

MS. DEAN: Yes, it is. The operating grant - we look at the financial statements, and we provide that operating grant for them to utilize throughout the year to help defray the costs associated with operating that service.

With respect to PTAP, the Public Transit Assistance Program, which is the capital program that we provide as well, we write a letter agreeing what that will be spent on. There is agreement between the municipality and ourselves with respect to what they are going to use that grant for.

MR. MAGUIRE: Excellent, thank you.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Okay, we'll move back to the Progressive Conservative caucus for 12 minutes of questioning. Mr. Houston.

MR. HOUSTON: The government commissioned or is doing some kind of study on ride-sharing, Uber and all this type of stuff. Are you aware of that study that is happening?

MS. DEAN: I've heard of it. I don't have any details on it.

MR. HOUSTON: Okay, so you don't know the status of that report into ride-sharing services like Uber.

MS. DEAN: I don't have any specific information on the Uber study, no.

MR. HOUSTON: Would that be something that the working committee that you are a member of would talk about, Mr. Sewell?

MR. SEWELL: I have no knowledge of any studies on Uber.

MR. HOUSTON: Okay. Maybe it's another government study that will come out the day after the election or something, who knows.

The government did make a first pass at introducing some disability legislation, and it kind of fell apart on them, much like some of the initiatives that they've taken before on Seniors' Pharmacare and all this type of stuff that's not properly researched when it comes before the House. But this legislation will come back before the House - we know they're going to have the Law Amendments Committee coming up and we know this legislation will come back.

Have you thought about the impact of that legislation on the different organizations that are providing - maybe you'll see a run on the program that provides support to buy vehicles. Are you hearing from any organizations about the impact of the legislation on their ability to provide services around transportation?

MR. CHAIRMAN: Ms. Partridge.

MS. ANNE PARTRIDGE: I can let Greg speak to if he has heard any concerns or comments with respect to the legislation and some of the work that he does with his stakeholders. In terms of the legislation itself, it's meant to be a framework in terms of accessibility, so things like the transportation. I know also our department is involved with the building code and the build environment. Those standards will come later.

Right now what's being looked at at a very high level is a framework for the legislation so it's very difficult to make specific comments on that in terms of what it looks like or what the feedback has been to date.



MR. HOUSTON: So it could be that the legislation will come back to the House, will pass but there's really no impact on anything until the actual regs come in the future. Is that the thought process, at least from the transportation aspect?

MS. PARTRIDGE: Yes, that's the process and it was a similar model adopted in Ontario as well that basically the legislation is the framework and then the different pieces will come later in forms of regulation, based on subject matter areas.

MR. HOUSTON: I guess with most of the operations around the province at the moment - would the majority of their vehicles be accessible? I know CHAD is, but is that one of the criteria for your program? The ones that get operating funding, do their vehicles have to be accessible?

MS. DEAN: Yes it is, because again these services are inclusive so it is about providing greater access to those types of vehicles for residents in Nova Scotia. It is part of the requirements for purchasing vehicles.

MR. HOUSTON: Other than the Nova Scotia Transit Research Incentive Program, you mentioned there were 11 communities that did feasibility studies. Does the department then weigh-in on those studies? Does the department then have an opinion on whether that would be feasible as well? How does the department analyze those studies that they get back?

MS. DEAN: They do. We do see those studies and we do review them. They are analyzed and then based on our experience with different organizations and seeing how they operate around the province, we're able to make a determination on whether they can go forward to the next step.

MR. HOUSTON: Is it common that it's not feasible or common that it is feasible, or is it just hard to say?

MS. DEAN: Our experience has been that it's more common that it is feasible than not.

MR. HOUSTON: But some studies are done and it's just not feasible.

MS. DEAN: Some studies that are not feasible then don't proceed to the business planning process. There are some occasions where it just doesn't make sense for the service to be established.

MR. HOUSTON: Of the 11 that you did this year, that you funded, how many were feasible and how many were not feasible?

MS. DEAN: We don't know this year because we don't have the reports in yet.

MR. HOUSTON: Let's say last year then.

MS. DEAN: Give us a minute.

MR. SEWELL: In 2015-16, there was only one feasibility study conducted out of that program, looking at the fixed route in Pictou County by CHAD Transit. Based on what they submitted to us, it did look like it was feasible for a fixed route to move to the business planning stage. They did apply and receive funding in 2016-17 for that.

MR. HOUSTON: Yes, I'm familiar with that project.

Then annually for the organizations that receive operating funding, you get their business plan, and it has to show, I think I heard, a break-even business plan for the year including the provincial funding. Is that quite a back-and-forth process to help them with a budget that's break-even in most cases, or is everything pretty much working smoothly for them?

MR. SEWELL: Most of the managers that are working with these organizations have been there long enough, and they work with their board to develop three- or five-year budgets, and they're all showing minimum break-even.

MR. HOUSTON: If a business plan does not show a break-even, is that rejected?

MR. SEWELL: If they're showing a projection for the fiscal year to be running a deficit, if they have an explanation for it and the funds in their bank to offset that, but in future years, they're showing positive results, and their plan to get there is reasonable, then yes, we will accept it. But if it does come in as a negative, and there's no plan to mitigate that, then we do ask them to go back and rework the budget.

MR. HOUSTON: Your programs worth \$4.7 million were kind of significant in moving 164,000 rides around the province this year, I guess - \$4.7 million drove that, was important to that. If your department would receive a business plan for something like the Yarmouth ferry that requires \$20 million and moves basically a quarter of the number of rides that you guys did, is that the type of business plan that you would be anxious to approve in your department, knowing what the other organizations have to go through?

MS. DEAN: Quite frankly, that wouldn't be the type of business plan that we would be asked to evaluate.

MR. HOUSTON: At times, I wonder if anyone in government was asked to evaluate a business plan like that. I think it's just interesting when we talk about sustainable transportation and sustainable routes, and then we have these organizations that work so hard to move people around, especially in rural areas and probably feel a lot of times like they're jumping through hoops. On the other hand, we have \$100 million for a little program over here with virtually no accountability in many ways. It's just interesting that

we have this topic of sustainable transportation brought forward by the Liberal caucus, and these are the types of things that are happening in government. As we sit here, I find that interesting.

Mr. Chairman, I don't know how much time I have left.

MR. CHAIRMAN: You have three minutes.

MR. HOUSTON: Since we have the department here, and we're talking about accountability and transparency and stuff, I wonder if the department is looking at any type of auditor general for municipalities. Is that something that the department is considering?

MS. DEAN: Interestingly, I will be back to talk about that at a future Public Accounts Committee meeting around the subject of municipal finance. What I can tell you is that the issue of having a municipal auditor was looked at several years ago, I believe, and I think it was difficult for UNSM to reach agreement on how that would actually work.

What we are doing right now though is, we have a committee that has been struck, that is the Union of Nova Scotia Municipalities, the Association of Municipal Administrators and ourselves working together to look at ways that we can enhance transparency of expense reporting, hopefully being at the stage where we can get them all reported online across municipal government. That committee, we're hoping to have recommendations by the end of the fiscal year on how to move forward because we believe that that is critical and important and require their input on how best to move forward on that.

MR. CHAIRMAN: We'll move to the NDP caucus for 12 minutes. Ms. Zann.

MS. ZANN: In my previous round of questioning, I had asked about recent cuts to Richmond County's Strait Area Transit co-op. The municipality did not have sufficient funds to bolster and increase their rural transit service. This led to a decrease in service hours, which later resulted in a lack of funding from the province.

In your response, I noticed you mentioned that if one new program comes into play, it can lead to small cuts for other recipients. But looking at Richmond County, this small cut actually led to a dramatic decline in rural transit service. This was again despite the fact that their pilot period to increase ridership had met the aspirations of the Sustainable Transportation Strategy. In fact, the data showed that demand for the transportation service grew during that pilot period.

My question is, why did the department opt to cut funding when a municipality's financial straits impacted the province's program goal? How is the decision made? Was an increase of funding taken into consideration to compensate for stagnation by the municipality? How did this come about?

MS. DEAN: I guess it's not always a perfect arrangement when you have a fixed budget, and you're looking at how best to allocate it. As I said earlier, it's certainly not ideal that we would have to make small adjustments in the budgets of some of the transportation providers. In this case, what had happened was a new service provider came on board, and I believe there was a \$40,000-ish operating grant required to support their operations. When you are dealing with a fixed budget, you look at ways to make an accommodation so that everybody can still maintain a level of service.

To your point, is it ideal that everybody received a small cut to accommodate a new provider? It's sometimes difficult to try to make those decisions. We try to act in the best interests of everybody. It's unfortunate that Richmond had those challenges. As I said, I think they received a small cut of \$1,000, and other service providers would have had a small reduction of that magnitude.

I do believe, though, that going forward, there's an opportunity to take a look at that program and how that operates, in order to avoid that situation in the future. But it's dependent on our resources and our ability to sometimes make some adjustments throughout the year.

The positive in that though, if I can, is that we added a brand new service that's able to provide more transportation, more accessibility to more residents in Nova Scotia. There are pros and cons. I respect that. I respect that it's difficult sometimes for organizations and that even what might appear to us to be something very small can have an impact. I would certainly undertake to take a look at how that works and those programs that we do have on that continuum. Maybe there's more flexibility we can use in resourcing them to avoid something like that in the future.

MS. ZANN: Yes, especially as I said earlier, since a lot of the municipalities are struggling right now themselves. Was the new recipient in Richmond County? Was there a duplication of service?

MS. DEAN: No, I believe it was BayRides in St. Margaret's Bay, which was a new service introduced this year.

MS. ZANN: Is that still going?

MS. DEAN: Yes, it was introduced this year.

MS. ZANN: One other question that I asked earlier was about the Ecology Action Centre and their program to walk to school to try and get kids moving. It was in 24 schools, including eight in Cape Breton, and it was working with 2,000 students across the province. The cut I mentioned was \$115,000.

The Ecology Action Centre was under the impression that their funding from the Department of Health and Wellness was going to continue, and the full cut of its program

funding came as a real shock, so they were unable to keep those services going. Part of their success came from their ability to collaborate with municipalities in person, on the ground. How is the Department of Municipal Affairs addressing the gap in programming that was created by that cut?

MS. DEAN: It's very difficult for me to speak specifically about that cut. That program was in a different department. What I would say is that municipalities have the autonomy to take a look at what's going on in their own areas and to make decisions based on their budgets and the availability of resources, to see where they may want to provide additional services or to maintain certain services. It's always within the purview of the municipality to determine how they may want to provide a service.

MS. ZANN: It seems with government that oftentimes we don't do enough negotiating and consulting among departments. Sometimes the right hand doesn't know what the left hand is doing. I find that we tend to be in silos, the different departments.

For a program like that which only cost \$115,000 but was doing so much good around the province, it really makes we wonder. It seems like government is oftentimes cutting off their nose to spite their face. They'll try and make this cut that's really a very small cut but does so much good work across the province that they're actually saving the government money. I find it very odd that government sometimes just doesn't talk to the different departments and that they'll make these small cuts which make huge differences to our communities and to the health of our communities.

Speaking of health, where do family doctors come into play in this Sustainable Transportation Strategy? It clearly states that part of the goal is to ensure that the public and community transportation programs reach doctors' offices so that citizens can easily go to and from appointments. I've already mentioned that under income assistance there were changes so that people on income assistance still need to get 12 appointments just to get an accessible bus pass.

As you must know as well, the government's promise was a doctor for every Nova Scotian, which hasn't actually materialized, particularly in rural communities. Even in Truro, which is close to the city, we don't have enough family doctors. People are suffering and coming to my office trying to get help getting a doctor. We're losing lots of doctors to retirement and to other regions. More doctor offices are closing, requiring many Nova Scotians to go farther distances to access medical services which is where your program would come in. How does your department help others connect to sustainable transportation to be able to get a family doctor and have access to doctors even if they are in a different area?

MS. DEAN: The main purpose of many of these rural community transit providers is just that, to try to find ways to ensure people can get to their appointments with their family doctors or to HRM for appointments as well. These providers also ensure that

doctors' offices have information about their services so that if there are patients or residents who might need to access their service, they are aware of it.

Brochures, websites - they do what they can to promote their services and ensure that people are aware of them. Again, they are one way that individuals who don't have access to transportation can ensure they get to their appointments.

As I said earlier, I know that the Department of Community Services does also offer assistance to employment services clients who may need help getting to appointments.

MS. ZANN: So they do have ways.

MS. DEAN: They do. It may not be perfect, but there are options for folks. I think that these community transportation organizations are doing their very best to make sure that people know that they are there, know that they can phone, and know that they can find ways to have their needs accommodated.

MS. ZANN: Just moving on to thinking about jobs and the economy and sustainable transportation programs and strategies, the strategy that we came up with when we were in government emphasized the importance of providing access to employment and essential services in our province. The strategy argued, "In the absence of new approaches, many rural residents will be forced to pay more to get around or, even worse, will not be able to get around at all." This in order to work.

Nova Scotia just lost 5,500 full-time jobs in December. That's 13,300 full-time jobs lost since December 2015. Jobs don't seem to be being created in Nova Scotia to the extent that we need, let alone close to home where many Nova Scotians need them.

How does a lack of economic opportunity in communities across Nova Scotia affect our sustainable transportation systems? Is there an increased burden as Nova Scotians try to work in other regions like Halifax? Or are more people divesting from public and community transit and being forced to drive for longer hours and buy a car in order to make a living?

MS. DEAN: For people who are dependent on public transportation to get to their jobs, changes in the provision of service can obviously have an impact. What these 16 organizations are doing around the province is trying to ease that burden, trying to make sure that people can get where they need to go when they need to go.

I also want to point out that the fixed-route services that are currently available are also heavily utilized by people who are going from point A to point B trying to get to employment and sources of employment. If jobs are decreasing, ridership decreases, and that obviously places pressure on routes . . .

MR. CHAIRMAN: Order. We have to move now to the Liberal caucus for 12 minutes of questions. Ms. Lohnes-Croft.

MS. SUZANNE LOHNES-CROFT: Thank you for being here. I didn't think I would have questions, but as you went on, things popped in my head.

I want to say in my opening speech, when we first took government in 2013, I mentioned the perseverance of a Home and School president - and this may help answer one of the questions from the member of the NDP. I was a Home and School president, and we did lots of programming like the walking school bus, walk to school programs. Those were developed and created by our Home and Schools and SACs - very successful. They were very cost-efficient. A lot of that information is very accessible from the Internet, and I see lots of parents walking to school with their children and neighbourhoods getting together and forming a human school bus, and they're quite successful.

I think sometimes people become creative when there's a lack of funding, and that's what you need in places like Nova Scotia. We can't always be waiting for government to provide, provide, provide. We have to be creative, and we as citizens need to step up and do our part too. So it does work, and it works in rural Nova Scotia. I can attest to that because I organized many of those programs over the years.

Anyway, I want to talk about a little thing. I have a son who's in his fourth year in university here at Saint Mary's. In his first year of university, although his student pass provides free transit, he was very reluctant to take the transit. His second year, he would take the transit, and he would get his brother to pick him up at point X and take him the rest of the way.

Just recently, we had breakfast together, and he said he was going to kickboxing. I said it must be at Saint Mary's. He said, no, I go to the North End. And I said, you? How do you get there? He takes the transit. Then he pulls out his phone and he shows me this awesome app. This app has all the bus routes. It has the GPS tracking for the bus, so if it's bad weather, or he has missed a bus, he's got all this information on his phone. My son who was very anti-public transit is this transit-savvy son.

I'm just wondering, would your program provide that kind of funding for other public transit organizations? A lot of people in rural Nova Scotia are iffy about transit because they're out waiting too long or they're not sure about the routes. If they are not a frequent user, when do they know the bus is coming or when can they get it?

I think public education is a big part of this. I'm just wondering, is there funding for these transit providers in rural Nova Scotia to develop apps for their programs?

MS. DEAN: First of all, thank you for that. I, too, have children in university who have maximized their free bus pass to its fullest. It certainly has been a great asset for them in getting around.

To your point, there is programming that's available to take a look at that. I think that more than ever there's an opportunity to look at how enhanced technology can help people better utilize these services. The youth are glued to their phones, so anything we can do to help them access services through their phones is obviously going to work to increase ridership. Reliability for them is tied to being able to tell exactly when they're going to be able to get on a bus.

I believe our PTIF program has funded a project for Kings to look at just that, technology and how that can be used and apps can be developed or how improvements can be made. Again, HRM has advanced significantly in this area. Particularly with the fixed-route services, there's an opportunity to look at that, and there is funding available. So if there are other fixed-route services that are municipally run that are looking to improve applications or ways to communicate with potential riders about the schedules, there's money that can help them do that.

MS. LOHNES-CROFT: I know from surveys that municipalities have done about public transit that many of the respondents tend to be seniors, whereas I think having apps and whatnot would attract a younger generation to using public transportation, so you are doing a good service there as well.

I did want a clarification point. You mentioned that organizations could qualify for funding for accessible vehicles. What do you mean by organizations? You mentioned Chester Community Wheels, so it must be the population they serve. Do non-profit organizations fall under that, say a non-profit long-term care facility? A group for handicap, special needs, would they qualify?

MS. DEAN: I can clarify that for you. The programming we have is limited to the not-for-profit organizations that are involved in rural transportation service. Those that receive our Community Transportation Assistance, that are getting our fixed grants, are the organizations that are eligible to receive funding to purchase accessible vehicles. We don't provide it to any community group that might need an accessible vehicle.

Again, the notion for our programming is that it's all designed to support the success of those regional providers so that they become strong, and they can provide that support and be sustainable.

MS. LOHNES-CROFT: All right, I'll pass it over to my colleague here.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Are there any other questions from the Liberal caucus? Mr. Porter.

MR. CHUCK PORTER: I just want to ask a couple of questions for clarity. In your opening comments I think you used the number 20 - 20 services, and you outlined 15 community groups and four municipal groups. The last time I did math, that was 19, so I'm



just curious about what I missed. Maybe I just didn't hear you correctly, and that's all. But I thought that's what you said.

MS. DEAN: I may have misspoke. It's 16 community services and four fixed-route services.

MR. PORTER: That's fine. Thank you. I was curious about the school bus issue and the usage around that and some of the discussion that Mr. Houston and Mr. Maguire talked about. As someone who is fairly close to their school bus situations and superintendents and has been over the years, and knowing the time schedule they keep, I'm not sure that that would work because they're to the second almost but certainly to the minute. It may be worth consideration to some degree. There's no question about that. I'm just not sure whether that would be a direction that would get much use, but it may.

Brendan talked about if he were to start up a business, and you touched on it some. The other question I had around that was, how long does that take? If I called Mr. Sewell and said I was interested in this situation, how long is that process start to finish getting an organization up and running - or a service, I should say, not an organization but a service - in place?

MR. SEWELL: There are four steps that they have to go through. It would depend on how aggressive the organization was. We have seen organizations do a feasibility study and a business plan in one fiscal year and then do pre-implementation and run a pilot project in the next fiscal year. But we've also seen organizations do one phase in each fiscal year. I would say somewhere between two and four years to get a service up and going.

MR. PORTER: Recently I met with a couple of gentlemen from the RTA, and one thing that's for certain is there seems a huge increase in ridership over the years that they have measured. I think there was a 10-year window there in the first one, and the second one was closer, but it was consistent. It was around 40,000, if I'm not mistaken, in the ridership table that they showed in the last - within a couple of years, anyway.

That's a pretty substantial number and that's why I ask about the growth. I know there's a map. I should remember the answers. How many places don't have some sort of service? Do we know that based on regions? How does your map work?

MR. SEWELL: There are four that currently don't have some type of service: the Region of Queens Municipality, a vast majority of Lunenburg County aside from Municipality of Chester, Guysborough County, and Victoria County.

MR. PORTER: Have they ever had services in the past, and it was something that didn't work, or do you know?

MR. SEWELL: Not that I'm aware of, no.

MR. PORTER: As an organization by way of the province that funds these organizations - and I know municipalities and so on - are you part of a team with the RTA out there actively seeking someone or an organization to start up to look after those places? Or are you hands-off on that?

MR. SEWELL: We don't do any community consultation looking for an organization to start a service in an unserved area. The RTA or Community Transportation Nova Scotia would look after something like that.

MR. PORTER: They wouldn't necessarily have to be new players, if you will. They could be an extension - Claredon Robicheau and the folks down in Digby, as an example, could come around the loop if they wanted to and increase that, or no?

MR. SEWELL: To use Lunenburg County, for example, there is a service that provides service in the Municipality of Chester only. They could apply to expand their service for the rest of Lunenburg County if they so chose to.

MR. PORTER: Is there a consistent application by way of subsidy and/or fee, or are they all different? Is Antigonish different than Digby by way of user fees and things like that? I don't know what they are, and it doesn't matter. I'm just curious about the model.

MR. SEWELL: Each organization sets their own fare structure. It is part of their application to the URB that they set out their fare structure.

MR. PORTER: Could that have an impact on ridership in those specific areas? Probably or no? Or is that part of something that's studied?

MR. SEWELL: We don't get involved in their fare structure. That's through their business plan, determining what a reasonable fare structure would be, based on what they think the ridership would be to get them to break even or a positive result on their financials.

MR. PORTER: Are most of these - outside of the HRM, obviously, with Metro Transit - volunteer organizations by way of folks that run the vehicles, or are they paid employees?

MR. SEWELL: There's a mix. Some of them rely heavily on volunteer drivers, but most of them have a majority of paid drivers and a handful of volunteer drivers.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Order. Time has expired for questions from members.

I'll give our witnesses an opportunity for closing remarks. Ms. Dean.

MS. DEAN: On behalf of us here at the Department of Municipal Affairs, I would like to thank you very much for your interest in community transportation services. Also,

I would like to commend all of the service providers, the volunteers, and the folks around the province who provide this valuable and essential service for many Nova Scotians. Thank you very much for your questions today.

MR. CHAIRMAN: Thank you, Ms. Dean.

Committee business, I don't see any on our agenda. Our next meeting is February 8<sup>th</sup>, from 9:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m. with the Department of Transportation and Infrastructure Renewal regarding the *Bluenose II*.

With that, this meeting is now adjourned. Thank you.

[The committee adjourned at 10:41 a.m.]