

HANSARD

NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY

SPECIAL COMMITTEE TO REVIEW THE ESTIMATES OF THE CHIEF ELECTORAL OFFICER AND THE AUDITOR GENERAL

Wednesday, January 14, 2026

Committee Room

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**SPECIAL COMMITTEE TO REVIEW
THE ESTIMATES OF THE CHIEF ELECTORAL OFFICER
AND THE AUDITOR GENERAL**

Hon. Danielle Barkhouse (Chair)
Marco MacLeod (Vice-Chair)
Hon. Brendan Maguire
Hon. Scott Armstrong
Adegoke Fadare
Lisa Lachance
Susan Leblanc
Hon. Derek Momabourquette
James Charlton, Chief Clerk of the House of Assembly
(Non-Voting Member)

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

In Attendance:

Gordon Hebb
Chief Legislative Counsel

David Hastings
Assistant Clerk of the House of Assembly

WITNESSES

Elections Nova Scotia

Dorothy Rice
Chief Electoral Officer

Li Chao
Chief Financial Officer

Office of the Auditor General

Kim Adair
Auditor General



House of Assembly
Nova Scotia

HALIFAX, WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 14, 2026

**SPECIAL COMMITTEE TO REVIEW
THE ESTIMATES OF THE CHIEF ELECTORAL OFFICER
AND THE AUDITOR GENERAL**

4:00 P.M.

CHAIR
Hon. Danielle Barkhouse

VICE-CHAIR
Marco MacLeod

THE CHAIR: I call to order this meeting of the Special Committee to Review the Estimates of the Chief Electoral Officer and the Auditor General. By way of background, Section 16 of the Auditor General Act requires the Auditor General to “present annually to a committee of the House of Assembly, designated for that purpose by the House, estimates of the sums of money that will be required by the Auditor General to conduct the activities required under this Act and any other enactment or authority, together with any estimated recoveries.” Section 19 of the Elections Act provides for the same in relation to the Chief Electoral Officer.

This Special Committee was established under Resolution No. 3,211 of the 61st General Assembly, Third Session, and Resolution No. 2,559 of the 61st General Assembly, Fourth Session. As the committee so designated, those resolutions provide that the Special Committee is composed of the members appointed from time to time to the House of Assembly Management Commission and is chaired by the Chair of the Management Commission. This Special Committee has the power to alter the estimates being considered by it and, upon completing its review, shall recommend the estimates as altered, if at all, to Treasury and Policy Board for inclusion in the Government’s Estimates.

Let's begin by having the members of the Special Committee introduce themselves. I will start, then let's move clockwise around the table after me. My name is Danielle Barkhouse. I am the Speaker of the House and MLA for Chester-St. Margarets.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: I note that under Section 16 of the Auditor General Act and Section 19 of the Elections Act, the Chair of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts is also entitled to attend this committee meeting. Currently, the Chair of Public Accounts is Susan Leblanc, who is already present in her capacity as member of the Special Committee. I'd also like to acknowledge the presence of James Charlton, Chief Clerk of the House, and Gordon Hebb, Chief Legislative Counsel.

I now invite the Chief Electoral Officer to present her estimates for 2026-27. I ask that you begin by introducing yourself and any staff from Elections Nova Scotia who are accompanying you before giving your remarks.

DOROTHY RICE: Dorothy Rice, and I am the Chief Electoral Officer for the Province of Nova Scotia, and this is . . .

LI CHAO: Li Chao, I'm the Chief Financial Officer with Elections Nova Scotia.

DOROTHY RICE: I am going to ask Li if she could please begin with our opening remarks and a few comments.

LI CHAO: Good afternoon and thank you for the opportunity to present our 2026-27 Budget Request. Elections Nova Scotia is an independent, non-partisan agency reporting to the House of Assembly through the Speaker. Our mission, established under the Elections Act, is to deliver provincial elections impartially and professionally. This presentation reflects our ongoing commitment to transparency and accountability in the use of public funds.

The budget we're presenting here today ensures that ENS is always ready whenever an election is called. That means investing in the people and tools needed to deliver a successful election during the election-readiness cycle.

Maintaining voter trust is critical, and integrity is at the heart of everything we do. To deliver our mandate effectively, we rely on continued funding and support from the Province. For 2026-27, Elections Nova Scotia requests an additional \$3.5 million to fulfill our legislative mandate and ensure election readiness. This includes \$2.4 million to prepare for the 43rd provincial general election, which includes in-person training for returning office staff, equipment procurement, polling division reviews, media and communications support, and the materials production; \$750,000 to deliver up to three potential by-elections; \$364,000 for service delivery projects, including the continued implementation

of the outreach strategy, voter registration initiatives during registration month, and development of a new website to ensure accessible online services; and lastly, \$60,000 for external legal support, which is essential to preserve the independence of the office and to address unforeseen litigation and compliance matters.

We appreciate the continued support from this committee in recent years and respectfully request that you recommend these estimates without alteration to Treasury and Policy Board to include in the provincial budget. ENS will report back on the final approved amounts and any variances.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I welcome any questions you may have.

THE CHAIR: Are there any questions? MLA Leblanc.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Thank you for the presentation. Thinking back on the last election, we had some bumps in the road in terms of voter cards, for instance. The \$2.4 million that you're asking for to prepare for the next election, does that include money to make sure that there are voter cards that are ready and will go out, no matter what, to all Nova Scotians?

THE CHAIR: Ms. Rice.

DOROTHY RICE: Yes, the voter information cards are normally an election expense. They will not be produced prior to an election call because we don't yet have the voting locations. We don't have those lease agreements signed until after the election is called. That is part of the cost of running an election. We are certainly counting on Canada Post to not be on strike next time.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Just another question. You mentioned a new website. As we all know, your website crashed on election day the last election. With a new website, is that a whole new system that will prevent that kind of terrible thing from happening and hopefully not decrease our voter turnout any more? (Laughs) I'm laughing, but it wasn't very funny at the time. Can you talk a little bit about the new website and what the plan is for that?

DOROTHY RICE: Yes, we will have a new website up and running by that time, and we will have the capacity to take care of the peak in calls that we had last time. If I remember correctly, the website went down for about an hour at the beginning of the day on election day, or the last day of voting. There was an impact because of that.

We are certainly making it as robust and with a lot of capacity compared to what we've had before.

THE CHAIR: MLA Lachance.

LISA LACHANCE: Thank you for the presentation. I was going to ask about the IDEAs committee and the work of the IDEAs committee. Could you outline some of the activities that that committee will undertake and the budget that's being allocated toward that work?

THE CHAIR: Ms. Rice.

DOROTHY RICE: Our IDEAs committee has been struck for the last couple of years, and we actually had some successes during the last general election with outreach activities and with setting up special polling locations to serve some of our voters who we were trying to encourage to vote.

This committee has remained in place. We do meet with the committee a few times a year. The goal is, of course, to try to encourage a higher turnout of the voters - a higher level of engagement as far as working for an election - and then establishing polling locations in communities where they may be needed. Those activities are ongoing, and we've built up quite a bit of trust with that group, so we'd like to maintain it.

LISA LACHANCE: Just to follow up on that, I had the chance to meet with the Director of Policy and Communications about this work, specifically considering the experiences of 2SLGBTQIA+ Nova Scotians. As I know everyone is aware, deadnaming remains a real challenge and a huge barrier to voting. I know that work is being undertaken to address that. I guess I would just encourage that to continue.

You mentioned the special poll sites. I know last election, there actually wasn't anything focused for the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. I encouraged the Director of Policy and Communications to think about what that could look like. I had people in tears on election day saying, "I'm not going to vote. I know I'm deadnamed."

I think we can do better. We can have community members who are trusted - like that whole building of trust - as we hopefully someday have a system where people's names are accurate on the electoral roll consistently and people can trust in the system. But until then, we really need to be thinking about that community.

DOROTHY RICE: I do appreciate the feedback and the input and the conversations you've had with our Director of Policy and Communications. That work is very important to us. We are certainly relying on feedback from representatives from all of the communities, including the 2SLGBTQIA+, to make sure that we do serve that community as best we can.

We are also trying to maintain a similar process as other provinces and the federal government, as far as elections that are run across Canada.

THE CHAIR: MLA Maguire.

HON. BRENDAN MAGUIRE: Thank you for being here today. The question I had around election readiness is polling stations. We've had these discussions. I had large parts of my community that are actual rural parts of the community with no bus without polling stations, where in the past it had polling stations.

I would just like to put on the record that we need to do a better job. A lot of those rural communities are older people, and the turnout was pretty low in some of those communities because there was confusion. There were no voter cards, so they were showing up at past polling stations, and then they were told that there was no polling station there. Then what happened in my community was they had, as you know, amalgamated some of these polling stations at Cunard Junior High and other places, and the lineups were fairly big.

I just want to put that on the radar. There was a specific issue in Sambro. There was an issue in Herring Cove. I know these places are hard to find, but I know the federal government had set up polling stations in those communities before the provincial election had been set up. They had made the contacts. They had reached out in advance of a federal election and booked places.

If we want more people to vote, it's about access.

THE CHAIR: Ms. Rice.

DOROTHY RICE: We do have, as part of that \$2.3 million, over \$100,000 to do the polling station reviews. We will engage with the electoral district associations if they are available to work with us to identify spaces to rent. That's certainly on the radar.

THE CHAIR: Are there any other questions?

Would someone care to move that the special committee approved the estimates of the Chief Electoral Officer for the 2026-27 fiscal year and that the Chair recommends the estimates to the Treasury and Policy Board for inclusion in the government's estimates?

Moved by MLA Leblanc. No seconder needed.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

[4:15 p.m.]

Thank you for your time. I now invite the Auditor General to present her estimates for 2026-27. I ask that you begin by introducing yourself and any staff from your office who are accompanying you before giving your remarks.

KIM ADAIR: Good afternoon. Kim Adair, Auditor General.

MORGAN MCWADE: Morgan McWade, Acting Deputy Auditor General.

KIM ADAIR: We're pleased to be here this afternoon to present our budget requests for 2026-27 for the Office of the Auditor General. There is information in the document about our Office, but I thought I'd jump right to the requests.

We're asking that the committee recommend our proposed budget of \$7.049 million for 2026-27 to enable our office to effectively meet its responsibilities. Essentially, the ask is what I would call a "status quo request." Our full complement is 43 FTEs. This \$7.049 million is the target that we have been given by the Department of Finance and Treasury Board, so that's essentially what we're asking for. Most of our cost is salary and benefits to pay the staff, and then we have some other details to the tune of \$1.1 million. Our salary and benefits is over \$6 million, and then the other costs are \$1 million; it's 43 people. There's more detail in the document, but I'd be happy to answer any questions the committee might have about the operations of our office.

THE CHAIR: MLA Maguire.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: I'm just going to put the motion on the floor.

THE CHAIR: There has been a motion that the Special Committee approve the estimates of the Auditor General for the 2026-27 fiscal year, and that the Chair recommend the estimates to the Treasury and Policy Board for inclusion in the Government's Estimates, moved by MLA Maguire.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

MLA Leblanc.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I just wanted to say to the Office of the Auditor General and to everyone here that as Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, I know that the Public Accounts Committee is very appreciative of the work that the Office is doing. Money well spent, I would say, in terms of what's given from Treasury, so thank you.

THE CHAIR: That completes the agenda for the Special Committee meeting. I remind the members of this committee, all of whom are also members of the House of Assembly Management Commission, that a meeting of the Management Commission will occur after a brief pause. Please remain at your seats as we intend to get under way very shortly.

With that, the Special Committee now stands adjourned. Thank you, everyone, for coming.

[The committee adjourned at 4:18 p.m.]