



House of Assembly
Nova Scotia

HALIFAX, TUESDAY, APRIL 4, 2023

SUBCOMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE ON SUPPLY

3:23 P.M.

CHAIR

Nolan Young

THE CHAIR: Order, please. The Subcommittee of the Whole on Supply will come to order. It is now 3:23 p.m.

The subcommittee is meeting to consider the Estimates for the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. We will resume with a Liberal round of questioning, which will be 30 minutes.

The honourable member for Fairview-Clayton Park.

HON. PATRICIA ARAB: Minister, I want to ask just one question on APSEA. We saw two programs cut to virtual-only under the Atlantic Provincial Special Education Authority. There is the short-term programming and the psycho-educational assessment services.

Short-term programming was a service where students would attend tailored training at a facility located in Halifax to learn life skills. What we've heard from a number of people who've been impacted by this is that the removal of the psycho-educational assessment services is going to result in these students being added to a two-year wait-list to be assessed through means that aren't equipped for their needs and their circumstances.

My question to you is: Why were these changes made?

HON. BECKY DRUHAN: The Atlantic Provinces Special Education Authority is an important support provider and educational partner that supports students who are blind or visually impaired and are deaf or hard of hearing. We saw through the course of the last three years, as we did in other areas of education, that adjustments were made to the way that programs were offered.

In addition to that, APSEA has undergone a review that was conducted between November of 2021 and April of 2022. It engaged with not only APSEA senior leadership, but also community partners including families, school personnel, and other district and regional staff.

As a result of that review of services, which is essentially an evaluation in consideration of the services being offered, there were recommendations around how to adjust those services going forward to best meet the needs of the students and community that they serve. Recommendations were put forward.

The APSEA leadership is currently reviewing the recommendations and is working with staff to create an implementation plan. It is very much a period of transition for APSEA, and as a result of that, necessary for all the students and families who rely on APSEA's support.

We do understand that change is challenging, even if it's great. It's challenging in a variety of ways. First is the uncertainty associated with change, but also the transition, because transition itself involves uncertainty and adjustment.

APSEA is working through the development of that service delivery model and working to make sure that the new or adjusted services that are provided meet the individualized needs of their students. Part of that will and does include assessments that are being done.

We do understand that those transitions can be challenging for folks and people do have questions. I do know that APSEA is working diligently to make sure that that transformation and transition is as supportive and seamless as it can be for the students and families that they support.

PATRICIA ARAB: I want to just make one statement. Again, as told to us - not a criticism - parents are feeling that they were not engaged. For your information, they felt that they were not engaged. They felt that it was just a survey that was done online with very little attention brought to it. Particularly those students who are visually impaired, the transition into learning on any sort of online is not as easy as it would be for others.

There's a lot of fear and uncertainty. There's a perception that there's funding for this available and that it's just not being spent. In whatever capacity and whatever conversations that you may have, I'm just bringing that to your attention so that you're aware of it.

I'm going to now move my questions on to child care. Under the child care agreement, the province was committed to build 1,500 new child care spaces by last December. I'm curious how many have been created to date.

[3:30 p.m.]

BECKY DRUHAN: I am always excited to talk about child care.

Before I get to child care, though, I meant to do this previously but I had forgotten to come back to it. There was a question yesterday based on Page No. 8.8 of the Estimate relating to the French programs and services.

The question was around the variance that we see there between the Estimate and the forecast and the Estimate for the coming year. I want to come back and provide some more information around that because I didn't have a lot to share yesterday.

To explain why we saw the variance between the 2022-2023 Estimate and the forecast, the majority of those funds were actually funds provided by the federal government late in the 2021-2022 year, so they didn't get captured in the previous year. They were captured, therefore, in 2022-2023. That's why we see the bump in the forecast.

Then we go back down again in our Estimate for 2023-2024 because we're back to that baseline. That's where that extra funding comes from. It's a result of that late transfer of funds from the federal government and then some provincial matching that was associated with it.

In terms of what that funding was used for, it was a number of things. We got to see a variety of improvements and investments into our French language programming as a result of that funding.

As a result of that, we saw more French books provided to classrooms for students to use. We increased the capacity of virtual learning by adding core French courses to that program, which is very, very exciting.

There's also an opportunity to expand current supports for students and parents in French such as, through Skills Canada, the Try-A-Trade® program. It's just fabulous. As we work to expand access, awareness, and knowledge of trades in schools, we need to be mindful of making sure that that work is inclusive. That was an opportunity to expand that Try-A-Trade® program and provide additional access to that in French.

There were also investments made in junior improvement. Some investments were supported through the Black Cultural Centre and a variety of other programs as well. I just wanted to provide more detail because I just thought it was important to share that.

PATRICIA ARAB: Going back to the question: How many child care spots have been created to date?

BECKY DRUHAN: The question is around how many child care spots we've created to date. I am really, really excited to be able to report on the progress of this. It's a huge piece of work. It's a huge transformation and a complete shift in the sector in terms of how we operate, how we support families, how we support parents, and how we support youth and children.

Over the last year, we've created 1,100 new spaces across the province. Those are child care spaces that run the gamut in terms of where they're located in the province. They're spaces throughout the province.

They are spaces in a variety of different child care settings. They are in day home providers. They are also in our child care centres and some of them are also in our before- and after-care programs.

They are spaces that are available to children of a variety of ages as well. In that number, we include spaces for infants, for toddlers and preschoolers, and for school-aged children. We're really excited that we have that mix of spaces that was created in those 1,100 spaces.

We're excited to continue with that work. Space creation is ongoing. I know in the coming weeks that I'll have more news and announcements around additional spaces that are opened and that work will continue.

PATRICIA ARAB: One last question from me before I turn it over to my colleague from Clayton Park West.

I'm curious if the minister has the number. How many child care spaces need to be created and provided in order to get our wait-lists down to an acceptable time?

BECKY DRUHAN: Our Canada-Nova Scotia Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement calls for the creation of 9,500 spaces. That work, in terms of estimating how many spaces would be needed, was done prior to our government taking office. That's the target that we have under that agreement and that's the target that we're working towards.

Ultimately, what does that mean? It means the goal is that we have accessible, inclusive, high-quality child care that is available to all Nova Scotians who need it. It may

be the case that that number is something different at the end, by the time we've built them. The goal is to meet the needs of all Nova Scotians who require child care. That's really what the work is about.

I think it's important, as well, to understand that we really can't talk about the creation of spaces in isolation. It's not as simple as just a matter of building the spaces, because all the work of this transformation needs to happen in conjunction to support those spaces to operate.

We can build the spaces, but if we don't have the workforce to support the spaces, the spaces are meaningless and not helpful. The work of opening the spaces includes the building of the facilities, ensuring that we have the fixtures, the features, the toys, the loose parts, and all those physical things that are required to have an enriched space.

For our infant spaces, it means ensuring that the sprinkler systems are as they need to be, and the appropriate cribs, and all the other accoutrements are present. That's the physical work that goes into it. In addition to that, we need to make sure that there are ECEs to fill those spaces and to support the students.

We need to do all of that hand in hand, so as we've opened spaces, we've also been working on those things. You've heard announcements associated with that. Over the last year, we increased funding to support ECE raises. We raised the salaries of our ECEs by 14 per cent to 43 per cent for the majority of our ECEs. We've increased operator funding to ensure that they are able to be responsive to this. We've decreased fees.

I did want to talk about all those things in the context of the spaces because it's really important to understand that we can't get out ahead in one of those areas above the others. We need to do all of that work in conjunction to support the smart and strategic expansion of the child care sector and transformation of that sector.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: If I may, just to continue on what my colleague started about APSEA. I have some information from when I met with the young 17-year-old Caelin Lloyd back on January 17th. He's actually from the Valley and is a huge advocate for APSEA. He's an incredible young man who is just finishing high school. He's in Grade 12 and going to university soon. He said to me and I have it in my notes that parents did not receive that survey at all. Only 2 per cent of parents gave information.

If I could just suggest that you meet with this advocate to learn more about what's happening in APSEA. There is information that you should know. There is money, it's said. What he is advocating for is the services that were in Halifax to teach them how to cross a road or how to cook an egg. When you're blind, these are safety issues and very important.

If I may, I will reach out through your assistant and make an appointment with you or the deputy to just listen to what he has to say in advocating for APSEA. It's wrong, what is happening. This is a safety issue for APSEA.

Yesterday in your opening remarks, I believe you said there is \$241 million for capital for building. Can you just explain to me - of course, going towards the new school in Clayton Park West, I'm hoping - what is budgeted in this year for that school or a school in that area if the land turns out to be suitable for the school? What has been budgeted for a school in Clayton Park West?

HON. BECKY DRUHAN: Growth is very, very exciting. Population growth and growth in our schools is something that we need in this province and that we're encouraging in this province. We know that we have to prepare proactively for it to support.

I know that this project in your community in Clayton Park is something that's been highly anticipated for quite some time. We're very excited about being able to move forward on that.

In terms of how we budget and plan for new school builds, I want to explain that. The trajectory is on a curve. In the first year, we see lower expenditures. Last year we saw lower expenditures because that work is related to preparation and exploration. Then in the middle couple of years, we see the expenses peak.

I can say for the coming fiscal year that we have \$1 million budgeted to support that exploration work. That's what's in the budget. What I can also say, though, is that progress will not be held up or impacted by what is currently in the budget. If it progresses more quickly and additional funds are needed based on the trajectory of the land acquisition, the planning, and the build, we'll make sure that funds are available to support that.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: In general, when would we see shovels in the ground and how long does it take to finish a school with what we're experiencing now with the shortage of labour? I don't know if material is still an issue, I'm not sure.

BECKY DRUHAN: The first thing I want to say is that we've reached a significant milestone, finally, with the Clayton Park-Fairview-area school in terms of having HRM's willingness to provide land for that. That's a really, really exciting step that's been taken.

As a result of that and in accordance with regulations, there's now a process that we have to undergo to confirm that that is in fact that site. That's under way now and we look forward to that working its way through the process and coming to completion. Subsequent to that is the province needing to take possession of the land.

[3:45 p.m.]

Then once that's all in place, the step after that is to have a design-build. That means going to tender to engage with people to work with architects, the community, the region, and to fully understand what the current community needs are at that moment as the build is being planned and, in addition to that, what the projected future needs are. We want to make sure that we're building a school that not only meets the current needs of the community but the future ones.

It's after those steps take place that boots go on the ground and the shovels start working. I'm hopeful that that will happen as quickly as possible. I can't give a sure timeline because there are factors that are somewhat out of our control. I wanted to outline for you the steps that need to be taken before we get to that point of getting the shovel in the ground.

I know that's a moment that communities really are excited about because the rest of the progress is unseen. All you see is the land untouched and it feels like nothing is happening. I do want to assure you and the community that even though they don't see progress on the land, that doesn't mean progress isn't happening. We've reached the milestone now of identifying that land and getting HRM's engagement on it. Those other steps are under way now.

THE CHAIR: With five minutes remaining, the honourable member for Clayton Park West.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: I would like to go further on this. I'm a little concerned that it's only \$1 million. I'm sure that the cost of the land is a lot more than \$1 million, so that does not include it, of course.

Does the \$1 million include the negotiated price of the land?

BECKY DRUHAN: One of the really exciting things about our planning for land acquisition - and it's a portfolio that's held with the Department of Public Works - is that we have a strategic plan and a budget in place to support the acquisition of land. I'll say that the \$1 million relates to the preparatory work that I talked about and won't be an impediment to the acquisition of land.

RAFAH DICOSTANZO: My biggest issue right now in my constituency is Rockingham School. It was built in 1922, so it's over 100 years old. It was built for 300 students. It's small and beyond overcrowded. It serves three times the population.

Can you give me some hope of what we can do with a small piece of land with a very old building? What plans do you have to solve the issues at Rockingham School?

BECKY DRUHAN: As I said to your prior question, it's really exciting that we have the growth in the communities that we do, but it is vitally important that we have the infrastructure to support that growth.

We have valuable schools across the province that are older. One of the things that I wanted to draw attention to as a result of your question and the identification of a school in your area in that situation is that we've invested in a number of ways to support growth and to support the preservation of a really important educational infrastructure.

One of the things we've done this year is we have increased our capital repair budget from \$6 million - which once was the budget that we used across the Province - to \$30 million. That is a significant increase in the capital repair budget, which will allow us to invest in more proactive capital repairs and maintenance in our older schools to better support the preservation of those schools.

Another thing we've done in terms of capital planning in education is that we have increased our budget and our planning for the ongoing use of modulars so that we can purchase and plan on using modulars in a very targeted and responsive way as we see community needs grow and develop. Not every school will be subject to that as a solution.

Those are just two of the ways that we are ensuring that we maintain our infrastructure and build new infrastructure. The bottom line is that we will, and do, ensure that every student in every community has space in a school to support their learning needs. The regions not only use the investments that we provide . . . (Interruption)

THE CHAIR: Order. That concludes time for the Liberal caucus. It's now the NDP's turn.

The honourable member for Halifax Needham.

SUZY HANSEN: Last week our caucus asked about the concerns we've heard from parents about large wait-list deposits that are being charged by some daycare providers. At the time, the minister wasn't really familiar with the issue, so I wanted to follow up. Hopefully, you've been able to take a little bit of time to review this issue.

Would you be able to provide an update? Is this department going to be restricting the use of deposit fees?

HON. BECKY DRUHAN: One of the pillars of transformation is that we're creating affordable child care. Fundamentally, that is one of the key aspects of the transformation. We want quality child care and accessible and inclusive child care, but we want everybody to be able to afford it. That underpins the work that we're doing.

That underpins the reduction in fees that we've already seen. Last year, we reduced fees by half for families across the province. That means that for somebody with a toddler in child care, \$400 more in their pocket and \$400 less that they have to pay every month. That is very much intrinsic to the work that we're doing.

I can say unequivocally that the concept of paying fees to be put on a wait list is entirely not in line with or in accordance with the goal of developing affordable child care. I can definitely say that.

I can also say that it's another example of the reason why we need to do the work that we're doing. We talk pretty regularly about the elements of the work, such as the reduction in fees, the increase of wages for our ECEs, the funding that we're providing operators, and all of the other individual pieces of work that we're doing.

Stepping back from that, we are fundamentally transforming the entire sector. We are going from a market-driven sector that has been piecemeal, a patchwork quilt of 330 separate centres all run by different independent operators - non-profit, for-profit, or private - funded by a patchwork quilt of grants with regulation, but regulation that has really been about basic safety issues.

That's not really the kind of thing that we're transforming into. We're going from that patchwork quilt of a child care situation to a system that truly cares for and supports all of our families and communities. That means change in a variety of areas.

This is an example of a practice that is used by a few operators, we understand. They've chosen to do that because they are independent organizations that, in many ways, are able to make independent decisions on their own. This is an example of that kind of decision that's being made. It's reflective of the system that we had, not the system that we're moving towards.

SUZY HANSEN: Following reports in 2019 that found alarming amounts of lead in school drinking water, the previous minister committed the department to remediate this issue. Can you provide an update on the lead remediation in schools?

BECKY DRUHAN: I can say that work was under way well before I took this office, in relation to the investigation into ensuring that every tap and water source within schools across the province met the requirements associated with lead. Any necessary remediation took place.

Each school underwent that process. I can say that remediation has been completed for all schools. Reports related to that can be found on each of the regional websites.

SUZY HANSEN: There's no money in this budget for remediation of any lead in schools. You're telling me that there's no lead in any school water in the province?

[4:00 p.m.]

BECKY DRUHAN: I want to say two things and I want to compartmentalize them to answer the first question and then put some context to it.

I just want to clarify it. Every student in Nova Scotia has access to clean drinking water that meets the requirements in terms of the absence of lead. I just want to be really clear about that.

To provide the context in terms of work that may be done associated with plumbing or pipes, the regions have operational funding to support maintenance like that. I'm not saying that in the context of the clean drinking water.

I can assure Nova Scotians that that's present, but it's so that you understand when you're asking about line items in the budget that part of the public education funding that flows to regions is to support maintenance of physical facilities. They have funds available to support that maintenance.

SUZY HANSEN: I'm just reading on the website and it says, "The cost to provide water to 324 schools until the end of the current school year is \$1.7 million. ...46 schools across the province do not require outside drinking water."

As we know - like you said - they do have access to water. That is not the issue. I was just wondering if all the school taps and the plumbing and stuff was appropriate for the students to be able to utilize the water in that sense. Thank you for that.

My next question is: Can you confirm how much the province received last year under the Canada-Nova Scotia Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement and how much has been estimated for this fiscal year from that agreement?

BECKY DRUHAN: The budget for 2022-23 for the Canada-Nova Scotia Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement was \$110 million. The budget estimate for 2023-24 is \$152 million.

SUZY HANSEN: Is that the combination of provincial and federal money, or is that just federal money?

BECKY DRUHAN: The \$152 million that I referenced is federal funding. In addition to that, the province is supporting the increase in ECE wages that we described before. We've provided an additional \$40 million a year to support the raises that have flowed to our ECEs and that will continue to flow through to the ECEs.

SUZY HANSEN: How much of the department's early learning spending is budgeted for the creation of new spaces?

BECKY DRUHAN: I will say at the outset that I don't have a breakdown of the funding associated with that, but I want to explain why that is. It relates to what I was talking about earlier in terms of the need to move forward consecutively with the work that's under way with the child care transformation.

We've already created 1,100 spaces. We have many new spaces that are being built and will be announced in the coming weeks. That work will continue throughout the course of the next year. The goal under the Canada-Nova Scotia Canada-Wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement is 9,500 new spaces.

In addition to the capital and other expenses associated with the creation of those spaces, at the same time we need to be hiring or supporting the education of new ECEs. We need to make sure that our operators are supported in the adjustments that they're making to their operations, their facilities, and their staff.

We have other work that needs to be done as well. That includes creating benefits and standardized retirement benefits for our ECE workforce. All of that will be factored in in terms of where that funding is directed.

In part, it will be guided by the work of the engagement table. To ensure that we were well supported and we well understood the needs of communities and the perspective and understanding of the sector, we stood up an engagement table that has members that include ECEs, not-for-profit operators, private operators, parents, families, and others.

They've helped us and will continue to help us to prioritize the work. That will continue to guide which steps we take at what time, and which steps we take at what time will guide the way in which that funding is directed.

SUZY HANSEN: You mentioned 1,100 new spaces. Could you give me a breakdown of those spaces by their space type - before- and after-school, regulated, centre-based, family home care, et cetera?

BECKY DRUHAN: In terms of space creation, of the 1,100 spaces that have been created, roughly 400 of those spaces are in centres and family homes. They would reflect a wide range of sizes and locations. More than 700 of those spaces are in before and after programming, which is school-based recreation programming that provides child care for families prior to school and after school.

I'm happy to go through a few of the projects that have been completed. They include the Cunard Street Children's Centre, which is in peninsular Halifax. Some others in the Halifax area include the Edward Jost Children's Centre and an expansion in the East Preston Day Care centre as well.

[4:15 p.m.]

We have others throughout the province. We have expansion in the Windsor Day Care Centre, and new spaces in Hubbards, Lower Sackville, and Lower Onslow. Those are just a few of the ones that have been created.

SUZY HANSEN: When we talk about 1,100 spaces, that is for the province. That is not really a whole lot of spaces that are opening up. If we think about these day care centres and these operators, I know that the few you named don't have a whole lot of actual physical space. Those spaces are probably not a large number within each operating space.

I say this because, like you said, there has to be a full scope of things. You also mentioned that it comes down to having the staff available, having the space for the kids to be there under care, and making sure that we have the proper facilities for these kids to be in these spaces.

My question is just something of a whole other thing. It's in this theme, but you mentioned the benefits for the ECEs that are going to be coming out of the funding that I spoke about. Is that coming up very soon? Are they going to be expecting to see the ECE benefits from the funding that has just been put forward within this year?

BECKY DRUHAN: I'm always excited to talk about the improvements we're making to support our ECEs, because they do such incredible work. They're foundational to supporting and to educating our early learners.

You'd asked about the benefits and retirement options. We've committed to provide those by the end of this year. The funding for those benefits will come out of the \$152 million that we talked about earlier. Those benefits will be on top of the significant investments that we've already made. We've increased their wages.

I really want to highlight - because I think it went under the radar - how really important it is that, in addition to providing the wage structure that we have - which included raises from 14 per cent to 42 per cent for the vast majority of our ECEs across the province - we also tied their wages to the public sector wage increases.

This means that for the first time ever, when public sector wages increase, our ECE wages increase. Just this past week, our ECEs across the province in child care got a 3 per cent wage increase. That's something that will continue to flow benefits to them into the future. It's something that I'm really proud of.

SUZY HANSEN: I agree. I'm glad that it's tied to the Public Service Commission because I think that really will continue to let our child care providers know that they are cared for and appreciated. We know that it's been a long time coming, so it doesn't seem like a lot. Hopefully it will keep people in that profession.

I want to get to retention and recruitment. I know that the minister spoke about the cohorts, the classes, and the number of new students that we have coming straight out of the classroom to be in another type of classroom with the little ones.

I'm just wondering: With the numbers for before- and after-school care at 700, is there a bigger plan to be able to get teachers into the infant care world and the child care day cares? Is there a strategy in place that this department is doing to recruit more folks to do early learning child care?

BECKY DRUHAN: There are a lot of individual initiatives and investments being made to support and to grow our ECE workforce, for sure. I want to take a few minutes to talk about each individual one.

Before I dive into those bullet points and the individual details, one thing I want to say and I think is really important and exciting is that we have to acknowledge that with the labour market being what it is, every sector is challenged right now to find workers. We see this everywhere. We see it in construction, we see it in health care. We have a demographic reality which means that it's more difficult now to find workers in every sector than it was in years past.

What we have uniquely in the child care sector is this incredibly exciting transformation that's under way. This is unlike any other sector. We don't see this in construction or other sectors. We are transforming child care into a system that people have advocated for for decades, reflecting the incredibly important and valuable work that the ECEs and others within that sector do.

That change - that transformation, that shift - from the patchwork quilt that we had to the inclusive, quality, accessible, and affordable structure and system that we are building is something that is exciting people and is drawing people to the sector. I've heard that from operators when I've spoken to them.

That buzz, that excitement, and that transformation is drawing new people to the field, but also bringing back people who had a passion for child care, a passion for children, and who were drawn to the sector but for a variety of reasons left the sector. The transformation in and of itself is an incredible motivator and draw for people to the sector.

In addition to that excitement that's bring people back, there's a lot of work that's under way proactively to make sure that we are engaging with students and people to ensure that we promote ECE as an exciting career and opportunity.

In July of 2021, the province announced a new workforce strategy called Excellence in Early Childhood Education - we were supported by the Canadian government in that. A number of actions flowed from that, which are still in place, that

support drawing ECEs into the field and supporting them as they go through their education.

Free tuition and books were provided for over 500 staff without a diploma working in child care and pre-Primary so they could earn one through an accelerated program. We had designated seats as a result of that for Mi'kmaw, African Nova Scotian, Acadian, and Francophone students, and newcomers, to ensure that not only are we bringing people to the workforce, but those are people who reflect our communities. We are building the diversity and inclusivity that we want - and that we and students and families need - in the new system.

In addition to that, \$1.4 million has been provided in bursaries to more than 250 students who were enrolled in full-time ECE degree and diploma programs. We are providing continuing education funding to child care, pre-Primary, and family home daycare staff who are studying part-time towards their ECE credentialling. We're partnering with the Department of Labour, Skills and Immigration to recruit internationally to encourage educated ECEs through the Atlantic Immigration Program to come to Nova Scotia.

That work is under way in partnership with NSCC and other educators to really ensure that not only are we drawing people and creating a pay structure and a professionalization, but that we also have educational opportunities to support those folks in the expansion of our ECE workforce. Those are just a few examples of the work that's under way to make sure that we have a prepared and ready workforce.

SUZY HANSEN: I'm glad to hear that. I also want to mention that I know of two daycares in my constituency that are no longer daycares because of the challenges of keeping staff on hand. Those are challenges for a lot of places. When a daycare closes down, that impacts families, homes, and livelihoods.

I will follow up with the minister on this later, but I just wanted to mention this now because it came to my head. There is a daycare that has been looking for a space for a number of years, since they were bumped out of Joseph Howe school. They are early and I know that the deputy minister knows of this one. They have been finding challenges because they are a daycare that actually has multi-abled children, and they don't always fall within that same bracket of child care scope.

They have the teachers, they have the people there to do the work - they just don't have the proper space. They're carrying children up and down stairs to get outdoors to have some free play time. I want to flag that now because I may not get to it later. That is also an opportunity for us to continue to have child care spaces available for families and communities, in particular my own community.

I'm going to move into regular public schooling. We noticed that this government is making significant investment in modular portables. I'm just wondering if the minister can table a cost benefit analysis of modular investments versus permanent capital builds. I'm wondering if this is going to be the norm, in particular, or do we have a strategic plan moving forward to be able to accommodate these large growing communities?

[4:30 p.m.]

BECKY DRUHAN: Thank you for the opportunity to talk about modulars in the context of education. This is something that is a really important development, and an important tool that we have in planning for and supporting our education system and our students to ensure that every student has a seat and a space.

You asked for a cost benefit analysis between modular and capital builds, like the building of a new school. What I want to say is that they are two different things that we use for two different reasons to support learning. I want to kind of talk about the spectrum of opportunities that we have in terms of school facilities.

What most people are familiar with - and what people think about sometimes, when we talk about modulars or portables. Portables are individual classrooms that exist within the system. They are really a short-term option.

When we talk about modulars, though - and these are the things that we have now - there's \$40 million in our budget to be proactive in the purchase of our modulars. This is something very different than what comes to mind. For school communities that have them, we hear nothing but praise and excitement. Modulars are brought in as annexes, effectively. They are groups of classrooms. They're connected by hallways. They have HVAC systems, and are equipped at the outset with all of the technology connections that they need. They have bathrooms within these units. They really form a welcome part of the school facility.

Communities are excited by modulars, and we get great feedback from educators, students and families alike about the value that modulars bring when they're used in the school facility. That's one thing that's really important for everyone to understand. They are really great facilities, so that's one of the benefits of them.

The other thing that I want to talk about in relation to modulars is why and when we might use them. Unlike a new school build or a significant addition to a school - which requires years - modulars are something that we can stand up very quickly. It's a matter of months to get modulars stood up on a school site.

They are a really excellent tool to use when we have rapid changes in enrollment in an area or when we are looking for a more medium-range option to deal with growth while we're awaiting a capital build - while we're awaiting the building of a new school.

So modulars are a really important tool in our strategic kit that we're using as we plan for growth across the province.

I wouldn't want to say which is better because schools, obviously, are excellent, but modulars are excellent too. We use them in different circumstances and to fill different needs. The bottom line though, the need that they fill is to ensure that every student has a space. Both our capital build schools and modular annexes do that really, really well.

I think I've covered the modular question. Do you want to reinforce though that they are an important element of a growth strategy - one of many elements of a growth strategy - to help us be nimble and flexible when we're responding to growth needs in communities.

SUZY HANSEN: I'm grateful that there are spaces for children to actually be able to have a spot to learn. We know that with this growing population, there are larger numbers than we had ever expected to have in different pockets of communities. A modular is better than nothing. Obviously, every child deserves to learn and actually have a space to learn in.

I wanted to ask that question because probably about five or six years ago, that was something that was not used as much. So we're utilizing these adaptations more than expected. This is another question for another time because this is a different thing. This could go on for a while. I'll go onto to another question, but I thank you for that.

According to the timeline released earlier this year, it was expected that a contract would be awarded for the construction of St. Joseph's-Alexander McKay Elementary by the end of March. I'm just asking: Can you confirm if a tender has been awarded so that we can look forward to a school completion date of September 2024?

BECKY DRUHAN: I know that the community is excited about St. Joseph's-Alexander McKay Elementary. It's a new pre-Primary to Grade 6 elementary school, and it's a consolidation. I'm very happy to report that it is out to tender with a closing date of April 6th. It's a really exciting project.

It will be amazing for the community. It's really exciting because there's a child care centre part of it. In addition to the community, we are also looking forward to that progressing.

SUZY HANSEN: I just have a quick question about the child care centre that's included. I'm curious to know if it is a child care provider from the community or is it a separate child care provider that is specifically from the department? There are a number of them that are in the community. I'm just curious to know if there has been consultation with community operators about this change.

BECKY DRUHAN: We know that it's really important that child care is connected with their community. This is the first time that we are including a child care centre in a new build. We will be connecting with the community in the development and operation of that.

SUZY HANSEN: I'm just wondering: Is there a budget increase for school counsellors or psychologists within the school system right now?

[4:45 p.m.]

BECKY DRUHAN: You were specifically asking about school counsellors. I want to make sure that I put that in context.

We know that it is vital that we support the mental health of our students in our schools. We do that through a wide range of programming and supports. We do it in conjunction, not just with education, but we also work with partners in health and in community services and others to make sure that our students have access to the mental health support that they need.

This is something that we need to keep considering and keep working on, but I want to kind of paint that picture. I'll provide you with the details on the counsellors, but also the other types of supports that are available.

I can say that under our inclusive education - increase in resources that what we have or are adding an additional seven school counsellors to the school counsellors who already exist within the system. Those will be additional school counsellors.

Within that inclusive education - I want to break it down by pocket, but it is important to understand that there are so many varied programs. Those are inclusive education positions - counsellors within that.

Counsellors work within a team. So within the schools, the counsellors work with the classroom teachers. In addition to that, there are a variety of other mental health supports that are present as a result of our inclusive education work and other programs.

With inclusive education, for example, in addition to counsellors we have applied behaviour analysts. We have a variety of professionals and support providers whose focus is autism. We have autism and behaviour supports, and autism teacher specialists. We have behaviour support teachers. We have child and youth care practitioners. We have navigators, inclusion coaches, resource teachers, SchoolsPlus supports, nurses, and student support workers. Counsellors are really important members of a broad range of professionals who support the mental health and well-being of our students in schools.

That's talking about the inclusive education funding, which is now \$75 million. We also need to talk about - and it's important that we understand that SchoolsPlus also provides additional mental health support and other supports within our school team. We have SchoolsPlus mental health clinicians. They provide things like individual and group therapy. Our SchoolsPlus funding is separate and apart from the funding that is associated with inclusive education, and it's really a partnership between education and those other departments. We have adolescent outreach services, which are present, and support our schools and youth in not just school settings but other settings as well. They are present in all of the regions.

In addition to that, we have schools-based youth health centres, which are important supports in our health promoting schools. Those are, again, another example of partnership between the Department of Health and Wellness, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, the Nova Scotia Health Authority, the RCEs, the CSAP, and others.

That's just a small picture of the types of mental health supports that are available in schools that support counsellors and others to do the important mental health work.

THE CHAIR: The honourable member for Halifax Needham, with a reminder that she has two minutes left.

SUZY HANSEN: I'm really glad to hear that from the minister about the funding for inclusive education. I'm curious to know: Have you implemented all of the recommendations from the inclusion report from 2018?

BECKY DRUHAN: One of the items in my mandate letter was to report on the progress associated with the recommendations relating to inclusive education. We will be reporting on and providing an update on that in the very near future.

SUZY HANSEN: Is that a "no" right now or is that a "still working on it?"

BECKY DRUHAN: We will be reporting on the progress associated with the recommendations related to inclusive education . . .

THE CHAIR: Order. The time for the NDP caucus is now over. I'll turn it over to the Liberal caucus.

The honourable member for Sydney-Membertou.

HON. DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: I only have a few questions, so I'm not going to take all the time. I do appreciate the opportunity. I do recognize a few faces in the crowd, so it's good to see you all again. I know firsthand how awesome the staff is in that

department, having had the opportunity to work with them. Some of the stuff that's happening across the province is really their work.

I have just one question on child care. It's just something that came up. Then I have two local questions, and I'll be on my way.

Listening to the child care conversation, one of the things that's coming up at home is that we're starting to have a lot of doctors and nurses who want to come into the community who are looking to access child care. One of the ideas now is to just actually set it up in the hospital. We would actually work with the hospital. They would have an administrator so that the nurses who are coming in and working various shifts and everything else, would have the ability to have child care right on site for an extended period of time - like flexible hours.

I think back to when we negotiated the child care deal and started looking at pieces of this stuff, but we really never got into this. This is something that's really popped up for me in the last year, which I think is a great idea. I think the Department of Health and Wellness is actually involved with it right now.

Are you looking at those options to get into the medical facilities to say that for nurses, if they want to come to a particular underserved community, are we looking at expanding potential child care spaces into the hospitals themselves?

HON. BECKY DRUHAN: The question was: Are we giving consideration to standing up child care options to support our health care shift workers, and the unique needs that our health care workers have?

I'm very happy to say that we're already on it. This is something that I directed the department early on. They have been engaged with the Department of Health and Wellness to look at options for exactly that.

We know that inclusive, accessible child care means that we need child care that's available when people work. People work all sorts of shifts, not just 9 to 5. That's one of the areas in which child care has been challenged in the past, for sure. I have been a shift worker. It is a challenge for shift workers to find child care.

To support the work that the Department of Health and Wellness is doing to support our health care workers, and to recruit health care workers, we are absolutely looking at options, and working actively to create some options and some pilots to support health care workers in obtaining child care.

DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: That's great. This came up with some of the health care professionals in Sydney. I find when I get into Estimates, I don't do a lot so it's more of a conversation for me. I'll ask a few questions along the way.

There are some daycares that are actually willing to make that expansion into the hospital, so I just put a plug in for them - that the infrastructure's there and the people are there. I'm happy to provide the names to the department if they want them for folks who have proposals, and who actually want to have the conversation with the department about it.

Specifically with the Cape Breton Regional Hospital, I think logistically, they're set up to really take this on. It would be a huge help because, of course, we all get the calls - minister, you get the calls, I get the calls, as local MLAs - that the more options we can provide, the better. That was the whole premise of the national partnership. The health care stuff can be really unique to help support those medical professionals.

That was my broad question. Now I have two local questions, then I'll leave you be. The first I'm asking not only for me, but the member for Cape Breton East. I wish he was still here because I would have really laid on the fact that he's got so many families in his community. I'm talking about the French school in Sydney.

There's been a local issue, as you may be aware. The French school building also encompasses a swimming pool that the Kiwanis has run for decades, but it actually falls under the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. There's been some infrastructure issues with the area for the kids outside. I've sent correspondence to your office on this.

There was some talk about trying to get those repairs put in the budget so that we can finally put this issue to rest, and get that building repaired so that we can re-open the play area for the kids at the French school in Sydney. I said it in the media as well. It's located in Sydney, but it really services the entire CBRM. A lot of the folks actually live outside of the greater Sydney catchment area.

Can I get an update on if those repairs are going to be in this year's capital for school repairs?

BECKY DRUHAN: We know that students need access to, and benefit greatly from, outdoor learning spaces and outdoor play spaces. We're committed to ensuring that all schools have safe outdoor learning spaces that support students' educational needs, and support the curriculum needs of the students. I can assure you and the community that those are all in place at the school, and students do have access to those safe outdoor learning spaces.

We're aware of the situation. We do know that it's a situation that's concerning to the families. We can assure the families that safety is a priority, and safety issues are addressed by ensuring that the spaces that need to be blocked off are. There is still lots of access to other outdoor spaces.

[5:00 p.m.]

We really do understand the concerns that are around the portion of the grounds that are being impacted. We and the region are working on a solution. I don't have an update at this time, but once we've determined what the next steps are, we'll ensure that information is shared with the community.

DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: I'm fighting for the member for Cape Breton East too. I know it was something that was supposed to come to the minister's desk and never made it before the transition to government.

I wish I had the policy with me where it actually outlines that the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development is responsible for any damage that is conducted to that pool. It's a relationship that is probably unique, but it's been a handshake agreement - I see the staff nodding - for 50 years. When I saw it myself, I was like: What is this? If we can get that fixed, that would be great.

That was my first local question. My second local question is Sydney Academy. Sydney Academy, as everyone is aware - massive flood over the deep-freeze weekend. As we know, the cleanup is ongoing. They were shifting students in and out. Asbestos is a big concern in the building for the community.

I know people have been working very hard to remediate that. I don't want to just throw that out there because I know how much work goes into this stuff. I also know how much work goes into getting a school on the school planning list.

As you know - as I do - you have many schools that are on lists that have reached that point of their life, but Sydney Academy has now sustained three or four major infrastructure issues. Really, the time has come to have a community conversation about the future of a new Sydney Academy in the greater Sydney area.

Can I get an update on where it sits now from a renovation perspective? Also this is a push for the entire greater Sydney area that: Is Sydney Academy now part of the conversation about what that school looks like in the future?

BECKY DRUHAN: We know that experience was a disruptive experience for students and staff. Whenever we have events like that that interrupt learning, it is a real challenge. I want to thank the staff in the region for working really hard to support the students and families through the course of that to do their best to ensure continued learning. I am very happy to say that students are back in class. That's really good news.

In terms of how we now address that, and what we do going forward, I think there are a couple of things that I want to say. I think I've said this phrase a few times now - I want to step it back to the big picture. You asked about whether this was in discussion in

relation to capital planning, as we have some aging infrastructure. I just wanted to talk for a couple of minutes - and you would know this, and we've kind of taken it a few steps from when you were in the office. We have an objective process for how we identify and prioritize capital projects.

We know that the Auditor General previously provided really good advice around how to make sure that process is in place. The department has created a process that enables the regions to prioritize their capital projects and their capital needs based on community needs and conditions of facilities. The regions then bring that forward. Those priorities are then assessed at the department level to determine, on a very objective basis, which projects get prioritized. That continues to be the process. That is the process through which all of these issues are looked at, including the question around Sydney Academy. That will unfold.

The other thing that I wanted to say is that one thing that we've done to support needs around our school infrastructure is increased our TCA budget. That's the budget that is used to do capital repairs on schools. It was previously \$6 million for many years, I understand. We have just now increased it by \$24 million to be a \$30 million fund to support the preservation and maintenance of these important educational assets.

So in addition to the consideration around that capital process that I described, there is also this pot of \$30 million that will support the maintenance and capital repairs that schools require. Those are two lenses and options through which the Sydney Academy situation will be considered - to ensure that we're preserving, protecting and repairing our educational infrastructure to make sure that we are able to use it as long as we can to support our students.

DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: Thank you. I have no further questions.

THE CHAIR: If I am to recognize the honourable minister, it is to give her closing remarks.

The honourable Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development.

BECKY DRUHAN: Just before I come to the resolution, I just want to take a moment to thank the many people who worked to prepare for and support this process, and support my involvement in it, Deputy Minister LeRue, Associate Deputy Minister Halliday, the finance team members, and other members of the department branches. I greatly, greatly appreciate their diligent preparation that enables me to be responsive to the questions that are brought forward here, and help Nova Scotians understand the investments and the work that's done, and that is under way in education and early childhood development in Nova Scotia.

Even more importantly, I want to thank each of those people, as well as the educators and staff within the regions, and the CSAP for the work that they do every day to ensure that our Nova Scotia children and students have the absolute best possible start in life. It is an honour and an inspiration to work with each and every one of them. I'm really grateful for that.

THE CHAIR: Shall the resolution stand?

The resolution stands.

We will take a two-minute recess to prepare for the Department of Environment and Climate Change.

[5:11 p.m. The committee recessed.]

[5:15 p.m. The committee reconvened.]

THE CHAIR: Order, please. The Subcommittee of the Whole on Supply will now come to order. It is 5:15 p.m.

The subcommittee is meeting to consider the Estimates for the Department of Environment and Climate Change as outlined in Resolution No. E7.

Resolved, that a sum not exceeding \$40,445,000 be granted to the Lieutenant Governor to defray expenses in respect of the Department of Environment and Climate Change, pursuant to the Estimate.

I will now turn to the Minister of Environment and Climate Change to make any opening remarks and introduce the staff that he has here with him.

The honourable Minister of Environment and Climate Change.

HON. TIMOTHY HALMAN: Good evening, colleagues. I'm very pleased to be with you here this evening to engage in this very important process in our democratic institution. I'm also very pleased to be here today to speak to the work and the priorities of the Department of Environment and Climate Change.

I want to take a moment to introduce members of my senior leadership team at the Department of Environment and Climate Change. To my right, we have Deputy Minister Lora McEachern, and to my left, we have Executive Director of Financial Services, Mike O'Brien. We also have the Associate Deputy Minister with us, Jason Hollett.

We have our Acting Executive Director of Climate Change, Anthony Weatherby, our Executive Director of Policy and Environmental Assessments, Lorrie Roberts, and the

Executive Director of Sustainability and Applied Science, Andrew Murphy. We have our Executive Director of Inspection, Compliance, and Enforcement, Adrian Fuller, our Executive Lead on the Coastal Protection Act, John Somers, and our Strategic Lead on the Coastal Protection Act, Gordon Smith.

I know many of you here do not need introductions of staff. Many here are familiar with staff. I just want to take a moment to thank them for the ongoing work they do to protect the environment and protect human health here in Nova Scotia.

It's no secret that our government's top priority is health care. We have a comprehensive plan to modernize the health care system. We will do whatever it takes and invest what it takes to fix health care and deliver the care that Nova Scotian families need and deserve. We want real results for people. We want to improve access to doctors, more nurses at bedsides, shorter wait times, ambulances there when you need them, more beds in long-term care spaces, and much, much more.

I believe that we're making progress, but as the Premier has indicated, it will take time as we make these significant investments. Our government's focus on health is quite broad and recognizes the important role other areas and other departments have on our health and well-being.

For example, environmental health and the impacts of climate change. As you're all aware, the United Nations declared the right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment to be a human right last year. I fully agree with this.

We also know that global climate change is affecting people's mental and physical health. We see examples every day from around the world and in our own backyard here in Nova Scotia. We see extreme heat, wildfires, droughts, flooding, stronger storms. All of these impact our health because they impact the health of the ecosystems that we depend on for survival.

Our health depends on the health of the water, the health of the air, the health of the biodiversity, and the health of the soil we call home. Here in Nova Scotia, our Premier has been clear that we need to do more, and we must go faster.

Climate change is the most pressing issue facing the global community. It threatens the physical and mental health of people around the world. It threatens communities, homes, and livelihoods in all countries. It connects us to every other human being on the planet. No matter where you live, all continents and all of the people we share this planet with - indeed all living things - are feeling the impacts of climate change.

Just two weeks ago, I had the opportunity to visit the Pakistani community at a Halifax Mosque. It was a wonderful engagement. I also had an opportunity to chat with some members of community there talking about the sea level rise that's impacting

Pakistan. It's global and we know the implications are enormous. It's going to require a global response - a response that Nova Scotia is a part of.

I believe we are doing our part. For example, in 2021, as many are aware, we signed onto the Race to Net Zero Campaign, which was launched at COP26. In signing on, we have agreed to meet robust science-aligned action to cut global emissions in half by 2030, and to deliver a healthier, fairer, zero-carbon world.

Our government is taking urgent action to reduce our greenhouse gas emissions, move our province to a cleaner and more sustainable future, and achieve carbon neutrality by 2050. Our action is being guided by the Environmental Goals and Climate Change Reduction Act and, of course, the climate plan. We have the most ambitious greenhouse gas emission targets in Canada - 53 per cent below 2005 levels by 2030. We are well on our path to achieving these targets.

Our department leads the work to reduce the impacts of climate change first by understanding the impacts and risks. We are working together to respond and adapt such as making sure that our ecosystems are healthy, investing in nature-based climate solutions, and making sure that Nova Scotians have clean air and clean, safe drinking water, by reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and contributing to the national and global effort to reach net zero.

On December 5, 2022, my department released a new climate change risk assessment. The warnings are clear. Climate change is a risk to human health and our well-being. The data and research from the risk assessment also shows what Nova Scotians can expect by the end of the century if further action is not taken.

As indicated in the risk assessment, we know that over the next decade, flooding is going to be the perennial key issue that is going to have to be dealt with. As we get into the 2040s and 2050s, the risk assessment is telling us to prepare for the extreme heat that Nova Scotia will encounter. This risk assessment provides reliable information that government and others can use to address risk, take advantage of opportunities, and adapt to the changing climate.

To protect the well-being of Nova Scotians, our government also released the Climate Change Plan for Clean Growth on December 7, 2022. This is our plan to prepare for climate impacts, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and create economic opportunity in a clean future. We are ready on the front line, both adapting and taking action.

There are 68 actions that will help Nova Scotians adapt to climate change, get off of oil, make their homes more energy efficient, and save them money on their energy bills; actions that will help us reduce our greenhouse gas emissions, including holding large industry and the electricity sector more accountable for doing their part; actions that help create jobs and economic opportunities in the green economy.

Our government's vision is to become a clean renewable energy national and global leader within 10 years. This is a grand vision for Nova Scotia, and we're seeing that being executed with the work with green hydrogen and working with the federal government with the environmental assessment for offshore wind. The work is ongoing. This, I believe, is very exciting for the next generation of Nova Scotians.

Reducing greenhouse gas emissions is a critical part of the global effort to slow climate change. We are well on our way to meeting our 2030 greenhouse gas emission targets - 53 per cent below 2005 levels. These are the strongest targets in Canada. Our new climate plan outlines how we will achieve this and put us on a pathway to being net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050.

Together we have an opportunity to make positive change and work together to protect each other and all that we value. You'll often hear me say that responding to climate change requires an all-hands-on-deck approach. I truly believe that. The future is ours to shape.

This is why the Environmental Goals and Climate Change Reduction Act legislates sustainable prosperity as a shared responsibility. Every Nova Scotian, I believe, can find themselves in our climate plan. There are benefits, job and economic opportunities, and roles for everyone - for average, everyday Nova Scotians, communities, municipalities, industry, youth, and the environmental and climate change leadership in our province. This is a big job but together we can shape our future, strengthen our economy, and protect each other and all that we value.

Much like our government has prioritized health care for Nova Scotians, we're pushing hard for action on climate change. Our budget speaks to the fact that our government is doing more and going faster. We have increased funding and staff in our budget for 2023-24 dedicated to our climate change work.

We expect to spend at least \$42 million this coming year to continue our work delivering commitments in our new climate plan. That's just the start. This is a five-year plan, and we will continue to invest in climate change in future years. This investment will help us continue our national leadership with reducing greenhouse gas emissions and fighting climate change.

Over the past 18 months, our government has invested almost \$300 million in programs and services that are helping to get Nova Scotians off oil and make their homes more energy efficient. Programs are preparing our province's future green workers and leaders - programs that are reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

These investments are providing tangible benefits for Nova Scotians. Looking ahead to the new fiscal year, we are finalizing partnership agreements now that will further empower Nova Scotians and our communities to adapt to climate change.

Very soon, we will be sharing the first round of projects funded under the Sustainable Communities Challenge Fund. This is a new project that came out of the Environmental Goals and Climate Change Reduction Act that invests \$50 million directly into communities to empower them to mitigate and adapt to climate change.

This matters because our communities are the first responders on climate change. We're in the process of selecting the first round of funding recipients. I look forward to sharing more about the great work communities will do with this funding later this Spring.

No doubt, as many of the MLAs around this table know in travels throughout the province, you see firsthand the incredible work being done on the ground by our local communities and municipalities. This Sustainable Communities Challenge Fund will only strengthen and enhance the great work that's being done. I want to thank the Nova Scotia Federation of Municipalities for their work in delivering this important new program.

Nova Scotia's people and communities are resilient. They are strong and they are resourceful. Many of our communities have been dealing with the impacts of climate change for years now and have a wealth of knowledge about what they need to do to adapt. This funding is meant to empower communities to use their knowledge, ideas, and people to take action.

For example, visiting Bridgewater last Summer - meeting with the town council there, and learning about all the amazing climate initiatives that have been ongoing for many, many years. Think about the great initiatives in CBRM and Halifax here in HRM - a lot is taking place.

In the coming year, we will also do more to help Nova Scotians adapt to climate change with the last of the revenue from the final cap and trade auctions. We will continue to design the new Nova Scotia Climate Change Fund - a more flexible program that we feel will deliver more benefits for Nova Scotians.

We will continue to work and partner with Efficiency One, the Clean Foundation, our municipal units, academia, the Mi'kmaw, researchers, and others to support the all-hands-on-deck approach that is absolutely essential in responding to climate change.

We know that carbon pricing is one way to motivate people to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions. It is a tool that we are using as part of our response to climate change. In response to the new federal carbon pricing requirements, we did a thorough analysis to decide the path forward. Our analysis showed that cap and trade was not a viable option moving forward, as the current practice of giving fuel distributors free allowances was no longer eligible under the new, strict federal guidelines.

Our government is committed to meeting the new federal requirements and continuing our national leadership to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. This includes

holding big emitters more accountable, making our homes and buildings more energy efficient, getting off coal, and moving to clean renewable energy and green hydrogen.

Earlier this year, we finalized the first series of regulations for Nova Scotia's new carbon pricing system, the Output-Based Pricing System. Industry produces about 50 per cent of Nova Scotia's carbon emissions. We designed the Output-Based Pricing System to reduce these emissions and meet the new federal carbon pricing requirements.

[5:30 p.m.]

The program has three mandatory participants: Nova Scotia Power, LaFarge, and Donkin Mine. Smaller facilities can opt into the program, and we're seeing interest from companies that want to participate. The deadline for facilities to opt in was April 1st. My team is reviewing these applications now, and we'll be ready to share who's registered under the program in the coming weeks.

The regulations are the first step in the implementation of the Output-Based Pricing System program in Nova Scotia. Further regulations on standards and compliance will follow later this year. We will continue to keep Nova Scotians updated on the Output-Based Pricing System as the program progresses.

One of the areas most susceptible to climate change is our coastline. Our diverse 13,000 kilometres of coastline is on the front line of the climate change crisis. Much more of it will be vulnerable to the impacts of climate change in the coming decades.

People who live along our coastline know this very well. They are experiencing, and are at higher risk of, storm surges, flooding, erosion, and storms. Nova Scotians are coastal people, and we've lived along our coastline for generations. We will continue to live on our coast, but we need to rethink how we do this in light of how climate change is impacting our shores.

In 2019, our caucus supported the Coastal Protection Act in the Legislature. We supported it because we agreed with the need to protect our coastline. Work on the regulations was under way when I became minister. I certainly want to thank my predecessors for the work that went into this. We continue to make this work a priority.

My staff has been receiving a sustained volume of emails and calls about this legislation and the pending regulations. It's become clear that while there is a lot of support for the Coastal Protection Act, property owners - or those who are considering buying property to build a house, cottage, or their dream retirement home - have a lot of questions. There is a general lack of understanding. We're also hearing that many Nova Scotians who live along the coast are not even aware of the legislation.

Buying or building is a big investment. We owe it to property owners to roll out this legislation without any surprises. We also want to hear from property owners as we develop and finalize the regulations. We're going to take more time to listen and make sure that everyone who needs to know that change is coming is aware of this and understand how it may or may not impact them.

Our government wants the Coastal Protection Act to be successful. Public awareness, public education, and understanding is key to achieving this success. In the coming months we are going to focus on public education and building understanding around the Coastal Protection Act.

Our plan is to reach out to coastal property owners with information on the proposed changes so that they can provide us with informed feedback. We want to have all Nova Scotians rally with us to take the necessary action to protect our coastline, and ensure the development occurs in places that are safer from rising sea levels, erosion, flooding, and more powerful storms.

I want to be very clear that this doesn't mean protecting our coastline is not a priority for the government. In fact, it's the opposite. This is such a priority to our government that we want to take a bit of extra time to do this right. That means building awareness, understanding, and support for the changes we all need to make.

The Coastal Protection Act is only one way that we can protect our coastline, and the people and infrastructure closest to it. There are other ways. Municipalities can, if they wish, explore the options that they have for zoning and by-laws.

We would also encourage anyone planning to develop or build along our coast to ensure that they do their own due diligence so they can make informed decisions - for example, by referring to flood line maps, the province's new risk assessments, by talking to the Insurance Bureau of Canada or their insurance broker, they can contact CLIMAtlantic, as well. They have lots of current research and data that can help people as they plan and make decisions. We'll continue to work with Nova Scotians, municipalities, the Association of Nova Scotia Land Surveyors, Engineers Nova Scotia, Geoscientists Nova Scotia, and the Mi'kmaw to finalize the regulations.

I want to take a moment to thank an incredible civil servant, John Somers, who is with us today even though it is his vacation. I want to thank him for his work on the Coastal Protection Act. Many of you here know John. After an impressive career with the Province of Nova Scotia, John is retiring.

We're going to miss John, but I wish him all the best. I also know that the Coastal Protection Act file is in great hands with Gordon Smith and our coastal protection team. I look forward to working with you, Gordon, as we collectively work to continue the work to protect our coast.

The relationship between our health and time spent in nature is clear. Certainly, during the COVID lockdowns, when we were able to get outside, I think Nova Scotians recognized how important nature is to our mental, spiritual, and physical well-being. I personally spend as much time as I can with my family on our trails in Nova Scotia for exactly that reason.

As minister, I want to encourage Nova Scotians to get out and enjoy our parks and our protected areas. We all know that a walk in nature can do wonders for both our physical, spiritual, and mental health. We can be proactive by spending more time outside and reduce stress on our previously broken health care system. That's one reason our government has prioritized protecting more of our land and water.

We also know that nature and biodiversity are our allies in the fight against climate change. Natural areas and healthy ecosystems are absolutely critical in the global fight against climate change. For example, natural areas capture and store carbon. Trees in natural areas help us manage heat stress. Natural areas play a role in mitigating the impacts of flooding.

That is why the climate plan has five actions: to strengthen biodiversity, prevent further biodiversity loss, restore natural areas, and protect more of land and water. In 2022, I was proud to announce that we protected an additional 9,300 hectares of Crown land, including creating the new Sackville River Wilderness Area. The new wilderness area will help conserve the Sackville River, restore important Atlantic salmon habitat, and help protect the Pockwock watershed on which so many people of this area depend for their drinking water.

I want to take a moment and thank Walter Regan, an individual who probably doesn't need an introduction to many parts of Nova Scotia. I want to thank Walter Regan of the Sackville Rivers Association and Chris Miller of the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society who worked tirelessly for years to help make this designation a reality.

When Minister Craig, Minister Johns and I had the opportunity in December to be in Sackville for this announcement - well, you want to talk about an absolutely joyful occasion to see the hard work of those community members come to fruition and be able to achieve the Sackville Wilderness Area - it was a sight to behold.

In addition to creating this new wilderness area, we created six new nature reserves and expanded seven wilderness areas last year. These new designations bring us one step forward to achieving our goal of protecting 20 per cent of our land and water by 2030. However, we have many more steps to take, and government cannot achieve this goal alone.

We are fortunate in Nova Scotia to have many organizations doing outstanding work to protect our natural areas. These are organizations that are highly regarded

provincially, nationally, and internationally for their conservation leadership. Organizations like the Nova Scotia Nature Trust, Ducks Unlimited, the Nature Conservancy of Canada, and many, many others.

To help ensure that they continue to carry out their important work and leadership, in December of last year we announced \$20 million in funding for the Nova Scotia Crown Share and Legacy Trust. The trust flows this funding to the conservation organizations that are doing outstanding work to acquire and protect private land with interested landowners. I know that our conservation partners will put this money to good use, and I look forward to hearing about all the great things they will do with this funding.

I want to thank our conservation partners for their leadership and their vision. Their work is improving the quality of life for Nova Scotians. It is helping to strengthen biodiversity, protect species at risk. It is helping in the fight against climate change.

Achieving 20 per cent conservation will also include working closely with Mi'kmaw in Nova Scotia to ensure that their knowledge and priorities are integrated with this work. In partnership with the Mi'kmaw in Nova Scotia, we have developed a shared approach in advancing Indigenous protected and conserved areas in Nova Scotia.

This begins with Nova Scotia Mi'kmaw identifying areas of interest for potential conservation on Crown lands. We will then work together to review and refine these conservation proposals, and move sites forward for protection consideration through a process that includes opportunities for broader stakeholder and public input.

One of the most meaningful moments in my professional life occurred at the end of January this year. I was humbled to join Chief Norman Bernard and Chief Leroy Denny in Wagmatcook where we took the first steps toward a shared governance of the Kluscap Wilderness Area with our Mi'kmaw partners - a significant moment in my estimation in the history of Nova Scotia. As a student of history, to be able to be there with Minister MacFarlane and sign the documents to begin the process of shared sovereignty over these lands. As Chief Norman Bernard said, this was a day he never thought would ever take place. Powerful moments are happening - moments that are making a big difference in the lives of so many people.

Our government is committed to reconciliation with the Mi'kmaw. They have been stewards of this ecological area since time immemorial. The Kluscap Wilderness Area is a sacred place to the Mi'kmaw. This is the first agreement of this type between Nova Scotia and the Mi'kmaw. We will continue to work closely with the Mi'kmaw, the land trusts, and other partners to advance land and water protection throughout Nova Scotia.

We're also working now on the next steps to make a decision about the proposed Archibald Lake Wilderness Area. Specifically, we are in the process of completing consultation with Mi'kmaw and completing a socioeconomic analysis of the impact of that

designation. This work is a priority to my Sustainability and Applied Science division for the coming months.

As we turn our attention to fiscal year 2023-24, my team will continue to work to designate protected areas from the 2013 Parks and Protected Areas Plan. The Minister of Natural Resources and Renewables and I will also deliver a new protected area strategy by December of this year, which will help inform the work that we have to do to protect 20 per cent of our land and water by 2030.

I also want to acknowledge my federal counterpart, Minister Steven Guilbeault and the Department of Environment and Climate Change. Last Summer, Minister Rushton, Minister Guilbeault and I had an opportunity to announce that we are developing a federal-provincial nature agreement. Our two departments and two levels of government have a decades-long history of working together on land conservation. I look forward to this ongoing partnership this year. We're currently finalizing several agreements with our federal colleagues that will support our work here, and flow new funding from Ottawa to Nova Scotia.

This is work that will protect more of our land and water, old growth forests and eastern hemlock; strengthen and protect our biodiversity, including migratory birds and species at risk; allow us to do more wetland mapping and research; store more carbon to help in our response to climate change; improve ecological corridors to support wildlife movement; support Parks Canada in making a decision about designating the Blue Mountain-Birch Cove Lakes area as a national urban park; and support the work of private land trusts with Mi'kmaw and other partners to protect more land and water in Nova Scotia. I look forward to sharing more details of our partnership with the Government of Canada in the coming months, as well as more land designations.

My team and I were honoured to be part of the Canadian delegation at COP15 in Montreal this past September - a very historic city in terms of environmental policy. One thinks of the 1987 Montreal Protocol. I know Minister Guilbeault to host the world in his hometown of Montreal - and my hometown of Montreal as well - was a very powerful moment. I'm deeply grateful to the Canadian government to give us status at that event to see this landmark agreement unfold.

I want you know this deepened my understanding, and my commitment and resolve about the importance of protecting biodiversity and our land. I look forward to continuing these dialogues with the Government of Canada and my counterparts across the country in the coming years.

Chair, in addition to the environmental and climate change response benefits of land protection, we also know that there is a link between nature and human health. Nova Scotians have asked us to fix health care. That's our government's number one priority. Every hectare of nature that we protect supports that priority.

[5:45 p.m.]

Our minds and bodies need nature. Nature is healing and restorative. Certainly, this Easter weekend, weather permitting, I'm getting the kids out on a hike. They're going to pick a trail. Nature improves our well-being. Nature helps our people flourish. Having more protected natural areas contributes to improving our quality of life. Nova Scotia has been a leader in land conservation. In the coming year, we will continue that leadership.

Nova Scotians are aware that our government's top priority is health care. There is a direct connection between a healthy environment and healthy people. Having clean drinking water and clean, safe air to breathe supports public health and prevention of health issues. Nova Scotia is known for our clean air and plentiful water. We want to keep it that way for generations to come.

That's why our department is working on updating our quality standards on clean air and water. My understanding is that this is the first time we've updated this since the early 1990s. I suppose if a regulation was designed when most people still smoked and sat at a typewriter to design regulations, you know it's time to update the regulations.

We started work last year to update ambient air quality standards, and plan to have those finalized by 2025. The first step was consultation, which took place last Summer. We listened and received valuable feedback which is informing our work. The updated air assessment guidance document is in the final stages of development and is expected to be finalized and available soon.

Safe, reliable sources of water are also important for our well-being and health, whether it is for drinking, food production, recreation, or for use in our homes such as bathing. Again, we are fortunate in Nova Scotia to have an abundance of clean water. To make sure that the water Nova Scotians depend on remains safe for humans and ecosystems, we are working on developing provincial water quality objectives. This work will help us set clear goals for water quality in lakes and rivers in Nova Scotia.

About 50 per cent of Nova Scotians depend on dug or drilled wells for their water. We know that climate change can impact water quantity and quality. One only needs to hear the stories from southwest Nova Scotia over the years in terms of quantity and quality of water. This directly impacts the health of Nova Scotians with dug or drilled wells. The Environmental Goals and Climate Change Reduction Act commits us to address barriers that exist for people to test and treat their wells. In the coming year, we will do more public education and awareness building to help make sure that more people know why well testing is so important.

Nova Scotians value and enjoy Nova Scotia's many beautiful lakes. With more frequent occurrences of blue-green algae, it is important that Nova Scotians know what to look for, and the steps that they need to take to protect themselves and their pets, and still

enjoy our lakes. We can expect to see more frequent blooms, even in pristine lakes, because of the impacts of climate change. Knowing what to look for allows people to be watchful and keep their families and pets away from potential harm.

Last Summer, we ran an education campaign to make Nova Scotians aware of the potential presence of blue-green algae, its dangers, and how to protect their families and their pets. The 2022 campaign was very effective, driving more than 79,000 users directly to the blue-green algae web page. On Facebook alone, we reached more than 210,000 Nova Scotians with over a million impressions. We are running another campaign this year to reach more Nova Scotians.

Strong, effective protection of our lakes and waterways is dependant on strong regulations. We already have strong regulations, but we are working to make them even stronger, and to be modern. As our province grows and there is more development, we are doing more to make sure that this development is not negatively impacting our lakes and waterways.

Sediment and erosion are concerning, and that is why adequate prevention and control is so important. This is a complex issue that involves both municipal and provincial levels of government. Each have roles to protect our environment in urban areas where development is happening frequently. I want to assure Nova Scotians that developers have to comply with the Environment Act and its very robust regulations. Our province's watersheds, lakes, rivers, and waterways are among our most precious resources. In the coming year, the department team will continue their work on water security and sustainable development.

Creating a circular economy and cutting down on waste and litter is essential to help ensure the health and sustainability of our environment and our resources. We are on a path right now to transform our recycling programs in Nova Scotia. Our waste management sector and the circular economy create jobs and business opportunities, and they drive innovation.

Moving Nova Scotia to a circular economy was another goal we committed to in the Environmental Goals and Climate Change Reduction Act. Nova Scotians have long been leaders in waste diversion and recycling going back to the 1990s. We're very proud of our record on solid waste reduction. Our work in the coming year will continue to support and empower Nova Scotians and municipalities to continue this trend. It will also modernize how we recycle.

We currently have one of the lowest disposal rates in the country at 400 kilograms per person per year. We're proud of this achievement, but we want to do better. In the coming year, we'll develop a plan to help us meet the new 300 kilogram per person per year goal. We'll consult with municipalities, industry associations, solid waste resource

management service providers, Mi'kmaw communities, and others as we develop this action plan. We have a legislated goal to complete this plan by the end of 2023.

One of the most effective ways to reduce the amount of waste that ends up in landfills is through extended producer responsibility. When I appeared before you a year ago, we were consulting stakeholders to create the best possible extended producer responsibility program for our blue bag materials in Nova Scotia. We used the valuable feedback that we received to inform the expanded program and regulations. The department team is prioritizing this work, and I expect we will have the regulations ready very soon.

Finally, this year we will start to work on the Litterbug Act, which will aim to reduce litter in our province. We value our partnerships with municipalities, waste management service providers, Divert NS, and others to create greener communities, and to support our respective waste reduction goals. I want to take a moment to thank them for the role that they play in waste management and reduction.

My department works actively to protect our health through a rigorous set of regulatory responsibilities. The correlation is simple: a healthy environment equals healthy people. Over the past year, we have made progress in modernizing and enhancing our work, including our environmental regulatory processes while managing a record high volume of regulatory applications. The volume of applications for environmental approval has increased by 2,500 applications between 2018 and 2021. This increase demonstrates what we know.

For the first time in generations - since 1926 when we started to keep this demographic data - Nova Scotia is growing. Our economy is strong. We have new opportunities. With growth and opportunity comes more interest from industry and businesses who want to work here. Our government is taking action to spur population growth - to grow key sectors and strengthen local businesses so that we can secure Nova Scotia's place in the economy of the future.

Our government has a vision to not only move away from fossil fuels by 2030, but to make Nova Scotia a global leader in clean renewable energy within the next decade - energy that will power our grid and meet the needs of Nova Scotians, and energy that we can export.

I believe we have what it takes to be a producer and exporter of wind, tidal energy, green hydrogen, and so much more. Last Fall, we made changes to ensure the green hydrogen sector has clear and easy to understand information about the environmental regulations they must adhere to in Nova Scotia.

These specific changes clarify the environmental regulatory path for green hydrogen, while also maintaining our high environmental protection standards. As the

regulator, my role is to be a steward of the environmental assessment process, which allows innovative projects like these to proceed while ensuring that the environment is protected. We can do both and do both extremely well.

Our department is making great progress assessing our regulations and approaches to ensure that requirements are clear, easy to understand, and can be met with a minimum amount of red tape. We want companies to spend less time trying to figure out our environmental protection rules, and just be able to focus on knowing them, understanding them, and following them. By streamlining and modernizing our processes, we expect to yield even better applications and reduce the amount of time that staff have to spend explaining our laws and regulations. It's important both for the department and our clients that we set clear expectations and follow through to ensure that these expectations are met.

I want to assure Nova Scotians that this doesn't mean we are compromising environmental protection. In fact, it's the opposite. For compliance to happen, companies and industry must have clear knowledge and understanding of the requirements that they must adhere to.

One example of work we did this past year to help make it easier for industry and companies to know and understand what is expected of them was to create two business relationship manager roles. These two navigators help companies understand and navigate our environmental regulatory process.

Their work is making a difference in helping to make sure that our laws and regulations are clear, and companies know what they must adhere to and what they need to provide to us as the regulator so that we can make informed decisions. We received two new FTEs in our budget for 2023-24 to make these two positions permanent. This will help make sure that industry and companies know what is expected of them, and can better navigate our environmental regulatory process.

We are hard at work to modernize our department's regulations and processes to help make sure that they can be met with a minimum amount of unnecessary red tape. We are keeping Nova Scotians in mind every step of the way.

This year, we will continue our work on reviewing the environmental assessment process to meet our timeline to modernize it by 2024, as set out in the Environmental Goals and Climate Change Reduction Act. We are applying this lens to all of the work to see where we need to modernize and remove ambiguity.

Another part of our modernization process has been finding the best places for our programs and people to fulfill their duties. This meant transitioning some teams from our Sustainability and Applied Science Division and Inspection, Compliance and Enforcement division to the Department of Agriculture. This restructure made for better alignment for these teams. We're happy to see them thrive over at the Department of Agriculture.

This transition has resulted in 19.8 FTEs and a budget of just under \$1.9 million being transferred from the Department of Environment and Climate Change to the Department of Agriculture. This was a direct lift and a shift of both FTEs and budget, and not a decrease in investment.

In the coming year, we will continue our work to modernize the environmental assessment process by 2024. I want to take a moment to thank the staff who work on environmental assessments. There are a lot of moving parts over there, and a lot of work taking place.

Those who monitor and enforce these approvals, holding industries and companies accountable, work extremely hard. Any steps we can take to make our process and requirements easier for industry to understand also helps reduce unnecessary back-and-forth for my team.

Nova Scotia has a troubling history of environmental racism - racism that continues to cause harm and trauma to African Nova Scotians, Mi'kmaq, and others whose voices are too often not heard or listened to. These situations contribute to health inequities in the communities as well.

This was unacceptable then and is unacceptable now. Nova Scotia must do better. That's why the government built the concept of equity into all of our environmental goals. We're determined to protect the health and wellbeing of all Nova Scotians. We are also committed to ensuring that every Nova Scotian has equitable access to healthy, safe, and sustainable environments, as well as equal protection from environmental harm and the impacts of climate change. As part of our work, we have created a panel to address environmental racism.

I would be remiss if I did not take a moment to thank my colleague, the member for Halifax Needham, whose remarks during debate on Bill No. 57 in the Fall 2021 session of the Legislature to make changes to the Environmental Goals and Climate Change Reduction Act created the Environmental Racism Panel.

Last December, we appointed the panel's first member, an individual who probably doesn't need an introduction, Mr. Augy Jones. Mr. Jones is one of our province's most highly respected leaders. I certainly know Mr. Jones through my connections in education. He is a highly regarded educator and community leader.

We're grateful that he's leading this work and we know that his expertise and leadership will help us move forward in correcting a shameful chapter in Nova Scotia's history. Mr. Jones is working now to provide his recommendations on the additional panel members and the terms of reference to guide their work. This information will be shared as soon as it is finalized.

[6:00 p.m.]

This panel is one way to support a community-informed approach to addressing environmental racism in the province. We look forward to receiving the panel's recommendations by the end of December and to take their lead to address these historic wrongs.

I've mentioned the many commitments that the Department of Environment and Climate Change is responsible for under the Environmental Goals and Climate Change Reduction Act. I am proud to say that all of the commitments for 2022 were achieved.

Of course there is still much more to be done and not just by us but by all departments. Making progress toward sustainable prosperity is a shared responsibility. Many of my colleagues in other departments have commitments under the Environmental Goals and Climate Change Reduction Act. I can tell you that they are hard at work on achieving them.

I'm so pleased that we're working toward a clean, healthy, and sustainable future together. You will be able to read about the progress we're making across government in the Second Annual Progress Report that will be released before the end of July.

I want to conclude with some words of gratitude. First, to my amazing team at the Department of Environment and Climate Change. Their work is making our province one of the best places to live, work, and visit. I may be biased, and I may get some looks from the other ministers, but I think I have the best team in government.

Every day they are leading our province's fight against climate change and to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, work that has resulted in Nova Scotia having the strongest greenhouse gas reduction target in the country. Their work makes Nova Scotia a national leader in land conservation.

Daily they are safeguarding our water and our air. They are inspecting our restaurants, cafeterias, our food trucks, and are helping to make sure our food is safe. Because of them, Nova Scotians can have confidence that if they want a tattoo or a piercing, there will be safeguards in place to protect their health.

They enforce our environmental laws, the regulations, help to make sure that Nova Scotians have clean air to breathe and safe drinking water. Their work is helping to reduce solid waste and make our environment cleaner and much more sustainable. Their work helps ensure the well-being of all Nova Scotians and contributes to our high quality of life.

They touch and benefit every single part of Nova Scotia. I'd like to thank all of them for their work. They are a committed and passionate team. Their professionalism and service to the people of Nova Scotia does not go unnoticed.

As I look forward to the new fiscal year and our many priorities and goals, I know that I have the right team standing with me to help ensure a sustainable and healthy future for our province, our people, and our economy. I also want to thank our many partners and the organizations that hold us accountable for protecting our province's environment.

I'd also like to take a moment to thank Scott Skinner with the Clean Foundation and Stephen MacDonald with EfficiencyOne and the incredible teams at both these organizations. They are key delivery partners that work directly with Nova Scotians every day.

Finally, I'd like to thank the members of the minister's Round Table on the Environment and Sustainable Prosperity for their advice and leadership. Our government is moving on solutions that work. We're building a province that thrives from end to end. I believe that we are making progress.

With that, Mr. Chair, I would now be happy to take questions from colleagues.

THE CHAIR: I'd like to thank the minister for those brief comments and the update on the environment.

According to the practice that has developed in this committee, the Liberal and NDP caucuses will take turns asking the minister questions up to one hour each, going back and forth. We are going to begin with the Liberal caucus.

We will start with the honourable member for Timberlea-Prospect.

HON. IAIN RANKIN: I appreciate the opportunity to ask some questions of the minister. I appreciate all the continued work of staff. I happen to agree with the minister he has the best department and the best staff supporting him. Hopefully the Department of Natural Resources and Renewables staff aren't watching. (Laughter)

As someone who has certainly been part of a lot of great work that continues, I certainly appreciate the work that the minister is undertaking. It's super-important and certainly connects to government priorities with health. I appreciate the connection there during the opening comments and the relationship between the health of people and ensuring that we have a vibrant economy and environment at the same time.

I want to start as it relates to the budget itself and the purpose of why we're here. Anyone who looks at the actual line of the estimate, the actuals, and the projected budget for this year - you can't not see what stands out there. It's the 400 per cent overspend in the last budget.

Nobody is disagreeing with the purpose of the spend. I think all members in the House are supportive of investing in heat pumps and ensuring that we transition people off of oil or other fossil fuels and have better efficiency in their homes. We all agree with that.

The principle and the practice of coming to the Legislature and approving your budget for the next fiscal year and then going from a \$30 million to \$40 million - I don't have the budget books, but roughly \$35 million, \$40 million is the typical budget line for environment - then booking \$100-and-some million over.

The Department of Environment and Climate Change is not the only department guilty of this. The minister's government is definitely not the only government guilty of overspending. We did it, too, but I would submit that it's fair to say that this government has taken this practice to a whole new level, which has caught the attention of the Auditor General. We're the only province that does it.

On principle, I just wonder if, in the minister's comments, he feels that this is something that will continue into the next year. I somewhat think it's futile to even be debating a budget when we're not even privy to what is actually going to be spent in this fiscal year, and if he believes that his budget will be quadrupled again as part of next year's rush to ensure that they have enough money booked to satisfy their political ends.

My question really is: Does the minister expect to overspend at all or in the same order of magnitude that we saw that was really unprecedented under the Department of Environment and Climate Change?

HON. TIMOTHY HALMAN: Climate change investments are a priority for this government. What you're seeing here is a timing difference. You have the year-end forecast that's outlined there. Let's not forget that we now have an approved climate plan and along with that is going to be allotted expenditures that will go to financing these very important 68 goals.

We all know that health care is the top priority to the government. I wouldn't classify this as overspent. I would classify this as much-needed investments. Whether it's in heat pumps or \$20 million for nature conservation, these are badly needed investments.

I can tell you that the other hat that I wear is Chair of the Treasury Board. There was a lack of investments by the previous government in certain areas. I don't say that as a knock. Contrasted with the current government, we're making some key investments, whether it's in health care or in climate adaptation or mitigation.

Over the next five years, these key investments will be guided by the climate plan. Following the release of the climate plan, a week later the Department of Natural Resources and Renewables immediately announced a key action item of one of the goals of helping Nova Scotians convert to heat pumps.

There is accountability built into this every year, as I mentioned in my opening remarks, to the Legislature. Every July there is an annual report on the Environmental Goals and Climate Change Reduction Act. There is a full accounting in terms of where the money is being allocated.

I'm confident in the investments that we're making. I truly believe that it's going to make a tangible difference in the lives of Nova Scotians as they convert to heat pumps and as we work together with our partners for nature conservation.

Then with respect to what the member classified as overspent, I see these as critical investments that are necessary to move Nova Scotia forward. As our climate changes, the way in which Nova Scotians heat and cool their homes needs to change. We need to amp up energy efficiency programs. We're going to continue to do that because we know it's the greatest way to help Nova Scotians in a very tangible way.

IAIN RANKIN: I appreciate the answer. I'm actually arguing the opposite. If we are looking to these important investments and if it is indeed important to spend that much, then why wouldn't we come into this year's budgeting asking for a significantly increased budget so that we can continue to spend in these areas?

You have a new climate plan and you're going to need substantial more revenue to put into this. I've been there before. If we're talking about past governments not spending where we need to, I remember looking at all the historic gold mines and other mines that needed remediation and going to the Treasury Board and finding tens of millions of dollars to put into ensuring that we cleaned up the mess.

I'm not even talking about probably the biggest example, which would have been Boat Harbour. I continued to go back to the Treasury Board every year for hundreds of millions of dollars more to look at the remediation that all governments of all stripes left behind when our government took over and finally tackled that very tough issue. The VG falling apart and drinking water issues - that's a circular conversation that we'll have in terms of cost that other governments have left for future governments to take care of.

I digress. I want to talk about the revenue in the budget this year and the estimate that the Department of Environment and Climate Change is forecasting. Where can we find the Output-Based Performance Standard revenue?

We know it's substantial. The minister referenced it in his opening remarks. He even referenced the participants that we know of that are going to be contributing. We know that Nova Scotia Power is contributing, which was announced on the first day. Subsequently, we know that LaFarge and Donkin Mine will be participating and potentially more.

I tried to find some information at the committee level, but surely the government has some idea in terms of revenue and they're responsibly booking booking some revenue that's coming into the province into the new climate change fund that they've put forward. I just believe that they should have some kind of number that they're comfortable sharing with the public in terms of scale of revenue that will be going into that fund as a direct result of the output-based performance standards.

[6:15 p.m.]

TIMOTHY HALMAN: We are in the process of transitioning to the Output-Based Pricing System. As I indicated, we're in the process of finalizing the list of participants. There's no revenue expected from OBPS until December of 2024, when we complete our transition from cap and trade.

Currently, in addition to the \$7 million climate plan allocation in 2023-2024, the Green Fund will allocate \$34.4 million towards the climate plan. That's going to be totalling \$41.4 million for fiscal 2023-24. Along with that, I'd like the member to know that we've also invested \$193 million in climate plan initiatives during 2023-2024. This was obviously the first year of the climate plan. Certainly, projections I think could potentially be in the hundreds of millions in terms of the revenue that will be raised here.

As we design the regulations and get the work under way, we'll have more information. I think it's fair to expect that there'll be significant revenue that will be raised through this system. This will allow for the great programming that we have for climate adaptation and mitigation programming to not only continue but to expand.

Obviously, having a climate plan in place now, we have our road map in terms of policy, discussions, and decisions. I have to say in terms of just internal meetings now that we have 68 goals, EGCCRA in place, and in terms of planning and priorities, it's been a game-changer for operations because it's our road map. It gives us clear outcomes to know what we're working towards.

The work is ongoing with OBPS. I think that it is absolutely fair to say that we're going to be able to raise significant revenue through this by holding our large emitters accountable. It's our intention to be utilizing the revenues from that to support the programming outlined in the climate plan.

IAIN RANKIN: Is this the fund that will continue to fund the programs and initiatives in the Green Fund? Will those funds be allocated into the climate change fund to continue to fund those types of programs?

TIMOTHY HALMAN: This is a very important discussion, obviously. Folks want certainty and I want to assure folks that there is certainty when it comes to the financing of these really important programs.

I think of the work that the previous government did in establishing some of the great things like the Clean Foundation and EfficiencyOne. We want to continue with that. We don't want to move backwards. We want to keep moving forward so the remaining funds in the Green Fund are going to go to finance the climate plan.

As we transition to the Output-Based Pricing System, that will be put into the Climate Change Fund, which will replace the Green Fund. The Climate Change Fund will be composed of the revenues raised in the OBPS along with general revenue. We'll be able to put monies from general revenue into that fund.

When we talk about the flexibility, this fund won't be a special purpose fund. It's going to have much more flexibility to be utilized. In the amendments to the Environment Act, there is a whole comprehensive list in terms of what programming that the funds can be used for.

Along with a very strong equity lens that will be used when it comes to the dispersal of these funds. As we know, climate change has bigger impacts on various communities in Nova Scotia. We're very aware of that. Our risk assessment and our climate plan acknowledges that.

There's a lot of work taking place. Cap and trade and the Green Fund served us for a period of time. However, due to the change in the federal requirements on pricing carbon, it became necessary to make this change. I know a lot of great work prior to my sitting at that desk at the Department of Environment and Climate Change occurred. I believe that Nova Scotians are very appreciative of the great work that's been done.

As minister, I'm determined to try to move this forward as best as possible to ensure a continuation of this great programming, the reliability of the financing for EfficiencyOne and the work at the Clean Foundation, and our new partners like the Nova Scotia Federation of Municipalities, which administers our Sustainable Communities Challenge Fund.

I'm very optimistic moving forward because I believe that this OBPS will do a good job in holding large emitters accountable. It will also allow us to raise the necessary revenue to expand programming along with utilization of general revenue that will help enhance programming and also give government the flexibility to be able to move quickly on items.

Hurricane Fiona reminded us how quickly sometimes we need to be able to pivot as government. Flood line mapping may be a priority one month. Getting more heat pumps may be a priority the other in terms of how quickly sometimes governments need to move. Again, those remaining funds from the Green Fund will go into the climate plan. We're going to continue our transition to the OBPS and the new Climate Change Fund.

IAIN RANKIN: Will the revenue on an annual basis be more or less than what was coming from cap and trade auctions into the Green Fund? If the minister could also tell us what he knows of the impact on the costs for Nova Scotians.

We know part of the reason why OBPS was the chosen carbon pricing system for the utility and large emitters was that it was a reduced cost in comparison to the backstop which was the carbon tax. There still has to be a cost. That's the only way you're raising revenue. We know that Nova Scotia Power and LaFarge and Donkin - I can only say those three because that's what the minister has said will be participating.

There are two questions in there: What is the cost in comparison to revenue and what are Nova Scotians going to be paying? I'm mostly interested in what they're going to be paying on their power bills. I think it would be more difficult to figure out how it's going to implicate LaFarge and cement and things like that. What is going to be the impact on power bills, I think, is really important to know.

TIMOTHY HALMAN: I really appreciate the question asked by the member. I think we all acknowledge as elected officials and having the honour of representing our communities how affordability and the cost of living is a big question and a lived reality for a lot of our residents. I certainly hear from my folks some of the challenges.

We know with cap and trade, as the honourable member would be aware, that the revenues fluctuated. With OBPS, we're continuing to work on the design of that. We expect there'll be fluctuations with OBPS as well, but we're continuing to work on the design details for that. It is our commitment that we are going to fully fund all of the climate objectives from the OBPS.

With respect to the federal backstop on the industrial side, if that had been imposed on Nova Scotia by the federal government, it would have been very problematic. In our estimation, it would have caused a 7 per cent impact to rates. The impact to the provincial system is expected to be significantly less.

That's why we were very adamant about making sure that the provincial OBPS was the way to go. At the end of the day, we obviously want to protect the environment and reduce greenhouse gas emissions, but we want to do it in the most affordable way possible for Nova Scotians.

What we designed was acceptable to the federal government through Environment and Climate Change Canada. Again, as we transition to this new federal model of pricing carbon, we want to do this in a way that is the most affordable to Nova Scotians on the industrial side.

Obviously, the honourable member knows the government's perspective on the consumer side when it comes to the federal rules on pricing carbon. However, the system

that is now in that process of transitioning to OBPS - this is a much more affordable and logical choice for Nova Scotians to price emissions on the industrial side.

IAIN RANKIN: You said 7 per cent would have been the carbon tax option. Cap and trade was less than 1 per cent. What's the OBPS percentage on power rates and when will that take effect?

[6:30 p.m.]

TIMOTHY HALMAN: To answer the member's question, it would have been a 7 per cent increase under the federal OBPS versus a 1 per cent increase under the provincial OBPS. Again, I want to highlight that the design details of OBPS - that work is still ongoing.

IAIN RANKIN: Correct me if I'm wrong: Is it virtually the same as the impact that cap and trade had on our electricity bills, the operative word being "virtually?"

TIMOTHY HALMAN: It's an interesting question, because we're dealing with a situation where, as the honourable member probably knows, under the strict federal rules on pricing carbon, the cap and trade system simply wasn't compliant.

Authentically, I'll tell the other member, I tried. I had two series of discussions with the federal minister. I could tell that they didn't seem very keen on Nova Scotia keeping cap and trade. We analyzed the option of linking with Quebec and California with the Western Climate Initiative - even so far as requesting the Premier of Nova Scotia to contact the Premier of Quebec to talk about that.

The bottom line where we always landed was that cap and trade wouldn't adhere to the new strict federal requirements. Then, in your analysis, you have to really look. Obviously, as the Minister of Environment and Climate Change, I've got to reduce greenhouse gas in this province, but it needs to be done in the most affordable way possible.

In that process, it's evident that the provincial Output-Based Pricing System was the way to go because it would allow us to hold industry accountable along with helping us meet our greenhouse gas targets outlined in EGCCRA and now our climate plan. The bottom line is cap and trade simply wouldn't adhere to the federal requirements.

I think that's key in the nature of the question that's being asked. We know that if the federal backstop on the industrial side had been imposed on Nova Scotia, that could have been very challenging and problematic, resulting in a 7 per cent increase to rates versus a more manageable 1 per cent.

This was the first file that landed on my desk: carbon pricing. I think the previous government knew that this train was coming at us very quickly. I discovered it on my first

day in my first briefing. I remember having to learn very quickly the nature of these programs.

I believe that we've landed on the most affordable, along with the system that will maximize environmental protections. The key take-away here is cap and trade served Nova Scotia for a period of time. It's now time that we remove and transition to the Output-Based Pricing System, a system that I believe will serve Nova Scotians well and help us achieve our 2030 targets.

IAIN RANKIN: I appreciate the authenticity. I do believe the minister in his genuine assessment of this situation and the challenges that were presenting to him on Day No. 1.

Keep in mind that the system we had that was 1 cent a litre and less than 1 per cent on power rates complied with the carbon pricing of \$10 all the way up to \$50 a tonne. The federal benchmarks were moving it for beyond \$50 to \$65 ascending up to \$170. I think I've said in the past I can accept that the federal government wouldn't want a program that's internal to Nova Scotia that doesn't link on the \$170 a tonne, but we're not there yet. That would be in 2030.

I find it very hard to believe that we couldn't have compromised and found a solution to protect Nova Scotians on their power rates and at the gas pump, one that didn't move the needle up because we threw out all the work in terms of a leveraging negotiating position and how much we are so reliant on coal and other fossil fuels and the cost of it.

As we established last night, it's tripled the cost of renewable energy. We don't have access to hydro like central Canada does. We don't have access to cheap natural gas like western provinces do. We're in effect being penalized by something and we lost our complete position that we brought to the federal government back in 2016 and into 2017, when we passed the cap and trade legislation.

I think that it would have been a preferable position than if there was a fight with the federal government, which there was even under our government, that this government should have stood their ground and said that they were going to keep the cap and trade system and we're going to move the price up to comply with the benchmarks. If they didn't think that it complies with the new system, then apply what the backstop is.

That's what's happening anyway. They're applying the backstop. I just think that we're getting shafted, frankly, with this new system. We have the same impacts on power and maybe more. We have Lafarge and some other companies that'll be paying more. Now we have all Nova Scotians paying more than 15 cents a litre with the highest jump on their gas than anywhere else in the whole country.

The system that we had before was 1 cent. Every other province is going to increase from the \$50 a tonne to \$65 a tonne. We're going to be doing that, but we're actually going to be jumping by 14 cents a litre. Other provinces are going to move up 2 or 3 cents a litre. We're going to move up 14 cents a litre because we were paying 1 cent a litre.

That's a hard pill to swallow. I do think that the provincial government has some responsibility in that. They do have a political way of saying that it's a federal government policy to price carbon and the name Trudeau is even synonymous with carbon pricing and I think that's why they get away with it.

Maybe I'll leave that alone for now and move to solid waste. On solid waste, I just want to look at the target. This is an area that certainly Nova Scotia was a leader in. It's arguable if we're still a leader, in my view. In the 1990s we were one of the first provinces to bring in recycling. I think P.E.I. can also claim they were leaders in bringing in recycling and keeping materials away from landfills.

I was really baffled when the new legislation came through on EGCCRA and reiterated the goal of 300 kilograms per person. I'm actually surprised that the minister mentioned it in the introduction that we're at 400 kilograms per person.

I was going to ask where we are today. I was hoping that we would actually be a lot closer to our goal that was not only established in your legislation a couple of years ago but going back two more iterations of the original EGCCRA.

This goes back to 2007, when your former Progressive Conservative government was in and had the original EGSPA bill. Three-hundred kilograms per person was the objective. This is no criticism to the current minister. I think all stripes are implicated in this.

I don't know what it is about solid waste, but we're not making progress. Certainly, some municipal units have, from my memory. HRM made a lot of progress with clear bags. I think it was Digby or somewhere down in that region was leading with achieving the 300 kilograms per person. It can be done. I think that the province can do it.

We're at 400 kilograms per person. That is, I think, literally no progress in the last couple of years. I wonder what the minister has in mind. When do we believe that we will actually get close to this target of 300 kilogram per person for landfill materials?

I guess I'll try to add something to this so that he can maybe add some specifics. Is he contemplating adding any more items to the banned list of materials that go into landfill to help remove textiles and those types of things and keep them banned from landfills, which I think will help?

TIMOTHY HALMAN: A couple of things that I want to unravel and package, peel the onion back on a bit.

With respect to cap and trade, returning back to that. Again, a couple of facts that I want to make sure are out there and established. It doesn't work under the strict federal rules on pricing carbon. I want to be clear with Nova Scotians that the Premier, the government, and I really stood our ground on this.

A series of meetings and negotiations took place with Minister Guilbeault and me. We had back and forth discussions. We presented in August of last year what I believe is a very progressive climate change plan alternative to pricing carbon.

We do not believe, in a time of historic inflation, that imposing a carbon tax on consumers is the appropriate path for the federal government to take. We know that there are multiple ways in which you can fight climate change. We do not believe as a government that adding 14 cents a litre to the price of gas is the proper way to go.

The Department of Finance and Treasury Board has data that shows no matter how the price of gasoline fluctuates in Nova Scotia, people still drive. They still drive. The end goal of pricing carbon on the consumer side is to change behaviour. We get that, but the market's already done that.

We've certainly had it out in the Legislature on this item. I can say that my conscience is clear. I truly believe that we have stood our ground on this. Not only that, the quantifieds are now in. The Parliamentary Budget Office, just the other day, released that Nova Scotia is not going to get its fair share in the rebates.

This is troubling because on a number of occasions, my staff has reached out to the Department of Environment and Climate Change Canada - the most recent outreach was in early March - to find out how they calculated the rebates. The honourable member mentions that we're getting shafted. We are getting shafted, but it's not by the provincial government, it's by the federal government.

The federal government is going to have to own that and wear that. We have been crystal clear that this is not appropriate and not the way to go. We've presented alternatives to the federal government. Unfortunately, they didn't go for that, which to me is mind-boggling. We have the strongest targets in the country. We have a very decisive and progressive 5-year climate change plan.

We are in the process of developing clean renewable energy with offshore wind, green hydrogen, and onshore wind. So much is happening here in this province. Bottom line: Cap and trade wasn't going to work. They weren't interested in allowing cap and trade to move forward, probably because the federal government wanted this to be national

policy with the exception, of course, of Quebec, who maintains their cap and trade system. I've asked Ottawa why that occurs.

[6:45 p.m.]

That's what I'll say on that in terms of pricing carbon. With respect to your question on solid waste, I'm really glad you asked that. The circular economy is a key component in the Environmental Goals and Climate Change Reduction Act. We have an ambitious target for that.

Nova Scotians are recognized as leaders in waste diversion. You think of the great work of Divert NS, the regional chairs throughout the province, and the municipalities coming together. For the last number of months, we've been working together on expanded producer responsibility for printed paper and packaging.

These regulations are a top priority to me. I remember first being appointed to this position and having to pull my car over because a friend of mine who is an HRM councillor called. He asked about EPR. I had to ask what EPR was. You have to educate yourself and learn quickly just how transformational extended producer responsibility will be with printed paper and packaging.

This year we're working on that ambitious legislated target. By the end of this year, we'll have a plan to get from 400 kilograms per person per year to 300 kilograms per person per year. I have all confidence in my team to get us there. I know that there's been some great work done in the last couple of weeks by my staff on EPR.

This isn't going to be done in isolation. We're going to be looking at regional coordination of our EPR programs with New Brunswick and P.E.I. A lot of stakeholder consultation has gone into this.

I can say with certainty and with confidence that Nova Scotians over the next number of years are going to see a transformational change in how we do waste disposal and recycling. I'm very optimistic that we will be able to achieve that goal to go from 400 kilograms to 300. This year, we'll be designing that plan to help us get there.

HON. IAIN RANKIN: I just want to remind the member that that so-called plan that the minister put forward was similar to the plan that Premier McNeil and Minister Miller put forward to try to fight the carbon tax. It was not even part of how we got to the cap and trade resolution.

They didn't like the cap and trade then even when it was approved. Just to say that they didn't like it - and the minister just mentioned the jurisdiction of Quebec operating with cap and trade - I don't think provides confidence that we couldn't have found a solution around cap and trade, whether it's linking or not.

I know that I'm running out of time, but I want to get some more questions in on solid waste. This is important. I know the minister knows that there was a revised approval at the Otter Lake facility in HRM. It just passed in November 2022 since the dismantling of the line which sorted out materials that shouldn't be going into landfills, especially organics and treating organics.

One of the conditions that was put into that approval to try to provide some confidence to the community that it wasn't going to be a truck-and-dump site that would just literally put everything in the landfill without people being able to sort it out was "Condition No. 16, Performance and Limits. The performance targets for this facility include compostable waste shall not exceed 10 per cent of the total amount of municipal solid waste landfill by mass."

I think it's important that we notice that it says "shall" because whenever we're drafting legislation, that's pretty clear that it's not a "may." It's "shall." According to the last two performance audits since the sorting line has been removed, that 10 per cent requirement has been exceeded. We had more than 10 per cent organics that are banned from landfills going into the Otter Lake landfill.

I wonder if the department and the minister is concerned with this non-compliance issue at Otter Lake.

TIMOTHY HALMAN: As the honourable member knows, there are very strict terms and conditions related to this. At any time if there are ever any concerns, I want to encourage community members to reach out to our Bedford office. As the honourable member knows, we're always open to hearing feedback and concerns. I just want to highlight that because I think that it's very, very important that we keep those channels of communication open.

The front-end processor is still doing its work. HRM has submitted a compliance plan. They can discontinue the use of the front-end loader but there's a whole process that needs to be followed here. My inspectors at the Department of Environment and Climate Change will monitor that.

Again, at any time if community members have concerns, I encourage them to reach out to our front-line enforcement at the Bedford office. They will be more than happy to engage and discuss the process. I recognize that change is never easy. I want your community to know that they'll be supported by my department as Otter Lake makes those changes.

IAIN RANKIN: Within that same approval there is a condition that if a performance audit determines non-compliance with performance and limits, or the compliance plan, the approval holder, which is HRM, shall develop an enhanced diversion

plan. This enhanced diversion plan is something that the community asked for. Again, it's in the permit that it shall have this diversion plan in place.

I've always said that the community doesn't necessarily care what it is that protects the environment, whether it's the front-end processor or waste stabilization facility. We can live with changes, but we wanted to make sure with whatever changes occurred at the site that there weren't adverse impacts to the environment. If you're going to dismantle a system, you can prove that there's evidence of no change.

We talked about diversion. The minister said that we're leaders in diversion. We're all for all the ways to divert material. There are now successive performance audits. In August, the performance audit exceeded 12 per cent of organics going in.

I think this isn't minor in 2023, when we're talking about trying to keep organics out of landfills. I know some of your colleagues who represent the Sackville area. The whole reason why we had such problems there was because of the substantial amount of unsorted organics going in.

Yes, clear bags and stuff helped. Fewer people put that in their trash. They source-separate, which is the cheapest way to keep it out. We still have a black bag that everybody knows they have the opportunity to put whatever they want to in there. We no longer have people at the HRM site for all of HRM's residential waste who open that bag up, so organics are going in. Organics are proven to be going in based on this audit.

I wonder why the department has thus far not demanded that we have an enhanced diversion plan submitted to the department within 6 months of the non-compliant performance audit given that there's a non-compliant performance audit.

HON. TIMOTHY HALMAN: As the honourable member knows, the front-end processor has to remain on site. Obviously, if there are concerns, I'd encourage the member to bring this to the Bedford office. The compliance team is always monitoring this. If there are concerns or new information that community feels that they have, bring that to the Inspection, Compliance and Enforcement division.

There's always ongoing monitoring of this. They're keeping a very watchful eye not only on this but on many other things. I would encourage the member to reach out to that Bedford office. I'm more than happy to facilitate that if there are concerns from community members. We're happy to engage and go and have a look.

HON. IAIN RANKIN: I recognize that the minister wouldn't have the detailed information in front of him, but there was a letter sent to the staff. The staff responded that based on the outcome of the baseline audits, HRM and Mirror, who is the operator, may propose updates to the plan if deemed necessary.

There's nothing in the terms of the approval permit that says that they "may" propose. That's when I go back to the "shall" that gives the approval holder that much discretion on whether or not they actually have a compliance plan to look at how they're going to divert all these organics.

Ultimately, I know how compliance works. You have either a directive from staff, summary events tickets you can offer, and then a ministerial order. How many audits that will be deemed non-compliant will it take for the minister to actually enforce what is in the permit?

[7:00 p.m.]

Again, this is something that is not minor because the community has to endure a dismantling of what is an environmental protection or has always been said to be an environmental protection from HRM Council and from the operator. At one point, the operator was even fighting to keep it in place when it was in their own financial interests.

Now we have both HRM and Mirror not wanting to operate these facilities. Whether or not the facilities are operating is beside the point. We don't want - to the extent possible - materials that are banned buried in the ground like organics, things that smell, things that draw rodents, or that impact potential groundwater.

What would it take for the minister to intervene for a ministerial order to bring the performance audit to his desk to assess to see if there's another plan and follow what's in the permit, which says that there should be a revised and enhanced diversion plan in place within 6 months of the non-compliant performance audit? We have now had two in a row.

TIMOTHY HALMAN: As always, if there are concerns, I'd encourage the member to bring that forward to my team.

I want to assure the honourable member that there's always careful due diligence taking place with these matters. As the honourable member knows, having sat in the chair as the Minister of Environment and Climate Change, all decisions are based on facts and evidence. The honourable member knows that there's a compliance plan that's being enforced. Staff will continue to monitor that.

However, I think that the bottom-line takeaway here is if there is information that the honourable member wishes to bring forward to me or to my staff, bring it forward and we'll have a look and go from there.

THE CHAIR: The honourable member for Timberlea-Prospect with 2 minutes.

IAIN RANKIN: Also, in the approval permit for the operation of the landfill, there is an opportunity for a technical steering committee. This was something that the

community monitoring committee advocated for. The department said that they do not believe that the establishment of a committee is warranted at this time. That's a quote from the letter back from staff.

I don't see any reason, unless there's something that they operator doesn't want the community to see, to have someone from the community monitoring committee to be able to be a part of a technical steering committee together with the owner and the operator, HRM as the owner of the landfill, as part of the permit.

I'm wondering if the minister will have a discussion with staff to reconsider this current position in the framework of being transparent, given the significant change at the landfill.

TIMOTHY HALMAN: This is highly technical stuff. However, it matters to your community and I recognize that.

THE CHAIR: Order. That concludes time for the Opposition. It's the NDP's turn.

The honourable member for Dartmouth North.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Thank you to the minister and all the folks from the department who are here, and for all the work that you do. Who is Andrew Murphy? I'll talk to you later. It's nice to hear your name. You helped me with a thing when I was first elected.

I just wanted to make a couple of general comments based on the minister's comments. This is my third or fourth department that I've been asking questions in because I have 800 portfolios. With each minister, the speech is the same. It begins with the thing on health care, which is great. That's good. I'm also the health critic, so - speaking my language.

I just wanted to talk a little bit about the connection between health, housing, and environment. Those three things are absolutely connected, linked - webbed even, I would say. All of those things, in fact, at a constituency level, are particularly concerning and worrying for me. I also feel like there's a lot that could be done as an inter-city riding, and then someone from the country side - I think I'm going to ask a few questions about that.

The minister said the government's focus on health is quite broad, which is great to hear, because obviously, climate change is having a significant impact on health, both physical and mental. I will start with that. We know that climate change mitigation is obviously very important. The adaptation part is going to be important too, because we know that we are already experiencing the effects of global warming.

What conversation is the minister having with the Minister of Health and Wellness, for instance, around climate resiliency in health? How are the ministers working together? For instance, things like making sure that people are trained to treat severe heat exhaustion; making sure that our communities are outfitted with cooling centres as opposed to warming centres that we concentrate on now; making sure that our hospitals have infrastructure and are storm and blackout resilient - not just weather storms, but the idea that we could have brownouts or blackouts on our power grids, and that kind of thing.

Can you talk about any conversations that you're having?

TIMOTHY HALMAN: I want to thank the member for this really important question, the interconnection among health, housing, and environment. The Nova Scotia climate plan was not developed in isolation in any way, shape, or form. Rather, it was the work of some of our talented and amazing civil servants working cross-departmentally. The end products, of course, being the risk assessments and the climate plan. A lot of cross-departmental work went into that.

If you have a look at the risk assessment that was released at the beginning of December of last year, there's a well-being framework that's utilized there. Obviously, we know as I indicated in my opening remarks, that outlined in the risk assessment you're going to have over the next decade or so - as a result of our extreme weather now, flooding. You're going to have in the decades ahead extreme heat. So preparation and adaptation are absolutely critical. That's why the climate plan is so vital as the road map as we move forward together.

We certainly want to respond to the climate impacts. We also, through the risk assessment, know where we're going to need to concentrate much of our energies. As I highlighted, our response very much is an all-hands-on-deck approach, so it's engaging municipal units. Staff at my department are constantly interacting with the climate leads that are in different municipal units, whether they're in Chester, Digby, Bridgewater, or here in Halifax. You have a lot of those discussions.

Then, of course, the work with Efficiency Nova Scotia. One of the first meetings I took was with Stephen MacDonald and Professor Bill Lahey, Chair of EfficiencyOne. You could listen to Bill Lahey - what a great mind - and just learning from him about the importance of energy efficiency.

There are a lot of interconnections here. I think your question is actually quite brilliant because there is that web of health, housing, and environment. We know how critical cooling is in the Summer. I can remember growing up in Cole Harbour in the 1980s, and relatives from Montreal or Ontario coming to visit who were absolutely floored that we didn't have air conditioning. In those days, the cool air at night cooled you off.

Those days are done. The climate has changed, and we have to adapt accordingly. To adapt accordingly means to work with all our partners. Certainly, there is a strong connection in the climate plan and the risk assessment with health and housing. You're seeing that last fiscal with our \$57 million investment in heat pumps. Then, of course, seeing how the urgency for energy efficiency, cooling using renewables, and heating using renewables is so fundamental. Government's investing \$140 million in heat pumps.

Along with that, the investment of \$20 million that was made for the Nova Scotia Crown Share Legacy Trust to help us preserve more land - that's a real gamechanger for a lot of folks. We know that interconnection of how important it is to be out in nature. Nova Scotians are very much an outdoor people. I think we appreciated that very much during the COVID lockdowns. I want to assure the member that as policy decisions are made, there are a lot of discussions among departments.

[7:15 p.m.]

I'm primarily responsible for EGCCRA and the climate plan, but the action-oriented items very much fall over to the Department of Natural Resources and Renewables. We have strong links with the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, and very strong links with the Department of Fisheries and Aquaculture. There are ongoing discussions.

I can tell you authentically, as well, among the ministers we are very much using a climate lens as we develop policies. If decision X is made, we need to make sure that we understand the climate implications and the energy efficiency implications. We know how fundamental that is for human health - absolutely. The two key documents that illustrate that link between health, housing, and environment is definitely the risk assessment and most definitely the climate plan.

SUSAN LEBLANC: In speaking of the climate plan, there's \$6.9 million in climate plan spending. My first question is: Is this for Green Fund projects? My second question is: Can you explain the drop in climate plan spending from \$160 million to \$6.9 million?

TIMOTHY HALMAN: I appreciate the question from the member. It's a very important question. With respect to the \$6.9 million - so you had \$140 million from general revenue that was for the off-oil. It was in the forecast. The \$7 million is the environment portion of the climate plan.

In summary, in addition to the \$7 million climate plan allocation, the Green Fund will allocate \$34.4 million towards the climate plan initiatives. This is going to total \$41.4 million for 2023-24. As I indicated before, our government has also invested \$193 million in the climate plan initiatives during 2022-23. That was the first year of the climate plan.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Just to be clear, that \$160 million drop is because that was the off-oil thing? (Interruption)

Oh, okay, that's not what I thought you meant. Clarify then. We see \$6.9 million in climate plan spending in the environment budget, so there's \$34.4 million somewhere else, and \$193 million somewhere else in other budgets that are to do with the climate plan? Is that what you're saying?

TIMOTHY HALMAN: We'll get as clear as mud here. In 2022-23 - when we say, "off oil," this is for the heat pumps. That was \$140 million. Green Fund revenues, we spent \$53 million - so the total revenue spent was \$193 million for 2022-23.

This fiscal, the Department of Environment and Climate Change budget - \$6,994,000. Green Fund revenue will be \$34,400,000 - so our total revenue for 2023-24 is \$41,394,000. The two-year total is \$234,394,000.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Thank you, but I'm asking about climate plan spending, not Green Fund revenues.

I'm wondering where the money is being spent in the budget that is going towards achieving our climate goals as laid out in the climate plan. I guess I should have said it that clearly the first time.

TIMOTHY HALMAN: The \$41.4 million is 100 per cent climate plan.

SUSAN LEBLANC: In the minister's opening, he spoke about 19 FTEs going over to the Department of Agriculture. That's the Policy division, Inspection, Compliance and Enforcement division, and Sustainability and Applied Science division, correct? Nineteen FTEs are going over there.

Are those some people who would have traditionally been in the Department of Environment and Climate Change doing environmental enforcement like by-law enforcement? For instance, buildings are being built on Lake Banook, a bunch of stuff goes into the lake, someone gets called, someone goes out to figure it out, and someone gets fined. Those folks. Have a bunch of them moved over to the Department of Agriculture, and if so, why?

TIMOTHY HALMAN: Allow me a moment to clarify. In terms of our environmental inspections and compliance, there is no diminishment whatsoever in terms of that.

What's happened here is the meat inspectors and animal farm workers have been sent to the Department of Agriculture. Authentically, when I was first appointed to this position, I quickly discovered the multitude of things that I was responsible for at the time

in the Fall of 2021 - responsible for the border, for COVID compliance, the conservation officers, and meat inspectors. I can remember taking a phone call from an irate resident about a farm inspection. I'm a Dartmouth guy . . .

THE CHAIR: Order. It is now 7:25 p.m. That concludes the subcommittee's consideration of Estimates for today. The subcommittee will resume consideration when the House again resolves into a Committee of the Whole on Supply.

Please return to your seats in the Legislative Chamber. The Committee of the Whole on Supply must rise and report before the House concludes its business for the day.

We are adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 7:25 p.m.]