



House of Assembly
Nova Scotia

HALIFAX, TUESDAY, APRIL 4, 2023

COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE ON SUPPLY

3:43 P.M.

CHAIR
Kent Smith

THE CHAIR: Order, please. I call the Committee of Whole House on Supply to now come to order.

The honourable Deputy Government House Leader.

JOHN WHITE: Mr. Chair, would you please call the Estimates for the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing, Resolution E14.

Resolution E14 - Resolved, that a sum not exceeding \$554,398,000 be granted to the Lieutenant Governor to defray expenses in respect of the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing, pursuant to the Estimate.

THE CHAIR: I will now invite the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing to make some opening comments, introduce the colleagues you have with you, and you'll have up to one hour to do so.

The honourable Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing.

HON. JOHN LOHR: I'm pleased to have the opportunity to introduce the Estimates for the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing and the Office of Emergency Management for 2023-24. Joining me are, on my right, Deputy Minister Paul LaFleche, and on my left, Associate Deputy Minister Valerie Pottie Bunge. I will have joining me, at some point, Adam Rainforth, the executive director of finance for the department. I have more staff up above following this along.

As you can imagine, I have a lot to talk about, so bear with me as I walk you through our budget and our plans for next year. Let me start with some key numbers. The total budget for the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing is estimated to be \$554,398,000 for 2023-24, an estimated \$1.53 million increase from last year.

[3:45 p.m.]

This is a strong and exciting budget for Nova Scotians. It is the single largest increase in my department's budget, ever. This is a budget for the future. Mr. Chair, \$90 million of this budget increase is new money that builds on historic investments our government has made in housing, supporting municipalities and communities, repairing and preserving infrastructure, and emergency management and response.

As we read through the estimates you will see that we have had a change in the way we do our accounting and the way our finances appear on the books, due to the creation of the Nova Scotia Provincial Housing Agency and the closing of Housing Nova Scotia. That change accounts for \$64 million. Mr. Chair, as you know, the Housing file was moved back to my department on August 31, 2021, when our government took office and I was sworn in as Minister.

Since that time, we as a government, and with staff as a team, have made ground-breaking advancements on how we manage the housing file, with the Nova Scotians we serve at the centre of everything we do. I will elaborate more on that important work shortly, as I am sure the housing file will be one of the great interests during our time together in the Chamber.

In addition to housing, the department supports and works in collaboration with 49 municipalities and 20 villages across the province. We also support safe communities through the Office of Emergency Management and the Office of the Fire Marshal. We've all benefited from the hard-working individuals who represent these offices. Now more than ever, as we still recover from Hurricane Fiona, we appreciate the critical role they play in emergency response and preparedness and in keeping our communities and residents safe. Again, I'll elaborate more on that work soon.

For now, I'd like to talk about the Municipal Affairs branch of this department. Municipalities and the communities they serve are at the heart of our province. The work they do and the services they provide to residents are critical. They help Nova Scotians get to where they are going, like work, school, and medical appointments, through vital transit services.

They are responsible for our water systems and waste and snow removal, and they provide key recreational programs for our children, seniors, and other members of our communities. This just scratches the surface of the service they provide. Their work is important, and their partnership is valued.

We work closely and collaboratively with local governments and communities across Nova Scotia. Now more than ever, our collaboration and partnership are key. I understand the value of good conversation. Since becoming Minister, I've met with the vast majority of our municipalities. I've met with the Nova Scotia Federation of Municipalities and the Association of Municipal Administrators Nova Scotia multiple times. So has the Premier. I'm proud to say that my staff have excellent working relationships with our municipal partners.

In fact, a couple of weeks ago, my department received a letter from the mayor and CEO of Westville, applauding the staff in our Advisory Services team for their expertise in collaboration on several key issues the municipality faced. They even said that the team helped the municipality shine brighter than it has in decades. We appreciate the collaborative relationship we've built with our municipal partners, like Westville, and are always happy to hear that they're having a positive experience.

That's not to say we don't have our differences from time to time. We do, but our goal is their goal: to build strong, sustainable, safe communities with diverse economies and high quality of life. In other words, places where Nova Scotians want to live, places where they can thrive, build a career, and raise a family.

Municipalities are governed by the Municipal Government Act and the Halifax Regional Municipal Charter. Municipalities have authority to raise revenue through property taxes and managed planning and development, and to deliver services such as water, wastewater, solid waste, police, fire and emergency, and public transit. It is important to me that we work collaboratively with municipalities as much as possible to understand their concerns, their challenges, and their strengths.

We are in a time of unprecedented growth in our province, the kind of growth we haven't seen in generations. From that growth, many municipalities and communities are seeing new residents, new opportunities, and new businesses. This is good news for our province, but with any opportunity, challenge is not far behind.

Mr. Chair, there is no question that the last few years have been some of the most difficult in our province's history. The pandemic, rising costs, the housing crisis, labour shortages, and now over the last few months, the recovery from one of the most destructive and expensive storms in our province's history, Hurricane Fiona.

Like us, municipalities are concerned about housing, about transit, about the rising cost of energy. Growth is a good problem to have. It's one we welcome, but with it comes the need to do things differently. We haven't planned for growth like this in decades; we haven't had to, so municipalities need our support and partnership as we work through this together.

Mr. Chair, that is why, when the Nova Scotia Federation of Municipalities asked for our help in the Fall, we listened. The NSFM identified concerns with the capacity of their members to be able to take advantage of the numerous funding opportunities related to infrastructure. The NFSM proposed that they take the lead on facilitating capacity building among the municipalities to produce quality grant applications for both provincial and federal funding, but they needed a resource.

When the NSFM requested the department's support for a full-time fund navigator position, we acted. We funded a full-time sustainability and infrastructure navigator position for two years that will support municipalities in identifying opportunities and pull together strong applications for provincial and federal programs. This is a \$180,000 investment.

I knew municipalities needed more. That is why, in my first month in government, I provided an additional \$32 million to municipal operating funds as a down payment to the eventual service exchange. This is the first time in years that a large investment like this has been made to municipalities. This was a mandate promise of our government.

As I said, I understand municipalities have increasing pressures, especially around housing needs, so this year we created a new program called the Sustainable Services Growth Fund. This is a new, one-time transfer to support eligible municipalities with capital infrastructure needs to serve their growing populations. The fund can be used by eligible municipalities to increase growth capacity, services, accessibility enhancements, housing, and active transportation.

We removed any application process to reduce the amount of time it will take to get the money into the hands of municipalities so they can work on their important projects. I've already heard thanks from several municipalities that are excited about the fund. I've also heard from the Nova Scotia Federation of Municipalities, which is very supportive of the fund.

Another key part of my mandate is to renegotiate the MOU, or Service Exchange Agreement, with our municipalities, which hasn't changed since 1995. This is a huge piece of work, which my staff has been overseeing for well over a year now. Our goal is to ensure that Nova Scotians across the province are well-supported by the communities they live in. I'm very pleased with the significant progress that has been made and look forward to sharing the details once it's finalized.

Mr. Chair, another important piece of work is the review of the Municipal Government Act and the Halifax Regional Municipal Charter. We are doing this work in close collaboration with municipalities. We have set up an advisory group with the Nova Scotia Federation of Municipalities and we meet with them regularly. We discuss outstanding and emerging issues on both service exchange and the Municipal Government Act review.

Governments often make changes to the Municipal Government Act and the Charter, and we are no different. In the past several months, we've announced some amendments to the Charter that will help modernize and speed up the development process in the Halifax area. There have been some excellent examples of partnership and collaboration under this work, like increasing municipalities' ability to track more residents and visitors to their communities and generating more revenue through the marketing levy.

Another example is enhancing municipalities' authority by giving them the power to expand under inclusionary zoning. We are now taking a hard look at allowing municipalities to sell land below market value to support housing development. It's been a long time since any government has done a wholesale review of these two important pieces of legislation. It's past time, so we are doing it.

My staff has collected the feedback from reviews of the Municipal Government Act that were done in 2016 and 2018 but never completed. We completed a thorough consultation with the municipalities last Summer and Fall and gathered their feedback on planning and development. More consultation is coming this Fall on key themes like finding better and more efficient ways to govern and deliver services, fiscal responsibility, economic development, and programs and services.

We're also working on the municipal code of conduct. Mr. Chair, Nova Scotians expect their governments at all levels to be accountable and transparent with taxpayers' money and to act in ways that maintain the public trust. I know my colleagues from all parties in this House believe that, and our municipal colleagues do too.

That is why we have set up a working group with representation from the Association of Municipal Administrators Nova Scotia, the Nova Scotia Federation of Municipalities, and the Association of Nova Scotia Villages to provide recommendations on the code of conduct, as well as potential sanctions. They will also look at the process related to handling complaints.

I believe strongly that this is not something the Province can impose on the municipalities. With that in mind, we have just wrapped up an extensive consultation process in which all municipalities and villages were invited to participate. We have obtained very helpful feedback and will now determine the right approach to a new code of conduct for all municipalities. I believe this will result in a strong code of conduct that will help our municipal colleagues and public build and maintain public trust.

Another important piece of work that my staff is undertaking is reporting. Every year, the department publishes the municipality reports, including financial condition indicators, which help municipal councils and Nova Scotians to make sense of municipal financial conditions and can provide municipal councils with indications of strengths,

opportunities, and risks that councils and staff may want to focus their attention on and improve their overall performance.

There are 12 financial condition indicators that were developed jointly between the Province, the Nova Scotia Federation of Municipalities, and the Association of Municipal Administrators Nova Scotia. These financial condition indicators are represented in a house format, which provides a snapshot of the general financial situation of each municipality. The indicators provide a quick view of the municipality's ability to meet its financial obligations now and in the future, in a balanced and independent manner. This work may not seem flashy, but it is extremely important.

Mr. Chair, now I'd like to talk a few minutes about some of our critical municipal programs that we support and fund alongside our federal government colleagues. Our funding partnerships with the federal government are all about ensuring our communities are equipped with sound infrastructure. This is the infrastructure that will support growing communities and future housing and business projects.

People need homes, and that means critical infrastructure improvements are needed to support that growth. Under the federal Investing in Canada Infrastructure Program - or ICIP, as we call it in the department - the Province has committed approximately \$730 million in order to leverage combined funding from all partners of almost \$2 billion, going to over 220 projects with an impact on over 500 assets province-wide. This program has the provincial and federal governments working together to make long-term infrastructure improvements, investments that will build inclusive and prosperous communities. These programs help support future growth and housing development.

These programs also support a low-carbon green economy. An example of the great investments being made right across the province is the recently announced Centre for Discovery and Innovation at Cape Breton University. The Province has committed \$35 million toward this project, leading to a total investment in CBRM of \$84.5 million.

The Province had an accelerated federal deadline of committing the entire ICIP program funds, including our provincial share, by March 31, 2023, a difficult task that required coordination and teamwork across multiple departments and partnership between all levels of government. Mr. Chair, I'm pleased to announce that we have succeeded. My colleagues tell me that we were the first province in Canada to meet this deadline.

As I mentioned, this program alone will see almost \$2 billion going to over 220 projects, with a positive impact on over 500 assets province-wide. One hundred of these project investments are direct municipal projects. Ninety-nine projects are provincially led, with the remainder being spread amongst our partners, First Nations, not-for-profits, and universities.

[4:00 p.m.]

I am proud to share that in the 2023-24 budget estimates for my department, you will see a \$7 million increase in ICIP projects under the transit stream; a \$4.9 million increase in ICIP projects under the green stream; a \$3.1 million increase in ICIP projects under the rural and northern stream; and a \$3.3 million increase for ongoing projects under the new Building Canada Fund national and regional projects stream. These investments will make a significant difference for many communities across our province that rely on these projects to sustain and grow their communities.

Mr. Chair, you likely have noticed over the past several weeks that we've been announcing this year's projects, like the one we announced in Inverness a couple of weeks ago. This was one of the largest infrastructure projects for a smaller community in Nova Scotia, representing a \$24.4 million joint investment. This project will support water infrastructure upgrades that will help prepare the town for future growth. Some may say waste water isn't flashy or exciting, but what is exciting about these investments is the people and communities they support, opening opportunities for future development.

Municipalities also benefit from other programs that leverage federal dollars. The Canada Community-Building Fund, which used to be known as the federal Gas Tax Fund, transfers money from the federal government to municipalities through our department. It provides long-term, stable funding for municipalities that can also be invested in local infrastructure priorities.

In the new fiscal year, Nova Scotia will receive over \$60 million from the Canada Community-Building Fund for these purposes. By fiscal 2024, Nova Scotia will have received, cumulatively, over \$681 million from the program. Projects funded under the new Building Canada Fund will continue as that program winds down. These infrastructure programs have helped grow the local economy, create jobs, and increase productivity across Nova Scotia.

The department also offers provincial programs to municipalities to support local infrastructure needs. Through the Provincial Capital Assistance Program - or PCAP, as we call it - we provide funding to improve municipal water supply, sewage disposal, and solid waste infrastructure. Fifteen communities received support under this program this year, with a total investment of just over \$1.2 million.

Projects include water and sewer line extensions - such as the Town of Oxford's Meadow Lane project, which received more than \$62,000 from the Province - stormwater and emergency water source studies, and a first-generation landfill decommissioning. An additional four municipal projects received provincial funding to help mitigate flood risk this year.

These four projects were funded under the Flood Risk Infrastructure Investment Program and received \$258,000, which included: Cape Breton Regional Municipality's Renwick Brook floodplain delineation and culvert inventory and condition assessment - \$75,000; Halifax Regional Municipality's flood mitigation plan for Highway 2, Fall River, and Pleasant Street, Dartmouth - \$88,000; the Town of Annapolis Royal's study on protecting its historic district - \$43,000; and the Town of Bridgewater's flood risk mitigation study - \$52,000. One project under the Municipal Innovation Program received \$262,000.

We also offer a Beautification and Streetscaping Program, which does exactly what you'd think from the name, and a Community Works Program to encourage municipal employment opportunities. Through the Beautification and Streetscaping Program, 29 projects were awarded this year to enhance the beauty of communities at a total of \$557,000. Projects included accessible washroom facilities, bike racks, benches, and signs.

Ten projects received about \$198,000 through the Community Works Program this year. The program creates job opportunities for people to gain skills and experience in their fields. Some examples of these jobs include municipal planner, youth ambassador, and summer recreation coordinator.

As we welcome visitors to our province, these investments in beautification will help make our communities more vibrant, foster local pride, attract tourists, and encourage economic development. Additionally, the Community Works Program allows municipalities to hire youth and other interested individuals who want to work on community-focused projects, providing them with valuable work experience where they live. We are pleased to partner with municipalities on these important projects and will begin accepting applications for the 2023-24 year this Spring.

I'd now like to take a few moments to talk about another very important artery of my department, the Emergency Management Office. The Emergency Management Office works in collaboration with our federal, municipal, and critical infrastructure partners to support the safety and well-being of Nova Scotians, their property, and the environment through innovative, collaborative, and integrated emergency planning and response.

In times of emergencies, municipalities are responsible to lead the response in their areas. The Emergency Management Act requires every municipality in the province to have an emergency management coordinator and to have an emergency plan. The EMO helps municipalities develop and review their plans. They carry out exercises to test the plan, and they help train key staff in emergency response.

In times of emergency, the EMO opens the Provincial Coordination Centre, or the PCC, to bring together any number of government and private organizations that may be needed to support the response. I think we can all recall a little too well one of the most

recent activities of the PCC, an activation that stayed in place for a full 15 days. This was the longest activation on record for the Nova Scotia Emergency Management Office.

Hurricane Fiona was one of the most expensive and destructive storms in our province's history. Damage and expenditures incurred by individuals, small businesses, not-for-profit organizations, government departments, and municipalities are estimated to be in the tens of millions. We still don't have a full understanding of the total cost, and we likely won't for some time.

In the hours and days after the storm, regardless of our political affiliations, we came together, alongside hundreds of our partners in emergency response, to collaborate, create solutions, and lend a hand in the best interests of the people we serve. I am proud of our partnership and I'm thankful for the collaboration of many of you who are in this Chamber today. For the hundreds, even thousands, of people who responded and helped during the storm who aren't here, I want to take this opportunity to put on record how incredibly proud I am of their support and sacrifice during the storm, cleanup, and now rebuilding.

Many people spent days, and in some cases, weeks away from loved ones, working long, hard hours restoring power, cutting trees, removing debris, manning phones, operating comfort centres, and even pouring hot coffee. Much of the response work in emergency requires stamina and grit, and I'm just so thankful for the many people who showed up for our province and our people when we were most in need.

Mr. Chair, one of the ways we acted as a government was, immediately after the storm hit, the Nova Scotia EMO, along with my colleagues in key departments across government, like Service Nova Scotia and Internal Services, Community Services, and Seniors and Long-term Care, all came together to develop a \$40-million aid package for Nova Scotians, especially for our most vulnerable residents and the ones hardest hit by the storm.

Through this package, we rolled out thousands of gift cards and other financial aid through the Canadian Red Cross to Nova Scotians displaced from their homes. We invested in tree removal, spoiled food, and additional funding for our seniors and income assistance clients. One of the key programs we announced hours after the storm was the Disaster Financial Assistance program, or DFA.

The DFA program is a federal initiative designed to help the province assist Nova Scotians, municipalities, small businesses, and not-for-profit groups get back on their feet after a major storm or natural disaster. Not all disasters are covered by private insurance, and the DFA program helps those whose losses are not insurable. Types of losses can include flooding and damage to uninsurable items like appliances, such as washers, dryers, and furnaces. The program covers up to \$200,000 in uninsurable losses per household, small business, or not-for-profit.

About 70 per cent of the funds are recoverable from the federal government; the province puts in about 30 per cent. The program accepted applications until the end of February, and in total, over 1,400 applications were received. Emergency Management staff have been working diligently to get money into the hands of eligible applicants. The process is complex. It requires insurance adjusters to make site visits, as well as documentation of damages, among other requirements. The process takes time, which I know is difficult for all involved.

In many ways, the Disaster Financial Assistance program works very well, but this storm revealed some gaps, especially around tree removal and debris removal. One of the things I heard loud and clear early on was the need for updated interpretation from the federal government on the DFA program parameters. I've written several letters to the federal minister, and in December travelled to Ottawa to meet with my federal colleagues in Public Safety Canada to advocate in person, on behalf of Nova Scotians, for more flexibility for the funding. I'm still working diligently to get more flexibility.

One of the other actions my government took immediately following the storm was to bring forward legislation to demand that telecommunications companies step up and better serve Nova Scotians. It is unacceptable for people not to have the ability to call 911. Frankly, enough is enough, and we've taken strong legal action to make significant change in the way telecoms operate in an emergency.

Since the legislation was passed in the Fall, we've seen some positive changes in the way our telecoms respond to an emergency, but we still have work to do. We are currently developing regulations to support the legislation, and that work is well under way.

I know many Nova Scotians are still struggling, and I know we have a lot of rebuilding to do, and a lot to accomplish before the next storm. We remain committed to helping Nova Scotians properly prepare for emergencies and to helping municipalities respond in supporting people and communities as they recover.

The EMO also administers the provincial 911 system, and we are taking part in the development of next-generation 911, which will give Nova Scotians access to new, innovative emergency services and capabilities and will improve public safety. This project will improve our emergency infrastructure, and it is important that we have the resources in place to get this work done.

That's why in this year's budget you will see an increase of 10 staff to do this critical work. Our goal is to have the work fully completed and in place by the March 2025 date prescribed by the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission. Next-generation 911 will increase the quality and variety of data available to first responders when they are responding to emergencies. It will eventually allow for texts, photos, and video to be sent to support responses to emergency situations.

I'd like to take a moment to thank all the 911 call takers for their very important work. They ensure emergency calls are directed to the appropriate first responder agency. They are the calm, reassuring voice Nova Scotians hear when they phone 911, and the one that sends help. Thanks to them for everything they do to help us when we need it most.

Mr. Chair, my department also holds responsibility for the Office of the Fire Marshal. The Office of the Fire Marshal oversees building and fire safety for the province and advises various levels of government on fire-related matters. The office also oversees building and safety, ensuring that the Nova Scotia Building Code Act and regulations reflect the latest national standards.

The Nova Scotia Fire Safety Act provides the office with the power to enforce the fire code and conduct inspections and investigations and provides authority to municipal fire inspectors and chiefs. We continue to work with municipalities, which have responsibility to provide fire services in their areas.

[4:15 p.m.]

The province supports fire services through the Emergency Services Provider Fund, known as ESPF. This \$1-million fund provides money to hazardous materials teams, ground search and rescue organizations, and fire departments. Organizations can apply for grants of up to \$20,000 for a variety of fire fighting, ice rescue, personal protective gear, and communications equipment.

Many of these volunteer fire departments, ground search and rescue organizations, and the First Nations fire departments also rely on fundraising. Obviously, traditional fundraising has been a struggle over the several years during the pandemic and now, with such high inflation, people are not able to give as much as they once could.

In our first year of office, our government gave \$3.5 million in funding to help them recover from fundraising losses during the COVID-19 pandemic. Just a few weeks ago, we did the same; we committed an additional \$3.5 million to help address the impacts of operational costs. More than 340 organizations will each receive a grant of \$10,000. They will decide how best to use this money.

It could be used for equipment, facility upgrades, training and/or fire prevention. Organizations have our trust to administer the funds to where their organizations and communities would be best served. The work of our volunteer first responders is so important. I am personally grateful and appreciative to them for all they do, and so many Nova Scotians have reason to feel the same. I hope they know how much we appreciate their work.

The Office of the Fire Marshal also conducts inspections for provincial licensing and provides recommendations related to fire and building safety for more than 3,000

provincially owned properties. We support local fire chiefs in determining the cause or origin of fires. Our deputy fire marshals are available to respond across the province and around the clock when asked to conduct fire investigations.

There have been too many fatal fires in the last several months. Each one brings unimaginable loss to families, friends and loved ones. There are different circumstances around each one, but I would encourage every Nova Scotian to make sure their smoke detectors work, have one in every room where someone sleeps in all levels of your home, and replace them every 10 years. They save lives.

Mr. Chair, housing is the last topic I'll address in today's speech, but it's also my first priority. It is the first priority for so many Nova Scotians. There are immense pressures on housing across the country. In Nova Scotia we are no different. We are in a housing crisis. Our government understands the urgency. We see the need and we know we have big gaps to fill. Everyone deserves a safe and affordable place to live. No one should be without a home.

A safe home gives individuals and families the comfort and security they need to work and study and attend school and thrive. An affordable home gives people more money in their pockets for basic needs like groceries, recreation, and transportation. Housing impacts our education, health, and well-being. Housing comes first.

Right now, we need more - more supply, more people to build, and more collaboration. The Premier has been clear: we need to do more for Nova Scotians, and we need to do it faster. I agree, and others do too. A few months back, the *Financial Post* featured an article that shared the opinion of renowned national policy analysts Steve Lafleur and Josef Filipowicz, saying Nova Scotia should be looked at as a place for how to boost housing supply. The article complimented the bold efforts taken by our government to address the supply shortage and encouraged other jurisdictions to take note.

These accolades are flattering, and it's always nice when experts recognize your work, but it's the words of people like 92-year-old Hazel Stedman that have stuck with me. Hazel is a resident of one of our rapid housing projects, Coady's Place in New Glasgow. She was present when we officially opened Coady's Place last year. The Premier was there, and she told him personally that her unit at Coady's Place makes her feel safe and at home, and she was so pleased that she could bring her cats with her. She said this project changed her life. These are the stories that matter.

Mr. Chair, since the first day I became minister of this critical file, I've said fixing the housing crisis and increasing supply is going to take a suite of solutions across the housing spectrum. It's going to take a willingness to do things differently, strong collaboration from all levels of government, and aggressive action. We know that increasing supply is the best fix. That is not just an opinion, it is a fact. Experts agree, like Steve Pomeroy. He's a top Canadian housing expert. He's internationally respected. He

believes this. Experts like Duncan MacLennan, who lives right here in Nova Scotia. He is involved in research that looked at the U.K.'s, Australia's, and Canada's approaches to housing supports. He has said that to address the crisis, we have to be dynamic, and we agree.

Mr. Chair, like we won't slow down on health care, we won't slow down on housing. I won't leave any stone unturned. Since taking office, our government has made historic investments in housing. We've invested close to \$200 million to increase, improve, and preserve housing supply. We've brought groundbreaking legislation to improve our public housing system, a system that has been ignored for decades, and we are reducing red tape to ensure development can proceed as quickly as possible so we can continue to increase supply and preserve housing.

In the last six weeks alone, we've injected over \$80 million in almost every region of the province to invest in modular housing options for health care's skilled workers, additional housing options for students, temporary housing for people experiencing homelessness, and funding to preserve and modernize and improve existing affordable housing, public housing, and to grow the community housing sector.

We're working hard across government and with our partners to recruit and retain health care workers and other skilled tradespeople. We know that when these vital professionals come here to work, they need a place to live. That is why, just a few weeks ago, we announced a total of \$20 million in modular housing projects for health care and skilled workers.

The Housing Trust of Nova Scotia will administer the funding and manage the logistics of the modular projects and continue to engage with municipalities and government representatives to advance the work. Provincial land will be identified for the projects, and a Request for Expressions of Interest issued by the Housing Trust closed just last week. Work is progressing to bring these modular units to market as quickly as possible. It is our goal to have some of the units available to communities in acute need by the Summer.

This is one of our urgent short-term solutions. We have a mix of solutions. Less than a month ago, my department announced more than \$16 million, including \$9 million in provincial funding for 10 affordable housing projects that represent 236 new rental units. More than half of those units will be offered at rents at or below 80 per cent of the local market average.

These investments will see hundreds of people and families, if not over a thousand people, living in communities from one end of the province to the other with a new, safe, and affordable place to call home. These projects include 36 units in Guysborough, 21 units in Tatamagouche, and 58 units in Sydney - three projects - and 8 units in Amherst, 5 units in Shelburne, 28 units in Alma, 24 units in Barrington, and 56 units in Truro. And

that's not all. We know we need to ensure that we are preserving the stock we already have, as we address this housing crisis.

Mr. Chair, in this budget you will have seen \$13 million more in home repair and adaptation program funding for low- to moderate-income Nova Scotians who want to remain in their own homes but need help to do so. This additional funding will help over 800 additional homeowners, many of whom are seniors, with critical repairs and upgrades that will allow them to stay in their homes safely and comfortably.

This represents a budget increase of approximately 70 per cent over the fiscal year 2022-23. Around 2,000 homeowners are assisted through the homeowner repair and adaptation programs each year. This means that more than approximately 2,800 households will receive assistance in 2023-24 with the additional funding. This is the second year in a row that our government is increasing funding for low- to moderate-income homeowners. In fiscal 2022-23, our government invested an additional \$5.3 million to assist 300 more households.

Bringing supply online takes some time, and as you can see, we are working urgently to get as many units as possible built quickly. While we wait for the supply to be built, we know we need to enhance our other supports to help people with affordability. To that note, Mr. Chair, you will have seen in this year's budget that we've invested an additional \$21.6 million for rent supplements. This additional funding will ensure that the 2,000 rent supplements we created last year will continue to be delivered, and we will create more than 1,000 new rent supplements.

When this government took office there were approximately 3,600 Nova Scotia households in receipt of a rent supplement. By the end of 2023-24, under our increased investments, 8,000 Nova Scotia families will receive a rent supplement. With this year's budget, we will now be investing more than \$15 million in the rent supplement program, which is more than double what it was in fiscal year 2021-22.

All new rent supplements are now portable, which means the supplement is attached to the person, not to the landlord. This means recipients can benefit when they move. It also helps many seniors and families to afford where they currently live, and it empowers families, giving them choice and control over where they live.

We know this program is making a difference, and we've heard directly from people who have benefited - people like Nick, who said that because of the rent supplement he receives, he can now afford his groceries and doesn't have to rely on friends for that support anymore. This may seem like a small thing to some people, but our clients have said that this program has been truly life changing for them.

Another way we are working to enhance affordability for people while we bring more supply online is enhancements to the Down Payment Assistance Program. The

changes we made to the program over the last year increased the maximum price of eligible properties and the total household income threshold.

We also changed eligibility criteria to reach single-parent families experiencing separation and divorce. Because of that change, we have more than tripled the number of families, from 50 in 2021-22 to 160 in 2022-23, who have benefited from this program and have been able to purchase a home. Again, this is just one of many puzzle pieces we are putting together to address needs across the housing spectrum.

As part of our work, we recognize the critical role of the co-operative and non-profit community housing sector in helping to address this housing crisis. To that note, we have made record investments in the community housing sector, from just \$7 million in 2021 to over \$61 million in 2022-23, to grow and maintain affordability in communities and to support an increase in social and community housing across the province.

These are investments in our community partners, some of the best landlords in the province, who are focused on keeping affordable housing in their communities. Some of them also play a critical role in ensuring that our most vulnerable citizens, those experiencing homelessness, can not only have a roof over their heads, but also receive the support and services they need.

Mr. Chair, The Overlook project in Dartmouth is a perfect example of what we can do when government, non-profits, and the private sector work together. This is the first harm-reduction housing project in Nova Scotia. It will serve 65 individuals experiencing homelessness and addiction. I had the pleasure of touring this facility and I congratulate the Affordable Housing Association of Nova Scotia and the North End Community Health Centre on their success.

We have also worked with groups like the Nova Scotia Co-operative Council, the Akoma Family Centre, and the Mi'kmaw Native Friendship Centre. Akoma will operate eight townhouses on Main Street in Dartmouth, which will be affordable homes for African Nova Scotians living in the Preston area. The Nova Scotia Co-operative Council has transformed a motel in New Glasgow and is now offering 36 deeply affordable rental units to low-income Nova Scotians. And the Friendship Centre will offer emergency shelter beds in 21 units and culturally appropriate support services for the urban Indigenous population at the Diamond Bailey House, not far from here.

Recently, in our partnership with the federal government, we also invested \$13 million through the Community Housing Infrastructure and Repair Program to help seven community housing organizations transform their operations and complete repairs to existing units. Nearly \$5 million in funding was allocated to help them preserve, renew, and grow co-op housing through the amalgamation of two small housing co-operatives, Gimmie Shelter Continuing Housing Co-operative Limited in Sydney, and the New

Armdale Westside Housing Co-operative Limited in Halifax with Compass Nova Scotia Co-operative Homes Ltd.

[4:30 p.m.]

This investment allows the organization to leverage the government's model and the administrative experience of Compass to make their operations more sustainable and to complete necessary capital repairs. The other \$8 million went to four other co-operatives and one not-for-profit housing provider in forgivable loans to complete necessary capital repairs to their buildings, including health and safety improvements such as upgrades to the electrical system and fire safety equipment. The funding will help to preserve 145 affordable units.

Mr. Chair, we know that growing the community housing sector is critical to ensuring an adequate supply of affordable housing options across the housing spectrum for Nova Scotians. Investments like this help to preserve existing homes and strengthen organizations for future development and growth.

To expand the number of community-based housing units, we've also created a lending program called the Community Housing Acquisition Program, or CHAP. This is a game changer for non-profit housing providers who can't access traditional financing due to a lack of equity. Under CHAP, non-profit organizations and other community housing providers can access up to \$10 million in repayable loans to support the purchase of existing rental units, which they maintain as affordable units.

The program fulfills the Nova Scotia Affordable Housing Commission's recommendation to help non-profits finance acquisition of rental properties at risk of being converted into higher-end developments. The Housing Trust of Nova Scotia was the first organization to receive low-end interest loans through the program and acquired nearly 300 affordable rental units in the HRM.

The community housing sector is also well positioned to meet the needs of underserved and marginalized communities. We have committed an additional \$4.5 million to the Community Housing Transformation Centre to almost triple our investment in the Community Housing Growth Fund, another important recommendation of the Affordable Housing Commission. This includes \$2 million in 2022-23 to create a new, dedicated stream for Black-led projects in Nova Scotia.

We will not stop there. In 2023-24, we are investing in an additional \$500,000 to support more projects under the capacity building and planning and pre-development streams of the Growth Fund. According to Stéphan Corriveau of the Community Housing Transformation Centre, other provinces and territories are watching with great interest what's been happening in Nova Scotia to strengthen the community housing sector. We

know there's more work ahead, but we are proud of what we have accomplished so far in such a short period of time.

Mr. Chair, we are not afraid to be bold. I've said that many times. If someone has a good idea, we will listen. An example of that is the Halifax Regional Municipality Housing Task Force that has already designated 10 special planning areas that will significantly speed up development in our largest city and will result in close to 23,000 new residential units, many being affordable.

These special planning areas will support development for people with needs across the housing spectrum. Our government is dedicated to supporting this important work, and in this year's budget you will see an additional \$2.5 million to support the work of the HRM Housing Task Force.

Under the Deloitte report issued in October, one of the recommendations was to create a parallel planning team to support implementation and recommendations, and to assist in expediting development approvals and addressing the backlog in housing supply. This additional funding will support the resources required to implement the Deloitte report's recommendations and lead to other strategic initiatives under the Housing Task Force.

Our population continues to grow in record numbers in Nova Scotia, and this is excellent news for our economy, our businesses, and our future, but there's no question that population growth puts pressure on housing. To understand what supply is needed now and for the years to come, we need good data. The Nova Scotia Affordable Housing Commission recommended, and we agree, that we need a housing needs assessment.

We have the consultant, Turner Drake & Partners, until the end of April of this year, to study the needs in our 49 municipalities, to assess current and future needs in urban and rural areas, and to present us with data that will help us and our municipal partners to plan future development for housing and make informed decisions.

African Nova Scotian communities have faced unique challenges in accessing housing because of systemic racism, so we have awarded a contract to Akoma Holdings Incorporated to support a housing needs assessment specifically for these communities. It will include an analysis of environmental racism and systemic barriers to finding housing. This information will assist in developing a housing strategy for African Nova Scotians. I'm proud to say this work is very close to completion. We're in the home stretch.

During the coming weeks, I'll be releasing the full results of the needs assessment. I will also be releasing our housing strategy. What I will reveal today is that we've had an unprecedented amount of participation in this assessment. Over 20,000 people, including 115 employers and all municipalities, provided feedback. This is an amazing sample size

of people from one end of the province to the other, and I'm very proud of the level of participation.

What I will also say is that we haven't waited for the needs assessment to begin taking action. Although we need solid data to support our long-term plan, we needed to take immediate action on Day 1 of my mandate to address this crisis, and that is what we did. We invested over \$22 million in 373 affordable units in the Mount Hope area of Dartmouth, homes that will cost 60 per cent or 80 per cent of market rate. We've also invested \$6.4 million to create about 200 new affordable rental units in Kentville, Lantz, Halifax, and Cole Harbour.

Mr. Chair, it's important to me and my government that we do whatever it takes to remove systemic barriers and support community-based housing opportunities in our African Nova Scotian communities. Historically, governments have not always engaged before making important decisions with the African Nova Scotian community. That's not the way we want to work. We're working together to understand historical and existing issues that impact residents and to identify options for creating more sustainable, community-owned housing opportunities, now and in the future.

To support that commitment, we've developed a new Memorandum of Understanding with the Preston Area Housing Fund that has launched discussions to address inequities and explore opportunities to support long-term housing needs in the area. This includes work to transfer up to 50 provincially owned housing units in Cherry Brook, Lake Loon, North Preston, East Preston, and Westphal to the non-profit organization. To support this work, we also provided \$3.5 million to support the ongoing repair, maintenance, and sustainable operation of these units.

We heard from Bruce Johnson, who is a board member of the Preston Area Housing Fund, about our work together. He said, and I can quote, "We as a community have been waiting for such a long time for community members to participate in housing decisions, not having someone else make decisions" for us. We are committed to that collaboration.

Now I would like to turn my attention to another critical piece of the housing spectrum that our department oversees: public housing. Over the last several months, we've had some historic changes in the way we serve our public housing clients. As a government, we owe it to all Nova Scotians to ensure we are managing our public housing units efficiently and effectively. When I took office 19 months ago, it was obvious this important file had not received the attention it deserved. There were big issues, and we took immediate action and got to work to make things better for the clients we serve.

Back in June, the Auditor General released a report on the oversight and management of government-owned public housing. In that report, the AG made 20

recommendations for improvement. Quite frankly, the Auditor General told us we needed to get our house in order, and that is exactly what we are doing.

To that note, we agree with the AG's findings and accept all the recommendations. In fact, at the time of the AG's report, my department had already begun to work on many of the areas highlighted, specifically around modernization of operations, to help more people and families. Before the AG provided her recommendations, we were already reviewing our policies and making changes to ensure consistency and fairness across the province.

A standardized application process was also implemented at the time to make it easier to apply to public housing, but we knew there was more we needed. In addition to the Auditor General, we also heard from the Nova Scotia Affordable Housing Commission, which recommended the creation of a sole entity dedicated to the oversight and operation of public housing.

We agreed and in response, during the last Fall sitting of the Legislature, I brought forward legislation to make that recommendation a reality. Under the Housing Supply and Services Act, the five regional housing authorities that were once responsible for the operation and oversight of public housing were amalgamated into one new Crown corporation called the Nova Scotia Provincial Housing Agency.

The agency is responsible for the administration, management, and maintenance of 11,200 public housing units across the province. In fact, in Nova Scotia we have one of the highest numbers of public housing units per capita in the country, with 11.46 per 1,000 residents. This is a huge and important responsibility. Thousands of people and families, including children and seniors, depend on the Nova Scotia Provincial Housing Agency. Bringing together public housing under one roof provides a dedicated focus, more consistency in policies and procedures, and improves client services from one end of the province to the other.

On December 1st the agency opened its doors and began its operations, and in four short months the agency has made some significant progress, including more accurate wait-lists and shorter turnaround times on vacant units. In fact, the wait time has decreased by 10 per cent, and that is just the beginning.

The changes the agency made are truly transformational and are already being felt. We recently heard from a father of two boys living in one of our units, who was working in another province making a very good living. He unfortunately had a workplace injury and was unable to return to work. If it were not for securing a unit in public housing, he indicated he would not have been able to keep custody of his children. That is why we do what we do, Mr. Chair.

Another important issue the Auditor General pointed out is that we have to do a better job of understanding, maintaining, and managing the units we have to better serve clients. We are committed to do that work to ensure every unit we manage is managed appropriately. Like I said earlier, for years, the maintenance and upkeep of our public housing units has not been a priority. I can assure you it is now.

In a housing crisis we have to ensure we preserve every piece of housing stock we have. That is why we are continuing to invest in maintaining our existing units, to ensure we preserve these valuable assets for years to come. In this budget, you may have noticed an unprecedented investment of \$19 million total for public housing capital maintenance and upgrading. This is in addition to \$14 million over the previous year that will provide upgrades and renovations to improve the comfort, safety, efficiency, and longevity of our public housing stock.

The budget for public housing upgrades in the previous two years before our government took office was only \$5.7 million per year. On top of this, there is also a recent investment of \$4 million to provide efficiency and longevity upgrades to 200 units in Cape Breton. As you can see, our government is investing more capital funding than ever before to preserve and improve public housing.

AN HON. MEMBER: Want more now. Want more now.

JOHN LOHR: I only have a few more pages. [Laughs]

AN HON. MEMBER: I didn't think you'd go an hour.

JOHN LOHR: Ahh, ahh, I could.

AN HON. MEMBER: I'm surprised. Very surprised.

JOHN LOHR: I will just jump ahead a little bit. Sorry. I know in the very few closing minutes I have to this I did have a bit more to say, but I just want to say how much I appreciate - and I know I'll have an opportunity at the end. I can tell you that the staff in Nova Scotia Municipal Affairs and Housing is energized. They are aware that they are in a once-in-a-generation opportunity to reorganize public housing, things they saw for years that needed to be done.

They have been energized by that opportunity, as have staff in Municipal Affairs. I just want to say how proud I am to be working with them, to see all of this happen, and it's an opportunity. A housing crisis is a crisis. A crisis is an opportunity, Mr. Chair, an opportunity to make things better. We are working hard to do that.

THE CHAIR: Thank you Minister, for those brief remarks. [Laughter]

For the Official Opposition, the member for Bedford South.

BRAEDON CLARK: I thank the minister for his comments. Before he started, he told me his opening speech was biblical, and he's a man of his word. So, we made it through. I want to thank the minister's staff for being here, the staff who are upstairs as well. I'll be directing my questions on the housing side, for this first hour at least, just for simplicity's sake. I know the minister has many hats on.

I wanted to start today, actually, where the minister kind of finished, on the public housing side. Could the minister tell us, when did the province last build a new unit of public housing?

JOHN LOHR: This pre-dates my time in government; 1995 was the last time new units were built, which I believe at the time was the government of John Savage.

[4:45 p.m.]

BRAEDON CLARK: I just wanted to clarify an issue that we talked about during Question Period today. I believe at the end of January, the deputy minister was at, I believe, Public Accounts Committee and mentioned that we probably need more public housing. I believe that was the quote.

The minister today was talking about how we need to look at all options and consider what we're doing, and that was the intent of the message back in January. I just wondered if the minister could clarify: Does the government have plans, does the department have formal plans, to build new units of public housing anytime within a reasonable timeframe, within the next few years?

JOHN LOHR: What I can say is that, first of all, for our province, we have 11.46 public housing units per 1,000. A province like B.C., for example, has five units per 1,000. We're in one of the top four in the number of public housing units we have. We've made record investments in community housing.

I do acknowledge that the deputy minister talked broadly about the internal conversation. The internal conversation is a leave-no-stones-unturned conversation at any given moment. I know that we will be releasing our housing strategy shortly, within weeks, and you'll see some things in that.

In terms of the direct comment by the deputy minister about new housing, I can say that at the moment there is no plan to construct new housing. Again, in terms of the internal conversation, all sorts of things get discussed internally. I don't want to prefigure anything, but we do have, as I mentioned and I'll just say it again, we really are in one of the top four or five in the nation in the number of public housing units we have for our population.

We have a very strong mandate from the Auditor General to fix the issues in public housing and that is really our primary focus right now, to address the concerns, which are a broad range of issues in public housing, and we're working hard on that.

BRAEDON CLARK: I'd like to ask the minister what the current wait-list for public housing is in the province.

JOHN LOHR: Between October of 2022 and the end of January 2023 - that's what I have information for, as current as I have right now - the average wait time decreased from 2.28 years to 2.06 years, almost a 10 per cent reduction. This means that we had 300 applicants moved into units sooner. Also, the wait-listed applicants decreased - and this is a massive reduction - from 6,625 to 4,790, almost a 30 per cent reduction in people on the wait-list.

This reduction was almost entirely achieved by the implementation of new software called Yardi that actually did a better job of determining eligibility based on household income. In other words, there were people who applied to be in public housing, but for one reason or another had not updated financial information, and when it was plugged into the software, we were able to get better - they were not eligible. There are eligibility requirements.

Also, there was a very small number of people who dropped out of eligibility due to the three-strikes-you're-out rule. What that means is that we offer you a place to live over here and you say, no, I don't want that. We offer you one over there and you say, no, I don't want that unit. We offer you a third unit somewhere else and you say, no. Then you drop off our wait-list. I think people who are in that situation understand very well that they're dropping off the wait-list by the third time. They're told that.

The reason that happens, what I'm told, is that some people put their name in the public housing wait-list because they want to be in a specific building in a specific area and they're on that wait-list to be in that building, so that's why they would turn down other units, which is a little bit - but that's just a reality. I'm telling you that's what I'm told. That is the reality of that.

We're providing, I think what I can say is, better management. We've seen a significant reduction in the wait-list and in the time to turn around our units. It's simply because the Nova Scotia Provincial Housing Agency staff are very focused on turnaround times. We're trying to reduce those turnaround times.

BRAEDON CLARK: That's good news on two fronts, I think, the wait-list and the wait time. Both of those are obviously good things on the face of it, so that's appreciated. I'd like to ask the minister: How many public housing units are vacant at the moment?

JOHN LOHR: If you're okay, I have it expressed as a percentage. It's 2.47 per cent, which would mean that there are 310 vacant units. This is again, January I believe - I guess this number is actually an October 2022 number. We're trying to get a lower vacancy rate.

Obviously, if you look at just the general vacancy rate for commercial landlords, it's less than 1 per cent. Are we happy with 2.47 per cent? Absolutely not. This is, again, going back to turnaround time - when one tenant is out, how long does it take to get another tenant in? If we can reduce that turnaround time, we reduce this number. That is the main issue.

As you can realize, we don't always get notice of when somebody's leaving. Sometimes we may, but sometimes it may be due to a tenant passing away; it's unexpected. It takes time to - it's just on staff to do these turnaround times quicker. We're working very hard, but the number is, again, 310 vacant units.

BRAEDON CLARK: I'm also curious around the issue of overhousing in public housing. We've discussed this before, the example of an elderly person who might have lived in the unit when they had kids, and the kids have grown up and left, and it's a single person living in a two-, three-, four-bedroom unit. How does the department track that, if able, and how is the department managing that so that person can move to a bachelor apartment, for example, which would be much better suited to their needs?

JOHN LOHR: You're right, overhousing is an issue that was identified by the Auditor General, something that we need to do a better job addressing. There are a few things I can tell you about overhousing. Our immediate focus is to focus first on the severely overhoused. What do we mean by severely overhoused? That would be a single person living in a four- or five-bedroom unit.

That's where we're starting, and we're just getting started on that now, but what you need to know is that we recognize fully that this - it's easy to talk about it, but it's extremely difficult for people who are overhoused to downsize. The main reason they are overhoused is that, in all probability, this was a family where a number of children were raised in this home. It's a family home, in reality, and to downsize when you're a senior to a smaller unit is extremely difficult. We recognize that.

Our commitment is to provide them with a unit that's suitably sized, in the same community, in the same area they are. We're not moving people out of their own communities, and we're not saying: You go do that. We're committed to helping the overhoused person downsize and move. We're not asking them to do that. Our staff are committed to helping assist the move and helping assist the downsize. We want to do everything that we can.

To date we have - as of right now, we have initiated 26 tenant transfers to get people into right-sized units. The interesting thing is, the goal - if we had everything right-sized,

there's a thousand more people that we could house, so in a housing crisis we simply need to do this. We're not doing it in a way that doesn't recognize the challenges for the person being asked to downsize. We fully recognize those challenges.

We want to do it in a way - and I think that even the tenants also have the right to appeal, or even say, no, I can't move there, and we'll try to find something closer or more suitable for them. We're trying to do it in a way that is sensitive to how they ended up overhoused. Well, they spent, maybe 20, 30, 40 years in that unit, saw their family grow up and move away, and each part of that house is part of them. They have a lot of memories there.

We're trying to be sensitive to that. We understand that, but we realize it's a housing crisis and this is something that we simply need to achieve, so we're working at it.

BRAEDON CLARK: My assumption then, based on what the minister has said, is that there's approximately somewhere in the range of a thousand people who are overhoused, roughly, within public housing at this point?

JOHN LOHR: I think what I said was, if we dealt with every overhousing issue, there would be a thousand more people. So, if you have one overhoused person in a five-bedroom home, in theory you have five people in now. We move that person to a one-bedroom home and then five people in. So, I was referring to the five people in.

I'm not sure if I have the number of overhoused. I think my staff are likely - if you want to know that number, we'll dig for it right now. But I know that the thousand I was referring to was, if we dealt with it, there might be a thousand people more off the wait-list.

BRAEDON CLARK: The minister has talked about increases in funding for repairs for public housing, I think in the range of \$15 million in terms of new funding in this budget. I'm wondering if the minister can give us a sense of what that represents in terms of - does that mean they're renovating and repairing 1,000 units or 500 units?

What kind of scale - what impact would that have, that amount of new funding in terms of renovations and repairs to buildings that, as the minister said, are at the absolute youngest, I guess, 28 years old? That was confusing. You know what I mean.

JOHN LOHR: I believe in my remarks I mentioned there was a \$4 million project that would touch 200 units in Cape Breton, which was part of the Green Fund, which would create much more efficient units there. There are 200 units there. We are planning to invest \$50 million in new capital funding over the next four years to preserve and improve public housing, and \$21 million in capital and operating budget for this year in additional public housing repairs.

[5:00 p.m.]

These investments will result in more than 678 projects in over 500 buildings and touch approximately 7,700 units. That's over the four years, so over the four years coming, we will improve or work on almost three-quarters of the units that are in public housing.

BRAEDON CLARK: I want to switch gears a little bit and talk about the special planning areas and the Housing Task Force. As the minister is aware, of the nine - well, I guess 10 now - special planning areas that have been announced, three of them are in my constituency, so it's of top concern for me, but I'm also interested from a broader perspective, issues around the task force and how it's going.

Could the minister tell us - I know he mentioned in his remarks, I believe, about 22,000 units planned through this process. How many of those are actually operational or built at this point?

JOHN LOHR: To answer your question - and I believe our colleague asked a similar question during Question Period - four of the areas - Indigo Shores, Penhorn, Mount Hope, and Port Wallace - are actually under way and had ground moving in 2022. This represents just over 6,800 units in these areas.

The work that we've undertaken, as I mentioned previously, will take anywhere from three months to 24 months off the time it takes to develop these projects, but all of their approvals, regulatory and environmental approvals, all of those things need to be done and will be done for these. There's no free pass on any of the regulatory approvals required for these units.

BRAEDON CLARK: A point of clarification, I think the minister said moving ground in 2022 - was that correct? Ground moving last year? Okay. Good. Just to make sure. Okay. I'm also curious about the process - okay, yeah, I've got you.

I'm also curious about the process for new sites. Obviously, there's been one site added since the initial announcement. I'm wondering if the minister could explain to us how that process works, to get new sites added as special planning areas, and are there plans for further additions beyond the 10 that are there now?

JOHN LOHR: What I can tell you is that for the special planning areas, site suitability is a criterion. Transportation-ready or -funded is a criterion. Alignment with HRM's Regional Plan is a criterion for us - also, scale, size. The Housing Task Force was, generally speaking, trying to look at things that were larger in scope, that had more impact.

The Housing Task Force also looked at areas of need and areas where it could make more of an impact, and projects where it was clear there was a clear desire to go forward

with it, and the applicant or the proponent had a clear path to go forward, wanted to go forward.

BRAEDON CLARK: I appreciate the minister's comments around criteria, but I'm also curious about the process for a new site. If I were a developer who wanted to have a special planning area, how would I go about approaching the department to potentially get added to that list? How would that process look? What would it look like?

JOHN LOHR: To be considered by the special planning areas process, you would have to have had an application in with HRM already. The special planning areas committee is not considering applicants that haven't already gone through a considerable amount of the process with HRM. That proponent would then discuss their project with the special planning areas committee - our Housing Task Force - and then that Housing Task Force would in turn discuss it with HRM staff, where it is and what can be achieved.

In this process you'll notice who's not in the process - me, the minister, or my - I'm not part of that process. The special planning areas committee would then, when they make their determination, make a recommendation to me, the minister.

BRAEDON CLARK: To clarify, if a developer does not already have an existing development process begun in some way, shape or form with HRM, prior to the establishment of the Housing Task Force, they are not eligible. Is that correct?

JOHN LOHR: The first step is the proponent has to be in conversation with HRM and have reached a significant portion of the - go through the process of the development approval with HRM. At that point, reaching out to the Housing Task Force to look at the barriers.

We know that - I think, if my memory serves me correctly - in one case there was a project that was in the process with HRM for seven years and hadn't gone further. It was stalled. That was the type of project that the Housing Task Force was interested in, and that was quite a large one the Housing Task Force was interested in working with.

In all cases, they would need to first go through the process with HRM.

BRAEDON CLARK: To an earlier point I just wanted to go back to, is it the intention of the Housing Task Force or the minister or whomever, to have additional sites added beyond the existing 10, or is the expectation that that's going to be it?

JOHN LOHR: As I think I said previously, as the minister, I'm not directly involved in the work of the special planning areas. I think I've met them two or three times, and only briefly. In terms of recommendations from the Housing Task Force, if more recommendations come forward from the Housing Task Force, we'll certainly respond to them.

BRAEDON CLARK: I'm just wondering if the minister has any authority or influence over issues around transparency with the Housing Task Force. In my mind there is an issue there. The meetings are, obviously, not open to the public. The minutes are very sparse, at best. Much of it is in camera and there is very little line of sight, I guess, from the public point of view as to what's actually going on at these meetings, what decisions are being made, how they're being made.

There are also concerns around, I believe, lack of public consultation on some of these planning areas. In particular, one in my constituency, at Sandy Lake, which is a park area, a sensitive environmental area as well. I'm just wondering if the minister has any authority in that matter, or any concern around the issues of transparency or lack thereof when it comes to Housing Task Force meetings and decisions.

JOHN LOHR: What I can say is that to be considered a project by the Housing Task Force, a proponent would have to have gone through a certain amount of the process with HRM, which would include public meetings. In terms of what the Housing Task Force is doing, the Housing Task Force does have minutes published on the website. I know that just recently - which I think was a good move - the terms of reference for the Housing Task Force were posted as well. The development agreements, of course, are public documents as well.

BRAEDON CLARK: I'm also curious - several times during the minister's speech - and when we discuss housing, we talk about affordable housing. We throw the term around a lot, and it means different things in different contexts, depending on what level of government's talking, or where the project might be. I wonder, does the department use a consistent definition of what constitutes affordable housing across the spectrum, or does it vary?

Correct me if I'm wrong, but I think the minister mentioned at one point, 80 per cent of average market and at another point, maybe 60 per cent. I know we hear from CMHC about 30 per cent of income. Does the department have a consistent definition of affordable housing, and if not, is that a problem in terms of assessing the issue?

JOHN LOHR: The reality is there's a variety of definitions that we use, you may be familiar with that we use. We are funding deeply affordable units in some cases. What does deeply affordable mean? Very, very little cost to the individual, deeply affordable. We're working with the - as has been in the media - rent supplements, 50 per cent of household income, simply because we've had to adjust the program, recognizing the demand.

We are also working with the federal government on Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation funding of units, where it's really a federal program, it's their definition, so we're working with that. It's 80 per cent of average market rent in an area. That is based on Statistics Canada information and on Statistics Canada areas. There's a variety. The simple truth is there's no one set answer.

[5:15 p.m.]

We're also working with something called the HILs, Household Income Limits, across the province. We're working with the federal government on their Household Income Limits. In some cases, we've established our own sets of Household Income Limits for programs as well. If we're looking at a senior and - in the Household Income Limits on our home repair program, that is a different set of definitions.

The reality is we're working across the province in multiple areas on funding housing. In each of these different sectors or categories there's a different definition, in a sense. For anybody in that, that matters. I mean, it's important to them. There's no one solution. We have a suite of solutions for housing. In reality, the definition for each of these projects, or each of these types of areas, is all a variety.

Generally speaking, we're using the 30 per cent of household income in terms of our calculation, for instance, for income assistance recipients or whomever. We're just using these calculations, but the fact is, we're working in a variety of definitions.

BRAEDON CLARK: I appreciate that it's a complex issue across the board. Consistency, as often as is practical and possible would, I think, go a long way in making sure that we can compare apples to apples when we're talking about housing projects in Cape Breton or in the Valley or in HRM. I appreciate that we can't dictate to the federal government, for example, what definitions they use. I understand that.

The minister mentioned in his speech, as well, a recent announcement - I think in the last month or two at most - around 236 new affordable units that were being announced across the province. I noted that of the 236 - and correct me if I'm wrong, Minister - but I believe none of them are in HRM. I'm wondering why that is.

JOHN LOHR: It's an interesting question because normally I get asked the opposite question: You're doing everything in HRM, why aren't you doing anything around the province? That is the normal question. You're asking me the opposite question. We're doing a lot of different things in HRM, that's for sure. We've done stuff with Akoma Holdings. We've got a number of projects with the North End Community Health Centre that we've done.

We're doing all kinds of projects in HRM. It just so happens that this announcement was across the province. We're not trying to focus on one area of the province or the other. In some cases, it depends on, at that given moment in time, who the proponents were and just what was funded.

I talked in my speech about the CHAP, Community Housing Acquisition Program, where we funded the Housing Trust of Nova Scotia for five buildings here in HRM last Fall. That was almost, I think, 300 units, preserving them, keeping them as affordable

housing, which was a fantastic announcement, and then I get asked: Well, how come that isn't happening in rural Nova Scotia? You know what I mean?

We're not trying in particular to favour one area or the other. We're trying to do projects all around the province. I'm very proud of that most recent announcement of the 236 units. We'll work with proponents for projects wherever they are.

BRAEDON CLARK: The minister mentioned the Community Housing Acquisition Program. I'm also curious, in meeting with different non-profit community housing providers across the province, one of the things that they have raised with me over and over again, is an issue of scale and capacity.

It's great to do projects; every project is good. Every affordable unit is good, but if you have six units here and eight units there and 10 units there, obviously we're kind of nibbling around the edges, and not really doing things to the scale that's necessary to address the problem, I think.

Does the minister think that the CHAP as it exists - and I salute the intent of it - does the minister believe that the scale is there, in terms of actually addressing the problem in a meaningful way? Do we need to multiply that investment many times over to really change the trajectory of the housing issue?

JOHN LOHR: What I think you're asking me is sort of a general philosophical question of can we meet this challenge? I believe as a proud Nova Scotian that we can. There's the capacity - clearly there are multiple areas that we are trying to solve all at once. For instance, our More Opportunity for Skilled Trades program, to bring more young skilled tradespeople. You could ask me: Do we have enough tradespeople to meet the challenges of construction that we have? That's a question we ask ourselves.

Do we have enough building inspectors around the province? There's a shortage of building inspectors. Is there enough capital? All of those things we are working on across the spectrum. The reality is, when you're in growth, everything has to happen at once. You could say, do we have enough health care for the number of new Nova Scotians? That's a challenge too. Do we have enough housing? All of these things are challenges.

I think that what you can see - and I believe what we are trying to achieve in our budget is to invest in the future of Nova Scotia. We're investing in the future of Nova Scotia in health care, in housing. I don't know if there's more that we could do in either one of these two areas. We're making record investments in both categories.

Is it enough? I think time will tell. I believe it is. I believe that Nova Scotians themselves will rise to the challenge and invest in our province. Even independent of government, we see construction happening and people doing things. The reality is every single house, every single unit counts.

I think I mentioned earlier today that we see the municipalities around the province stepping up and doing things like changing zoning so that there are smaller frontages where they have water and sewer. We've asked them to do that. We see them doing that. We see them looking at their - we were just going through finishing up, or really allocating - I think I mentioned that in my speech - all of the ICIP - Investing in Canada Infrastructure Program - money.

Really, the investments of that program money this year - the lens was, where will this most benefit housing? Where will we gain the most housing? Every focus that we have on this is to increase the number of units in the province, to increase the supply of housing, to do everything we can to maintain the units we have in good shape, and to just simply invest in housing across the spectrum, not in any one area.

I can say that when I became minister, what I heard was that the community housing sector in Nova Scotia, the not-for-profit housing sector in this province, was very weak. I think if you were listening to our focus, we've done an enormous amount to raise the boat of the not-for-profit and community housing sector in the province.

I think that when my time is over as Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing - I'm very well aware that nobody gets to be here forever - and people look back, that's what they will say. Not only will they say we reorganized public housing, but the main thing I think that we are doing is lifting the boat of community housing and not-for-profit housing. I think that's where we will end up. I think that we are doing enough; I believe we are, but obviously time will tell.

BRAEDON CLARK: I'm just wondering - this kind of combines the minister's two portfolios of Housing and Municipal Affairs. Just today I was reading about a change that the B.C. government is planning to introduce around municipal zoning rules. The provincial government will introduce legislation on this to allow what they're referring to as missing middle housing - duplexes, triplexes, fourplexes - in areas that are currently zoned just for single family.

In his previous response, the minister mentioned municipal reforms of this nature, whether it's getting rid of minimum parking requirements, zoning reform. I think that's a huge piece of it, but I wonder if the minister is aware of what B.C. is proposing, and if the department has considered these kinds of changes to accelerate more dense housing development across the province.

JOHN LOHR: Yes, we are aware of what other jurisdictions are doing, taking these steps. One of the things that I already mentioned is the Deloitte report. What the Deloitte report did was look exactly at other jurisdictions, I think it would be fair to say, around the world, but particularly in North America - America and Canada - in terms of what other things they were doing. One of the tasks of the Housing Task Force is to implement the Deloitte report.

One of the recommendations in the Deloitte report is to change - is to consider, anyway - the recommendations they're making, to make a recommendation that R1 becomes - you could add one or two units to an R1. That is a recommendation in the Deloitte report. It is part of the Housing Task Force's mandate to implement the Deloitte report. Obviously, that type of change - how that exactly unfolds, I can't predict. It would be in consultation with our municipal partners.

BRAEDON CLARK: I think that's a huge piece, and I hope the minister will continue to work with municipalities on that, because I think that's an absolutely fundamental piece to getting the housing prices right across the province, not just here in HRM.

With my time remaining in this hour, I just wanted to touch on the changes to the rent supplement program. In January, I believe it was the end of January, the threshold was changed, as the minister knows, from 30 per cent to 50 per cent. I'm just curious when that decision was made, and was it communicated in any way other than on the website, as the minister has stated?

[5:30 p.m.]

JOHN LOHR: I think I can say that in December of last year we realized that the demand for rent supplements in the past fiscal year was outstripping the budget for them, and we were discussing how we could address that. One option was to change the application process so that we were prioritizing those most severely in need. Realizing that there wasn't quite enough money to address every one of them, the idea of prioritizing those most in need seemed like the right thing to do.

We made a change on the website on January 27th, that anyone putting in their data would see whether they were eligible or not. It was communicated on the website to individuals that day. If you had applied on January 26th, you were in the previous - and there was a backlog then - but you were considered under the previous guidelines. Anyone on January 27th going forward was under these new guidelines.

Anyone who had received a rent supplement prior to January 27th and going forward, their eligibility requirements going forward - I mean, we hope that everybody receiving a rent supplement becomes ineligible because their income goes up. They will continue to be evaluated based on the rules when they came into the program, if you understand what I'm saying. After January 27, 2023, we prioritized those most severely in need of core housing, and that was over 50 per cent.

Meanwhile, recognizing this issue, we've invested \$21.6 million, making our provincial investment in rent supplements \$50 million. That \$21.6 million will allow us to add 1,000 new people to the rent supplement program. We realize the rent supplement

program has become incredibly important to Nova Scotians and we're very cognizant of the depth of the need. It is something that weighs on us all.

This was, I will say, a difficult decision for our staff in that department. I know that it was not one that was made lightly. We're very aware. It was communicated immediately on the website so that someone plugging in their information as of that date would have seen the difference. It would have been there on the website. That's what we chose to do.

BRAEDON CLARK: The minister has mentioned that demand for the program was extremely high. At that time, in January, there would have been 7,000, I guess, rent supplements available at that point. How many applications were there at that time for supplements, prior to the new 1,000 in this budget?

JOHN LOHR: In the last six months of 2022, we were receiving an average of 400 applications a month.

BRAEDON CLARK: The last six months of this previous fiscal year, 400 applications per month? Okay, so 2,400 over the six months. Okay. The minister said in an earlier answer that the overall budget now, for the rent supplement program, is about \$50 million. How did the minister and the department balance the decision between upping the income threshold, but the budget was increased as well? Was there consideration given to maintaining the 30 per cent threshold, which I assume would have meant fewer rent supplements available overall? Is that correct?

JOHN LOHR: Could I just ask you to rephrase the question? I'm not quite sure what you're asking.

BRAEDON CLARK: I'll try my best to explain it more clearly. The decision, I guess, would have been between maintaining a 30 per cent threshold, as it was in the past, with your budget figure, or going to 50 per cent, as you chose to do. But if you had stayed at 30 per cent, the overall number of rent supplements available would have been, I assume, fewer than the 8,000, because the demand was so high. Why was the decision made to up the threshold, rather than keep it at 30 per cent as it was in the past? With \$21 million in new funding.

JOHN LOHR: I think what you need to understand about rent supplements is that it costs a lot more to maintain than to create a new one. Do you know what I mean? Maintaining a rent supplement over time. We were looking at how much anticipated future need there would be, based on the threshold. Again, I'm a little bit unclear what you're asking, but I think one of the things that we did not want to have is a large backlog.

When people applied, we wanted to be able to deal with the applications in an expeditious manner. If we'd maintained it at 30 per cent, there would have been more applications coming in; there would have been a backlog. We still had the same amount of

budget available, if you understand what I'm saying. I think that's getting at what you're asking.

Looking at the growth in demand, the future budget, where we were at, we wanted to prioritize those most in need in the province and that's how we dealt with the increased demand.

BRAEDON CLARK: Four hundred applications over the previous six months leading into the end of this fiscal year. Do we have a year-over-year comparison? For example, the previous year, were we averaging 100 a month or 200 a month? How does that compare on the demand side?

JOHN LOHR: I think what I said was we were receiving, in late 2022, an average of 400 applications a month. I actually don't have any more data on that right in front of me. Maybe I do. In the last six months of 2022, we were getting 400 applications a month. In the first six months of 2022, we were getting 200 applications a month.

What I should say, too, is we've done a jurisdictional scan of rent supplement programs across the nation. As the member may know, the rent supplement program is a partnership with us and the federal government. Some of the design of the program is in the hands of the federal government. What you need to know is that for every dollar the federal government puts in, we're putting in three dollars.

It is a big demand on our budget, that's one thing. We're very committed to it. We don't want to put people on rent supplements and then not have the budget to keep them on a rent supplement. That would be a problem too. We realize that once a family or an individual is on a rent supplement, it's important for us to maintain that. This is part of the reason we did what we did with the program, realizing that there was tremendous demand, and we knew that those most severely in need were the ones we really wanted to help.

The other thing that you should know, too, is that with the commitments we are making, we will be moving to - the reality is, the federal government is not continuing to put more money into the rent supplement program. They're holding steady, so in 2023-24 we will be moving to a five-to-one ratio. In other words, the province puts in five dollars for every one dollar the federal government puts in. This does weigh heavily on our budget. It's not like we're going back to the federal government and getting more money. That's not happening.

Another thing you need to know is that when we do a jurisdictional scan across Canada, we have one of the most transparent and accessible programs, and also one of the more generous rent supplement programs in the nation, from our jurisdictional scan. We are doing a lot as a province. We're doing more than some, anyway. More than some of our other provincial governments.

BRAEDON CLARK: Thank you, Madam Chair. He answered my next question, I guess, ahead of time, which was around the federal government. It sounds like that funding stream is fixed, which is too bad. I appreciate the response there.

In the last couple of minutes, I just wanted to ask the minister about the forthcoming housing strategy. I know he's not going to reveal all of his secrets here today, but I'm just wondering if he can give us a vague outline, perhaps, of what that strategy might look like, and if - fingers crossed - there's any chance we might see it while we're still sitting in the House.

JOHN LOHR: My apologies for not unveiling what's in the housing strategy, I just don't feel free to do that, although I'm excited about it. I don't know if that tells you anything, but I can tell you that the housing strategy comes out of the needs assessment we are doing. Turner Drake is doing a needs assessment across the province. I think I mentioned that in my speech - massive - over 20,000 respondents, over 115 employers.

I've seen a preliminary report, not the final report, but we will have the final report by the end of April, and that will be made public. Some of the housing strategy that we're working on comes out of having seen the preliminary report. We can see some alignment, things we already - maybe that's a reality sometimes, when you get these strategies, some of it you already knew. Some of it, we can see the report confirms the directions we were already working on.

I'm quite excited about the housing strategy and we're working hard on it. I'd like to get it out sooner rather than later, but I don't think we'll get it out before the House rises, for a variety of reasons, but not because I don't want to get it out. That's just the reality.

BRAEDON CLARK: We've also heard from the Minister of Advanced Education about a student housing strategy. He touched on that in his Estimates, which I was at last week. I'm just wondering if those two strategies are connected in any way, if there will be any synergies between the two. Obviously, student housing, particularly at our universities, particularly at Cape Breton University, as we know, is a real, real crisis issue right now. I'm just wondering if those two strategies are being developed in any kind of together nature.

JOHN LOHR: The answer is yes, they're very connected. I think the last housing strategy we released a year ago had three NSCC builds as part of it. As a government, we're working together very closely on - we realize that student housing is an important element of housing. It's important that students have adequate, safe housing . . .

THE CHAIR: Order. The time for the Liberal caucus has elapsed. I shall - I know we're halfway through, so I shall ask the minister if he would like a short recess.

THE CHAIR: The honourable member for Cape Breton Centre-Whitney Pier.

KENDRA COOMBES: Hello, Minister, and hello guests. I'm going to start with EMO for the minister's benefit. First, I do want to thank the staff at EMO for all the work they've done with our office. I know Peter and Dylan are on a first-name basis at this point. I'm just wondering, how many applications are still under review with regards to Hurricane Fiona?

[5:45 p.m.]

JOHN LOHR: There are approximately 1,200 still in process.

KENDRA COOMBES: I wonder if the minister could tell me how many applications have been rejected.

JOHN LOHR: There have been no applications rejected so far.

KENDRA COOMBES: Okay. I'm wondering if the minister is able to table the criteria and the questionnaire that were used with regards to the applications for the disaster relief, that were used by the Canadian Red Cross.

JOHN LOHR: First of all, I just want to acknowledge that Paul LaFleche has stepped out and I now have Vicki Elliott-Lopez, Senior Executive Director of Housing.

AN HON. MEMBER: That's called an upgrade.

JOHN LOHR: Definitely. Okay, I've got to focus on your question. We can get that information. I don't have that here to table today. We will make a note to staff to table the documents, but I don't have them right with me.

KENDRA COOMBES: Thank you, Minister, I appreciate that. When this government came in - formed the government - they did deliver on a promise to double the municipal funding for the first year. It's my understanding that that has not happened this year, that it went back to the \$30 million. I am just wondering why, if that's the case.

JOHN LOHR: The commitment to double the Municipal Financial Capacity Grant was a one-year commitment in my mandate letter. No other government has made this type of investment in municipalities in decades. It was meant to be a statement of good faith in terms of the renegotiation of the Service Exchange Agreement that was under way. That renegotiation of the 1995 Service Exchange Agreement MOU, that continues. It's not finalized yet.

KENDRA COOMBES: The Service Exchange Agreement and the funding are two separate issues, right? So, I'm just wondering, first, when will a new funding agreement for municipalities be in place?

JOHN LOHR: What I can say is that renegotiation of the Service Exchange Agreement is, as it was in 1995 and right now, is a look at the flow of money back and forth between the municipalities and the provincial government. I think that in doubling the Municipal Financial Capacity Grant, we made a statement that we are willing to do more in terms of the flow of money back and forth and that we are willing to make changes.

As you may know, my mandate letter indicated - even including roads, which has been a very contentious issue for some municipalities - the commitment of our government to work with and assist municipalities going forward was in that doubling of the Municipal Financial Capacity Grant in my mandate letter.

It's a commitment we still have. It's part of the renegotiation of the MOU and the flow of money back and forth. It may be a statement of our anticipation that in the new MOU we would do more, if you understand what I'm saying.

KENDRA COOMBES: I guess my question to the minister is, do we have timelines for the MOU and the Service Exchange Agreement to be completed?

JOHN LOHR: Not a timeline, but I think - certainly from my point of view anyway, I hope that this would be done so that we will achieve it. As the member may know, this MOU has - the previous one was 1995. There were a couple of attempts previously to get it done.

There are not many other things that we are still operating in from 1995. A lot of the world has changed since then. I can tell the member that since March 9, 2022, the provincial representatives, along with members of the Nova Scotia Federation of Municipalities, the Association of Municipal Administrators Nova Scotia, and my department have met 11 times over that 10-month period.

Just so you know, I'm not privy to the details of what that looks like, but I know that it's relatively close, if I could say that. I don't know that for sure. You know what I'm saying? It remains a subject of negotiation.

KENDRA COOMBES: I am looking forward to the MOU and the Service Exchange Agreement. Let's talk about if we have more timelines. I'm looking if we have a timeline for finally, since before 2015 - I was a councillor in 2016 and the Municipal Government Act was still under review, and I'm now an MLA and the MGA is still under review. I'm wondering when will we finally have that review of the MGA completed?

JOHN LOHR: You're correct. Between 2016 and 2018 there was quite a bit of work done on the MGA and the HRM Charter, but that work was never completed. We've picked that work up and gone forward with it. We are continuing to work on that. In fact, the group that is working on the MOU renegotiations is working on these same issues in

parallel. We continue to work on it. It would be my hope - but I can't say for sure - that we would see legislative changes coming forward this Fall.

KENDRA COOMBES: I look forward to the Fall, Minister. I'm going to continue with some timelines here. The code of conduct, I understand that is being looked at. I've also spoken with the NSFM on this because it was something I was really passionate about when I was a councillor. I'm wondering, do we have a timeline with regard to when we will see a complete update on that code of conduct?

JOHN LOHR: I can tell the member that the code of conduct working group was established in January of 2022, with representation from, again, the same three partners: the Nova Scotia Federation of Municipalities, the Association of Municipal Administrators Nova Scotia, and our department. There's been quite a bit of work done on developing recommendations on the content in the code of conduct, including sanctions that can be imposed and the process related to investigation.

We did consultations on the content that were concluded in September of 2022. We issued a what we heard report, which was released in November of 2022. We've recently finished consulting on the recommendations related to sanctions and the process related to the investigation of complaints.

Following these consultations, another what we heard report will be developed and released. There will be one more round of consultations in the Spring of 2023, so, this Spring - we're nearly in Spring now - on the entire recommended plan. I think the member will realize, and I think, obviously, the most critical part of the code of conduct is sanctions and the process to investigate. That ultimately is the most contentious, most significant part of this, and most important, actually.

We expect that once we have feedback from this last survey in the Spring, we will finalize the recommendations and that will be brought to me, and then to Executive Council, to Cabinet. It is expected that by late Summer of this year there will be presentations of those findings. That's the track we're on. I think we will achieve that.

KENDRA COOMBES: If I could just make a plug here for that, I would ask that the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing help municipalities with the implementing of the code, including training, education, and support for hiring potential third parties if needed, and other resources required. If we want this to be successful, municipalities, especially those that struggle and are really small and can't even really afford to retain their own solicitor, are going to need that kind of help.

I want to move on fairly quickly to cannabis. My question on that is: Have there been any funding agreements between the municipalities and the provincial government regarding the funds that come from cannabis? As I'm sure you're aware, the provincial government receives 75 per cent of the tax, with the understanding from the federal

government that 25 per cent of it was to go to municipalities. I'm just wondering, has a funding agreement been reached, or even looked at?

JOHN LOHR: Just to follow up one last thing you mentioned. Training and education will certainly be a part of the code of conduct. We've heard that, and we do that as a department, offer that in many cases. It's an important part of what we offer. We recognize that the new code of conduct will need that type of training.

[6:00 p.m.]

In terms of the question about the municipalities and cannabis, I understand this was a Trudeau promise and it might be better addressed to the Department of Justice, but I have no comment. I've seen nothing on it. I don't know. There's nothing happening from our point of view. This is an unkept promise by the federal government, from what I can see, but you may want to ask the Department of Justice.

KENDRA COOMBES: I asked the minister because the funding agreement is supposed to be between the province and the municipalities. I know one of your other ministers also brought this issue forward when they were in Opposition. Again, that's why I'm asking.

I'm going to zip along to the police contracts review. The increase for the RCMP came into effect last year. I was just wondering, is there anything in this budget to help municipalities cope with the increased cost in policing? Also, the other question I have is: Are municipalities going to be helped with regard to the retroactive payments?

JOHN LOHR: Policing, the relationship between our policing and municipalities is all in the regulation of the Department of Justice. That question would need to be put to the Department of Justice. It's not our area of responsibility.

KENDRA COOMBES: I thought the minister was coming back with another response there. I understand that policing is with Justice, but we have municipalities also involved, which in my view, makes the minister involved, the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing. I just hope that the minister will speak with the Minister of Justice about this issue and look at those retroactive payments. With that, I will concede my time back to my colleague.

THE CHAIR: The honourable member for Halifax Needham.

SUZY HANSEN: I'm going to start off with a core housing need definition. I said it before, it's spending 30 per cent or more of your income each month on housing and utilities. This is also the threshold at which most experts agree that housing is no longer considered affordable. My question to the minister is: How many new rent-geared-to-income units have come online since this government took office?

JOHN LOHR: As the member may know, we have invested in a number of different types of units. We've invested in deeply affordable housing with Akoma and Souls Harbour Rescue Mission. It's difficult for me to answer that question. Some of our not-for-profits that we're partners with may be operating on rent-geared-to-income. I would have to ask my staff to do a little bit of work on that to find out that answer.

In terms of the deeply affordable housing that we've funded, there's certainly some, but I don't have the number immediately available in terms of that. In terms of public housing, we have approximately 11,200 rent-geared-to-income public housing units and that number has remained the same.

SUZY HANSEN: I didn't get a chance to say, I appreciate your time today, and, as well, the staff who are sitting here doing hard work every single day. I just wanted to say that before I forget because we get caught up in questioning, and I do appreciate the work that you do.

What I'm hearing, and I just want to clarify this because I know the minister will give me some information later. I want to know about some new rent-geared-to-income units that this province is actually funding specifically. I just want to know the numbers of that for this year and if there are any planned for next year's budget - or this upcoming budget, sorry.

JOHN LOHR: I just want to say - well, thank you for the question, and thank you for the compliments to the staff. I appreciate that. I know they're upstairs behind us, by and large, and here.

We're in the top four provinces with the most public housing per capita, with 11.46 units per 1,000 residents. That compares, I think, to British Columbia, which has approximately 5 units per 1,000 residents. I feel pretty proud of our investment in public housing, which has been previously - it dates back to 1995. The stock clearly is getting older. We're making immense budget capital improvements in that stock. There are no plans to add more units.

SUZY HANSEN: That was going to be my next question, because when we think about it, we do have a large number of public housing units in Canada, but we also need to understand that there is a housing need that is great.

As we know, just by the minister speaking about the targeted benefit and how there was an influx of folks who were really needing this 30 per cent and that we had to change the number to 50 per cent so that we could prevent the overflow or the backlog of folks, putting the most important need first, is a testament to why we need to invest in more public housing and more affordable housing that's rent-geared-to-income. I say this just because I want the minister to take that in. We do have a number of public housing units, which is great, but there are no newer units right now.

My next question to the minister: Recently we have heard about an issue where landlord agreements to provide below-market housing with the province are expiring, and landlords are trying to evict tenants or raise the rent as they are no longer under the obligation to provide housing at a reduced rate. The minister has signed a number of such agreements requiring low-market rents for a certain period of time.

My question to the minister is: What is the plan for people living in a unit that is meant to be below-market rent, but the agreement expires?

JOHN LOHR: Yes, we appreciate you bringing up the issue. We're aware of this. This is the CMHC program which continues, which we continue to have new buildings on this. Some of the first buildings were done 14 or 15 years ago. We're starting to see the expiry of some of these agreements and that is causing us concern, and for the tenants in those buildings, it is a concern.

We're aware of it. We are discussing it internally. What I can say is that once the agreement is over, the landlord is still subject to the Residential Tenancies Act and the rent cap. That's something that's important to know. We are aware of this, and we are looking at it. We haven't got anything to say or announce right now, but we're looking at it and seeing if there is anything we can do to address the problem, but it is one that is happening.

The other thing we do see is that there doesn't tend to be a large - we hope there won't be a large increase in rent after 15 or 20 years, because those are already older buildings now. Some of them were 15-year agreements, some of them were 20-year agreements. We are starting to see some of those buildings show up and to have conversations about it. We are aware of the problem and looking internally at what things we can do, but we haven't made any decision.

SUZY HANSEN: We know that you recently announced funding for several housing projects across the province, all at below-market rates for 10 or 15 years. Was a long-term cost analysis done that looked at this investment over publicly-owned units that are affordable in perpetuity and result in a capital asset? And can it be tabled?

JOHN LOHR: I think what the member is addressing is - what the member needs to understand is that the - in big numbers, the 11,200 public housing units that we have are approximately - I know the numbers are exact in the budget, but I'll just give you an approximate off the top of my head - an approximately \$160-million budget item for us, of which approximately \$60 million is rent coming back, or \$65 million.

There's approximately \$90 million to \$100 million invested in that every year by the government of Nova Scotia, along with our partners, the federal government and the municipalities, to some extent. The single biggest expense that we have for housing is the 11,200 public housing units. It's the single biggest subsidy. It's not so clear that one is a better deal than the other, if you know what I'm saying.

Maybe the per-door deal that we did with CMHC is more effective. The member needs to know that, in terms of apples and oranges. I think that the reality is there's no one solution to the housing crisis. Public housing is part of it, the CMHC program for rentals per door is part of it. Community housing is part of the solution.

I think the member heard me say that I believe we've made a very large investment in not-for-profit community housing, as a government, one that has been noticed across Canada and has made a real difference in the sector. While we were quite strong in public housing, we were very weak in community housing. We are investing. We're looking at all of the programs that we offer, and I just wanted to let the member know that.

SUZY HANSEN: I want the minister to know that we do truly appreciate the investments that are being made in not-for-profit and other housing options that are truly affordable.

I just want to go back to this question because this one goes back to the projects that the minister announced from across the province that are all at below-market rates for 10 to 15 years. I just was curious to know if that affordability is going to be consistent with the past 10 to 15 years, or is it going to be based on the 80 per cent of market rents that have been said for the new builds that are - the new announcements for the builds that were said?

JOHN LOHR: Could I just ask you to rephrase the question? I'm not sure I understood what you were asking.

SUZY HANSEN: This wasn't for public housing. This was for housing units across the province that you had made announcements for. You were saying all at below-market rates for the 10 to 15 years. I was just curious to know, how did we get to the rate, because it says that units will be 80 per cent of market rents. How was that determined? As we know, the CMHC definition is 30 per cent.

JOHN LOHR: This program, which we do under the - what's the AHDP?

VICKI ELLIOTT-LOPEZ: Affordable Housing Development Program.

JOHN LOHR: Thanks. The Affordable Housing Development Program, which we are announcing these projects under, is in partnership with the federal government. They use Statistics Canada data to determine the average market rent for a particular area, but it isn't necessarily how you or I would think of a particular area. They define the areas themselves. It isn't like CBRM or HRM; it's a smaller piece of those in these different areas.

The 80 per cent is of the average market rent in that area. The feds and we will partner to buy down. If you think about a landlord getting \$1,000 a month rent on a unit, and we're saying, we want you to take \$800 a month rent for 15 years, well then you take

that \$200 times 12 times 15, you know that's that much money. We say we'll pay that up front. I'm just giving you the broad - and that's how we purchase that affordability for that length of time. There are probably a few other factors in that calculation, like interest. I don't know.

[6:15 p.m.]

That's what we're doing. This is the program. That is where that is coming from. As your previous question acknowledged, when that comes off, it's a big problem for the people who are accessing that program. It's an important program, but it has nothing to do with their income. It's just about the cost of that unit, and it's purchasing - it's us making an investment.

Why do landlords like it? Well, somebody building a building might well like to have - and I think at one time it was \$50,000 a door, that's what it was, and that was awhile ago. For the person building the building, if they do that, say, with 10 units in the building, they get \$500,000. That \$500,000 up front is enormously helpful to build the building with. That's the incentive for the landlord. Rather than waiting, rather than getting the money little by little over 15 years, they get it all up front.

That's why they might want to do that. That's one reason why. For them, it's still the math - I get paid this much up front, or I can make it over the life of the building. Some landlords don't choose to access it at all. They don't want it. When some do, yes, we do this program, which is fundamentally a federal government program. We'll partner with them, and we like to do it. One of the reasons we like to do it is because that financial help will help get that building built.

Getting buildings built is important to us. We want to see - because we know that, at the end of the day, the most important thing that will help this housing crisis is having new buildings built. We're interested in that. I have another note here. There is also, for a person to get into this - the other thing you should know is it can be - we can put more money in, the feds can put more money in. It might be 60 per cent in some cases, 60 per cent of average market rent. The amount of money that we put in up front will dictate where that percentage is, but it's got to be at least 80 per cent.

The other thing is that eligibility for those units is determined by what we call the Household Income Limits, the HILs. That is evaluated and continues to be evaluated over the life of the agreement. There is an eligibility requirement to get in there. It doesn't have anything - so that's a part of it. Part of it is a calculation on their income, what we call the HILs, the Household Income Limits, which is set by the federal government as well.

SUZY HANSEN: Thank you for that information, Minister. I'm going to move on to another question. We are aware of at least one boarding house in Halifax that has made sure that the tenants are getting maximum subsidy and are now paying \$800 a month. What

is this government doing to prevent landlords from charging more to tenants with access to subsidies?

JOHN LOHR: Could you just unpack that question a little bit more? We're not quite sure what units you're talking about or what circumstance.

SUZY HANSEN: When someone is receiving a subsidy and the subsidy goes to the landlord, are we checking up to make sure that the landlord isn't overcharging for the tenancy?

JOHN LOHR: What I can tell the member is that the rent supplements that we have offered since we've been in government have been what's called portable. In other words, they go to the individual. The individual chooses what apartment they live in. The landlord should never even know that they're receiving a rent supplement, unless for some reason they would tell them, which they probably wouldn't tell the landlord.

In terms of previous to that, there are still, I think, some non-portable ones. If that's what you're referring to, then I would say that those receiving those non-portable rent supplements should talk to Residential Tenancies on that, in that circumstance.

SUZY HANSEN: Thank you for that, because there are some that are still going straight to the landlord. My next piece was tenants are evicted and they're still getting rent supplements. It's something that really needs to be looked into.

Recently, department staff said they were looking at investments in new public housing as an option, but it wasn't in the capital plan or the Budget. I was listening earlier to my colleague over here and I know some of these questions may seem similar, but I didn't catch some of that information while I was in the back there. I just want to know what the minister thinks about that. Why not? Why was there nothing in the Budget?

JOHN LOHR: As the member knows, we did receive two very, very significant reports from the Auditor General on the management of public housing. We're very focused on trying to implement uniform management across the province. The five public housing agencies that did exist were not - they were all operating on a similar set of - really, the same rules, but they were implementing them very differently in some cases.

The second Auditor General's report, as the member might know, showed some very serious lack of oversight in terms of how some of the housing authorities were being managed, which has resulted in us adopting the recommendations of the Auditor General. I think what I can say is, for right now, we're very focused, in the new Nova Scotia Provincial Housing Agency, on doing a good job managing what we have. That is not just managing; it includes managing the application process, who's on the wait-list, making sure that we have integrity in our processes, and also doing a good job of managing the suitability of the units.

We want to offer good housing and we want to offer safe housing. We're working hard on all those things. The reality is, as I think I've said before, that we have one of the highest rates of public housing per thousand people in the country. The national average is 8.2; we're at 11.4. Doesn't sound like a lot, but it's a lot of public housing.

We realize that we have a large public housing stock that is aging, and we need to do a better job, not only of managing the infrastructure, but also managing the processes. Meanwhile, I think we have chosen, as a government, to really make a very strong statement of investment in co-op housing, not-for-profit housing, and we will continue to do that.

I don't know what the future holds. Obviously, governments will change. I can tell the member that the last public housing unit was built or purchased in 1995. Sometimes these things are done in response to federal government agendas. That's likely the reality. If the federal government gets on an agenda for new public housing and starts to fund that, we'll see where we're at. I don't think we'll say no.

A lot of it is - for us, the reality is the federal government and the National Housing Strategy are incredibly important partners, and when they offer funding, we try to do our best to access every federal dollar that we can to the betterment of the people of Nova Scotia. Some of that is what dictates program design. For us, it doesn't entirely, but to a large extent, it is where we find direction for what we are doing with our housing stock.

SUZY HANSEN: I'm wondering if the minister is involved in conversations with his colleagues about residential tenancies issues. What advice does his department provide about fixed-term leases?

JOHN LOHR: Fixed-term leases, the Residential Tenancies Act, the Residential Tenancies board, all of those issues reside in the Department of Service Nova Scotia and Internal Services. The questions would be better put to the Minister, the member for Argyle.

SUZY HANSEN: The housing department has no thought over fixed-term leases or any thought behind what the Residential Tenancies Act has put forward?

JOHN LOHR: Obviously, in terms of what's happening in government, everybody is aware of every issue. We all think about these things. In terms of a government spokesperson, the Minister for Service Nova Scotia and Internal Services is the spokesperson on that issue.

SUZY HANSEN: The new Provincial Housing Agency has stated a priority of addressing over-housing, and I know my colleague has spoken to this as well. I do have some questions about this process. I'm wondering if the minister has an updated number of how many families are considered over-housed?

JOHN LOHR: Since the previous questioning, my staff have provided a number. There are 1,378 households overhoused. I don't have the breakdown of whether this is a single person living in a two-bedroom unit, or three or four or five bedrooms. I don't know the answer to that. I have stated previously that, in dealing with the overhoused situation, we will initially look at trying to address what we call the severely overhoused, in other words a single person living in a four- or five-bedroom unit.

[6:30 p.m.]

Again, as I stated previously, we are very aware that this is not an easy transition for anybody to move out of a family home that they've lived in for 30, 40, 50 years, maybe raised their children in, they've all moved out, they're alone there now. It's not easy to downsize and we're very aware of that and we're offering every assistance we can in the process. Given the housing crisis, we feel the urgency to provide housing for Nova Scotians. We need to address this, and we are working at it.

SUZY HANSEN: You talk about the wait-list, and we know that there are thousands of people on the wait-list for public housing, and hundreds of people who are currently sleeping outside. How many people are on the public housing wait-list right now?

JOHN LOHR: I can answer that question for the end of January 2023. At the end of January 2023, there were 4,790 people on the wait-list. What I can tell the member is that in October of 2022, when we created the Provincial Housing Agency, there were 6,625 on the wait-list. How did we achieve a reduction of almost 30 per cent?

The answer to that is really changing the application process and updating the data in our software system called Yardi. Two thousand of those people on the wait-list were not eligible to be on the wait-list due to income level. In other words, they had an adequate income level that they didn't qualify to be on the wait-list for public housing, so they came off.

There were a hundred people who came off the wait-list due to the fact that they declined a unit three times in a row. One of the things that we know happens, and it doesn't seem to make a lot of sense to you or me, but one of the things we know happens is that people get on the public housing wait-list wanting to get into a very specific building.

We don't really know that, in a sense, but when we offer a unit here, they say, no. Maybe a bit later we offer them a unit there and they say, no. We offer them a unit over there and they say, no. If they say no three times, then they're off our wait-list. They would know that before they said no the third time, I think.

SUZY HANSEN: You mentioned they didn't fit the criteria. Two thousand people went off the wait-list, which is great, and for many different reasons - could be that they've been waiting for five years and they already have a place. Could be a number of reasons.

When you mention criteria, I'm wondering if the criteria changed from previous to something different, i.e., the threshold, that people didn't know about.

JOHN LOHR: One thing I didn't mention when I was talking about the reduction in the wait-list is that part of it was also faster turnaround time for our units, which really goes to our staff across the public housing agencies. We are focused on reducing the turnaround time, and that takes people off the wait-list. We think approximately 300 people were taken off the wait-list simply because we turned the units around quicker. There's a real strong focus on turning around the units quicker. That's another real good news story.

In terms of what you're asking about, there was no change in criteria. This was simply maybe what I could call better data integrity through implementing a software program.

SUZY HANSEN: I'm glad to hear that. Thank you for clarifying. My next question is: Have the times changed now for average wait times for general applicants, for priority access, and others? I know the wait times are really quite long. Before, for general it was 2.3 years, priority was 1.2 years, and in Cape Breton it was 2 years for general. I'm just curious to know, have the wait times changed?

JOHN LOHR: Yes, the average wait times have gone down. You mentioned the number 2.3 years; that's gone down to 2.06. It's about a 10 per cent reduction. The priority also has gone down by about 10 per cent, I believe. Yes, the priority access application wait-list has decreased from a wait time of 1.8 years to 1.61 years.

Now let me just say while I'm happy to see a reduction, I still think those numbers are too large. I think I could say that for all of our staff and for all the good staff we have in the Provincial Housing Agency. We want to see both of those numbers reduced even more. They're still too high, but we're working hard.

SUZY HANSEN: I'm really glad to hear that, and I don't disagree. I think your department is working extremely hard under the circumstances that are put before them. They're doing the best that they can, with really positive interactions on my end, I can say.

My next question is about the eligibility criteria for the Canada-Nova Scotia Targeted Housing Benefit. I'm not going to keep saying that word because it's just not going to make sense. As we know, it was changed. It went from paying 30 per cent to 50 per cent, and I did hear - I came in and I heard the tail end there.

I'm glad to hear that applications prior to this change will be considered. I'm curious to know some numbers. How many people applied after - because you said 400 monthly from January until - no, it was 2022. The last six months, sorry about that. I'm just curious to know how many people have applied since then?

JOHN LOHR: We don't have that. I don't have that information. We'd have to get back to you. It hasn't been that long. We need a couple of months to get the data. My staff are making a note. We will let you know when we know the number.

SUZY HANSEN: Thank you so much for that, Minister. I'll also ask for how many people have been denied or are not eligible. I know that it is still in the early stages, but it would be really helpful to know how many people are eligible for that.

All of these other questions are about that. I will table these questions for the minister to take a look at, because it is for our future. It is literally some gauging numbers to be able to tell us what's coming up.

I have questions about the Province's contract with Fivestar Bailiff & Civil Enforcement Services. I asked this question to the Minister of Justice and the Minister of Justice said it was the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing. So now I'm asking, because I know they do utilize the Fivestar bailiffs within some of the public housing units. I'm just wondering, how much is it, and for how long do we have a contract with them?

JOHN LOHR: We recently renewed with Fivestar for one more year, until November 2023. I guess I could say in November of 2022 we renewed for one year.

SUZY HANSEN: Is there a price on that contract?

JOHN LOHR: My staff tell me it's a \$1 million contract for their services.

SUZY HANSEN: I do have one more question, and it goes back to the Targeted Housing Benefit, but this is specific for seniors. We know that it's now only for people paying more than 50 per cent of income on rent. Why is the rent not the actual rent they're paying, rather than the CMHC average? And there are two more after that.

JOHN LOHR: The answer is the program initially conceived was a federal program and the average market rent component of that was part of the federal design. The feds, as I've said, I don't know if the member heard, but we are, at the moment, putting in three dollars for every dollar the feds are putting in, and it's going to five of our dollars to every dollar.

The feds are still an important part of this, and the design of the program is something that we know they are re-evaluating, and we continue to look at the program and evaluate the program going forward, but this is where this comes from.

SUZY HANSEN: Then my question is, why is the senior subsidy calculated at 95 per cent of the market rate instead of 100 per cent?

JOHN LOHR: Again, this was meant to be a partial gap, and this was a federal government requirement for the program, recognizing that there are a number of ways both the federal government and the provincial government assist seniors that other people don't necessarily get assisted in the same way.

There's the Guaranteed Income Supplement and different things like that. There are federal programs and provincial programs that assist seniors in particular that not everyone else is eligible for. This remains something that is being discussed, going forward in the program.

SUZY HANSEN: I do want to say that not all seniors receive these same benefits. We get a number of seniors who call and ask us about this specific question - and I have no idea how to answer it for them - because they don't think that it's fair. I just want to say that.

[6:45 p.m.]

THE CHAIR: Order please. The time for that hour of NDP questioning has elapsed. I will return back to the Liberal caucus with the honourable member for Bedford South.

BRAEDON CLARK: Okay, here we go. Round two. Minister, I just want to ask a few questions around modular housing. You touched on that in your speech as well. I'm just curious, I know it's geared towards health care workers in particular. Is this a model that's in place in other provinces or other jurisdictions? Where did the concept come from, I guess?

JOHN LOHR: I think I can say that the concept came from the sheer need to do something quickly. We did do a jurisdictional scan, and others are using it successfully. For example, P.E.I. is using this modular model successfully. British Columbia also uses it with health care workers. There was a jurisdictional scan done. We know other provinces are successfully using it. The urgency of the situation was wearing on us. Ontario also has created a tool kit for this, whatever that means. I'm not sure what that precisely means.

Yes, other provinces are successfully doing this. There was a feeling that the modular model might address the extreme need quicker.

BRAEDON CLARK: I'm wondering how many housing units do you expect to be these modular housing units, and when might they begin? You touched on this in your speech, I apologize. How many units, and when they might actually be up and running.

JOHN LOHR: As the member may know, we're working collaboratively with the Housing Trust of Nova Scotia. They had a request for proposals that just closed this week, I believe. Or maybe last week, but very recently. We don't know the results of that RFP,

but we know that the modular industry in the province is very interested in this. There are a number of companies.

We would hope to see some units in place by late in the Summer. What the member should know is that the municipal zoning and whatever requirements are to put up units, permitting would all need to be done. This is all part of the process. Where they end up and exactly how many, we don't know yet. I think with the money, we're hoping for maybe as many as 200, but it remains to be seen.

It will take time to get all of those in place. Hopefully some will start to be in place by mid-end of Summer.

BRAEDON CLARK: Is there a goal within the program of how long someone would be living in these modular housing units? Is the expectation that they'd be there for a year, two years, five years? Is that baked into the program? Obviously, it's meant to be a temporary thing. I'm just wondering, how temporary?

JOHN LOHR: They will be used for that purpose for as long as they are needed. I don't think there is the intent of putting a length-of-stay requirement or parameter on it. As long as they are needed for health care workers, they will be used. This is something that will be - the landlord will be the Housing Trust of Nova Scotia, so this will be, presumably, a lease arrangement, or a rental arrangement, by the health care professional and the landlord.

Some people choose to rent for a long time, some people prefer to have their own home. If they settle into a community, we expect some of the health care workers would purchase their own home at some point or move somewhere else, maybe. Maybe not; that would be up to the individual.

BRAEDON CLARK: Perhaps in other jurisdictions, as the minister mentioned, there'd be some evidence of this or perhaps there's been some feedback from potential health care workers here in the province in terms of what the uptake might be. Do we have reasonable confidence that these health care workers that we're hoping to attract would be happy and more than willing to live in these accommodations for some period of time?

Do we know in other provinces if these modular housing units, for example, have they been filled up right away, or has it been difficult to actually recruit people into that situation?

JOHN LOHR: It's difficult for me to comment on that, except to say that when people are in a community and can't find a place to live in the community they're working in, we know they're unhappy and we're attempting to address that.

BRAEDON CLARK: A question about the Down Payment Assistance Program. Obviously, there were enhancements made to the limits last year, which was good news - appreciate that. The minister mentioned in his speech somewhere between 50 applicants one year up to about 150-160, so, obviously, a significant increase there.

Is the budget for that program currently being maxed out or is there still room in the budget for more applications if they were there?

JOHN LOHR: As I mentioned in my speech, we're pleased with the uptake of the program. There's still more room in the program for more applicants. One of the things that we've seen is, due to higher interest rates, the number of applicants has slowed down a bit, but there is still room in the program. Obviously, if we saw a significant downturn in applicants, we would look at the design of the program again.

BRAEDON CLARK: How many public housing buildings does the department manage across the province? The number of them.

JOHN LOHR: I knew I had seen a number; we don't have it right in front of us. My staff upstairs do know that number. We have what we would call 644 large buildings, but over 2,152 buildings. That would comprise our approximately 11,200 units.

BRAEDON CLARK: Yes, I did see some furious flipping up there, so I figured there was some digging for a number- appreciate that. Of the - perhaps all buildings, but in particular - the 644 large buildings that the minister mentioned, does the department know how many of those are approaching the end of their usable lifespan? Does the department track that, and how does it define that?

JOHN LOHR: The best way I can answer that is to say that I remember when our dear Queen Elizabeth was in hospital, she was in a 300-year-old hospital at the time, in England. I have a 100-year-old building on the farm that my son's purchased from me, so there's a 100-year-old barn, 150-year-old house. The age of any asset is really dependent on your commitment, and the useful life is absolutely dependent on your commitment to keeping it going.

The average age of our units is 42 years. I think that, as you've seen in our budget, we're making massive investments in maintaining them. In the next five years we know that of our 11,200 units, we expect to be doing work on three-quarters of them. We're committed to maintaining those units, keeping them going. There are many Nova Scotians living in 150-year-old houses, and they love those homes. We will keep these units going too.

BRAEDON CLARK: I appreciate the minister's response. We're in a 204-year-old building right now, so I take your point. I know, for example, in the Department of Public Works - which manages a few thousand bridges as well - I know that there's a significant

tracking of all the bridges, what the condition is - poor, excellent, everything in between. I wonder, does a similar type of system exist in the minister's department, to assess not just the age of buildings, of course, but what their overall condition might be?

JOHN LOHR: The member is correct. We are working hard to maintain the data of the condition of our units. I mentioned the software data integrity gains we had made on the wait-list side. We're also deploying similar software to maintain good, up-to-date data on the condition of our buildings.

Obviously, I don't think it's quite the same as Public Works and bridges, but homes need to continue to be maintained and we are very committed to doing that. Having uniform data across the five former housing authorities, we're integrating all that data into one platform. It's a lot of data, it's a big job to maintain, but having good information to direct us on where to go is important.

We do evaluate the condition of the buildings. Most of our buildings range from fair to good condition. We did condition assessments on 1,300 units last year. I would expect that that number would be maintained. We continue to do condition assessments on the units.

BRAEDON CLARK: About 1,300 units inspected last year; about 11,000 within the overall portfolio. Am I correct to say that over the course of about a decade, you're able to assess essentially all of the public housing units?

JOHN LOHR: That would be a fair guess. The reality is that we stood up the new Nova Scotia Provincial Housing Agency in October of last year. So, October to March 31st, there's approximately six months of the year there. We've got new data, new software. We're investing, as I mentioned previously, over the next four years, \$15 million in new capital funding. My expectation is that the speed of the evaluation of our units will increase. We will certainly be publishing that type of thing in our annual reports going forward.

I think I can say we are working on a strategic plan for the Provincial Housing Agency, as well, to address some of these issues. This massive investment that we are making in new capital funding, which I did talk about, is meant to address issues like this, and to make sure that we maintain the 11,200 units in good condition, so that our tenants have good, safe places to live. We are concerned about that.

BRAEDON CLARK: I'm now going to switch over to a few questions on the Municipal Affairs side. These are on behalf of my colleague from Cole Harbour-Dartmouth. I believe I got that right.

The minister knows, all municipalities know that policing is a major cost pressure for municipalities and that's increasing year over year. Obviously, with the report from the

Mass Casualty Commission this week, the issue of not just policing costs but policing structure and reform is certainly top of mind in the province.

[7:00 p.m.]

I'm just wondering, how does the department work with, I assume, the Department of Justice and other departments and municipalities to address the recommendations from the report and also the overall issue of policing costs at the municipal level?

JOHN LOHR: The member is correct that the Department of Justice would be the lead department on that. Certainly, in our role at the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing, we have constant and continued contact with the 49 municipalities. Even through things like the Service Exchange Agreement committee, there are constant conversations going on. We do act as a liaison and to facilitate the Department of Justice communicating with the 49 municipalities. We would enable that and assist that communication.

The Department of Justice would be the lead department on whatever changes are made in policing. Obviously, as the member would know, in our role in the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing, we do hear the concern among our 49 municipalities, particularly the ones that have a contract with the RCMP, concerns, as well, about policing. We facilitate that and we have facilitated that conversation with the Department of Justice.

BRAEDON CLARK: Apologies to the minister, I know I said I was going on to Municipal Affairs and then I realized I forgot to ask something about housing that I wanted to. Just quickly on the affordable housing report, obviously a suite of recommendations came out of that. One of them, Recommendation 16, was about the creation of a provincial housing data portal.

I'm just wondering if that work is under way within the department, if it's going to be done? Having that data available, not just to the department but to the public, to the Opposition, to everybody, to really get a full picture of what's going on within the housing sector would be helpful. I'm just wondering if the minister could give us an update on if that work is under way, and when we might see that portal.

JOHN LOHR: I just want to ask the member to rephrase the question and maybe clarify if he's asking about public housing or other data. We're not quite sure which data portal you're referring to.

BRAEDON CLARK: It's in reference to Recommendation 16 from the Nova Scotia Affordable Housing Commission's report. I don't have the report in front of me, unfortunately, to actually read the recommendation. If the minister needs a minute or two to come up with it, that's fine. I can move on to some further questions. If you have it, we can - okay.

JOHN LOHR: As the member knows, we were in agreement to do all of the items from the Affordable Housing Commission's report. What I can say is that this was a recommendation to improve access to rental housing data. We are working on that. For example, once we have the Provincial Housing Needs Assessment data, we would make that data available through a public platform. I can't say that it's finished, but we continue to work on it.

BRAEDON CLARK: There was a significant increase in last year's budget for EMO disaster assistance, obviously as a result of Hurricane Fiona. However, we've seen that number drop back down again to what I assume would be considered a normal level, in this year's budget.

Obviously, we all realize we're in a climate crisis. These types of storms will become more and more frequent. I'm just wondering if the minister and the department had considered keeping the budget for disaster relief elevated or increased to account for the increased probability of these types of events in the future.

JOHN LOHR: I think what I can say is that, of course we all hope we won't have any more events like Hurricane Fiona, but we know in fact we will. We know that it could be one, two, three, four years, so to provision money in the budget would be to - it could be done, but it doesn't really hold any advantage. If we have an event, we will deal with it, the federal government will deal with it, and the money that is needed, we will provision.

I think that is the same policy that previous governments have had too. Obviously, we are committed to meeting any crisis that arises. Even now, I think I can say, through my colleagues in the Department of Environment and Climate Change and other departments - to addressing, in terms of long-term planning, what needs to be done to harden the infrastructure through the Department of Public Works.

There are always evaluations that come out of these events and what happens and then looking at what constitutes proper construction of roads and storm drains and public infrastructure. Even the building code adjusts over time based on events across the country. The National Building Code of Canada is adjusted to accommodate ongoing climate needs. That happens across the country throughout multiple departments. It is something that we are aware of, and we are working toward all the time, making all the things that we can do to improve and harden our structures to be better prepared to deal with these crises in the future.

BRAEDON CLARK: I want to ask the minister about municipal amalgamation, which is always an interesting topic. It's happened many times before. I represent Bedford, grew up in Bedford. It was the Town of Bedford when I was eight and amalgamated to become HRM.

Recently, as the minister knows, the Town and the Municipality of the County of Antigonish had a request for special legislation to facilitate an amalgamation between those two units. In the last couple of weeks, there have been media reports that, obviously, that legislation is not forthcoming. The town and the county had met with the minister.

I'm just wondering why the government decided not to move forward with that request from the municipal units.

JOHN LOHR: What I can say is I do want to acknowledge that the previous government, obviously, was very proactive on this file. We saw three amalgamations happen, all of them a little bit differently. There were different things that happened in each one of them. It's certainly something that - we want our structures in Nova Scotia to represent how we live and the way we live.

In terms of Antigonish town and county, what I can say is that discussions are ongoing and that, at the moment, the decision has been to not bring that legislation forward at this time.

BRAEDON CLARK: I'm curious. Does the minister think there's a need to perhaps standardize that process as best we can? Obviously, no matter what, amalgamations tend to be emotional issues for people. If folks are under the impression that there will be a public vote or a plebiscite and then sometimes there is and sometimes there isn't, I think that can naturally lead to confusion and mistrust.

It kind of leads us down the path that we don't want to get down, which, unfortunately, can happen when amalgamation comes forward and we don't get the chance to discuss the merits of an issue without it becoming too emotional. I'm wondering if the department and the minister have views on the need to perhaps standardize that process in some way.

As the minister alluded to in his previous answer, previous amalgamations, as the minister said, have been different in their own ways. Perhaps there's merit to that, I'm not sure, but I'm wondering if the department is thinking about perhaps standardizing that in some way.

JOHN LOHR: I understand that there is a process in the Municipal Government Act, but certainly if - I mean, we're consulting with the Nova Scotia Federation of Municipalities all the time and if there's a desire for a standardization of process, we would certainly be willing to look at that.

I think it's fair to say that the process in the last three was non-standardized. It was a little different every time, in terms of what happened. Certainly, it's not something we're ruling out, but it would not be done without consultation with the NSFM.

BRAEDON CLARK: In the minister's speech, he also touched on municipal financial indicators, a report that I believe the department does on a yearly basis. I've seen it in the past. I don't know the term that would be used to describe it, but there's a colour-coded section, from what I recall, where it indicates the health of a municipal unit financially, red being not a great colour in that regard.

I'm just wondering, of the 49 municipal units within the province, how many - there they are. Words, difficult; colours, easy - I'm like a five-year-old. I wonder if the minister can tell us how many of those units are within the red colour. I don't know if that's severe or whatever the word might be, perhaps you can enlighten me.

JOHN LOHR: What I can say is that there's a document called the Financial Reporting and Accounting Manual, we call it FRAM, and it requires all 49 municipalities to report to us in the identical format. You can imagine if you had 49 different reports laid out 49 different ways, no one could ever figure out or compare them. It would be extraordinarily difficult.

[7:15 p.m.]

In order to address that, we have this requirement that the municipalities all report their information in exactly the same way. The consequence of that is it makes it relatively easy to compare the financial health of each municipality with each other municipality, due to this uniform reporting, which is quite important.

I do want to compliment my staff who work on this and put this together. This is, obviously, as you may appreciate, something that is for accountants to love and work on, so you need to be that kind of person to really delve into this.

The data is important. The data tells us things about the municipalities. I can tell you that it's a house format you're talking about. The three categories on the bottom we consider as providing the foundation to the house, and then there are five categories and four above it. The foundation, of course, is always the most important.

If there's a certain number in the red, then this is flagged. I will say that the number is declining. Overall, we see the health of the municipalities improving. I will also say that sometimes there are artifacts or things beyond the municipality's control that would cause them to drop into another category. For instance, one of the categories is budget accuracy - how many times you've been wrong in your budget in the last five years. Sometimes there are just things beyond the municipality's control that cause budget accuracy errors.

I say that just to say that the number in the red that you're asking about was five this year. They would have received letters. There are four towns - the Town of Middleton, the Town of Oxford, the Town of Clark's Harbour, and the Town of Trenton - and CBRM. This is something that, we hope, will be a useful tool for the council and councillors in each

of these towns - mayors, wardens, whatever there is there, I guess it would be mayors - to have as information.

The other thing that we do with that letter is we require them to provide an action plan to address this rating. The five that would have received a letter, we would require an action plan by May 1st of this year. It is an important tool to help municipalities see where they're at and identify the problem areas and see what they can do.

Sometimes it can identify very significant problem areas. Sometimes it's a situation where - for instance, for one of the five, we doubled the Municipal Financial Capacity Grant last year. For one of them, anyway, the reliance on government transfers went up simply because we gave them more money, so that put them in a different category.

Some of them are more significant than others in terms of the blocks and where they're at. Some of them are incredibly important items. For instance, one would be uncollected taxes. The average collection for uncollected taxes around the province is about 6 per cent, but when you have a municipality considerably over that, maybe double or more uncollected taxes, that starts to become a very big number that's really impacting their ability to function.

Then the question is, what's the problem? That's something for them to look at their own processes and see why they're failing to collect taxes. As you may realize, of all the entities in our country, municipalities have the most powerful tool to collect taxes. They can always do a tax sale and sell your property. That's an incredibly powerful tool. Municipalities should be able to collect taxes.

Those are the things that are going on in this. I know I'm giving you a bit of a long explanation.

BRAEDON CLARK: It's good to hear that the number of those units in the red is trending down, so that's positive. I have one further question and then I'm going to turn things over to my colleague from Halifax Atlantic for about 20 minutes or so.

This might be a question for the Minister of Public Works. If it is, I will ask her tomorrow. The Investing in Canada Infrastructure Program, ICIP, which I know is managed through the Department of Public Works, but I'm curious about the public transit stream of that program. Last I checked, it was still largely unallocated. It's the only one that's in that state. Most of them are 100 per cent allocated at this point. The transit one is not. I think it's about 70 per cent unallocated at this point.

I'm just wondering what role, if any, does the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing have in either soliciting proposals from municipal units or accepting them and passing them on to Public Works? How does Municipal Affairs fit into that puzzle? I think

- and I've said this to the Minister of Public Works before - it's a wonderful program and opportunity, and I would love to see it used to its full potential.

JOHN LOHR: What I can tell the member is that the Minister of Public Works and the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing have joint responsibility for the Investing in Canada Infrastructure Program. This is something that is - the things that our department - and we work with other departments. We reach out to municipalities on it, but generally speaking, we're working on the parts of ICIP that would directly impact municipalities, like water and sewer.

The Department of Public Works would be responsible more for the transit/transportation portion of ICIP. You're correct, you should probably - I don't have that information in front of me, the transit stream. It's not something that the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing is directly involved with. It is my understanding that we have fully committed the ICIP money, but the exact details of that, the transit stream, would be probably something the Minister of Public Works could answer.

BRAEDON CLARK: I will certainly do that tomorrow. Again, I want to thank the minister and the staff for all the work on this. I appreciate the time and effort it took to answer all my questions. Now I will turn things over to my colleague from Halifax Atlantic.

THE CHAIR: The honourable member for Halifax Atlantic.

HON. BRENDAN MAGUIRE: I've got a couple of quick questions, hoping to get some short answers so we can get a few out of here. We want to get you out tonight, so we want to leave you some time to finish up. I think you only need a few minutes to finish up.

First off, I want to say, on the record, I think you're doing a great job. I think the staff is doing a great job, both in Municipal Affairs and Housing - deep appreciation for everything that's going on there. There's still lots of work to do, obviously, but thank you everyone for all you're doing. It doesn't go unnoticed. Okay. Now to the good stuff.

Let's start with Hurricane Fiona. Fiona was very personal to me because it made landfall around near my community. There were a lot of claims that came through on that - I think it was Fiona - was it Fiona?

AN HON. MEMBER: Yes.

AN HON. MEMBER: No.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: A lot of claims were rejected. A lot of provincial and federal claims - was it? It wasn't Fiona, was it? It was the - am I getting storms mixed up?

(Interruption) Which one was it? Hurricane Dorian, sorry, Dorian - there have been a few. For those who don't believe in climate change, there you go.

Dorian made landfall in Ketch Harbour, as we know. Some serious infrastructure damage was done there, including the breakwater, which was dealt with by the feds. I've got to say, they didn't do a good job. Ultimately, a lot of proposals went forward and through from the community. A lot got rejected.

My question to the minister and the department is, how many of those hurricane relief claims in Fiona and in Dorian, were rejected, first by the province and then by the federal government?

JOHN LOHR: It's difficult for me to comment on Hurricane Dorian. I think we could find that information, but I certainly don't have it with me. In terms of Hurricane Fiona, what I can say is that we have had 1,400 applications; 220 have been paid out fully so far. None have been rejected so far or closed. There have been none that have been rejected. The rest are in progress.

As the member may appreciate, there's a fair bit of work involved. An insurance adjuster has to show up on site. I know that I was asked - the other thing that the member should know is that there's what we call a very long tail on these things. The reality is the Hurricane Dorian file is still open between us and the feds in terms of getting the money from the federal government.

What happens is - I'm getting other notes here. I've just got to think what I wanted to say.

There's a long tail on these things and we continue to work with the federal government. I can tell the House that one of the things that I did learn was that the federal government wants to go to a national flood insurance program. That's where it's headed. That's not where we're at right now. And that is primarily what the Disaster Financial Assistance Arrangements are for, flood insurance.

We can get the information on Dorian if you want to know the number of rejected claims. My staff will make a note of that and get that information. We can find that out, all right?

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: We can actually blame it on the previous government too. I have to say - I know this has nothing to do with you, but I was a little disappointed hearing about the upcoming HRM budget, to hear another increase in property taxes and more money coming out of the pockets of people in HRM constantly. It feels like every year it's 5, 8, 10, 12 per cent. I feel like we're getting - at this point it's not even a drip anymore.

One of the complaints I've heard from HRM councillors is that their charter does not allow them to run deficits. In a time of COVID-19, they were asking for that, I know. I'm asking some of these questions knowing, I think, some of the answers a bit, from my time there, so please forgive me.

Have you had any discussions as the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing with the continuing tax hikes that are being burdened on residents in HRM? Have you had a discussion with them about - I know it's really not your place, but as the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing, I know that you're in constant contact with mayors and wardens and things like that - the ever-growing expenses of HRM that seem to be downloaded onto the people of HRM?

JOHN LOHR: What I can say - and there's been quite a bit of talk the last couple of months, especially since the Property Valuation Services Corporation put out the tax roll, about municipal taxes. I think what I would like to say, and to whatever public are watching too, that PVSC does the tax roll for the municipalities and is owned by the municipalities.

As minister, I get one courtesy briefing a year from the PVSC and I have the power to appoint the Nova Scotia Assessment Appeal Tribunal. That's it. It is an entity that is owned by the 49 municipalities. All that PVSC does is attempt to get a very accurate picture of the value of every property. What we know in the last year - and it's for the previous year, but what we know has happened - and I don't have the number right in front of me, but I know it's approximately - across the province we saw a massive increase in property values.

Property values went up by, on average, I believe 20, 22 per cent. As the member knows, we still have in place the cap. Anybody who saw their property value go up - everybody saw their property values go up; however, the maximum amount that will be taxable is the cap amount, which is a calculation of the consumer price index and is 7.7 per cent.

Virtually everybody in the province is seeing a 7.7 per cent increase in the value of their property. That means if, for instance, a municipality put up their tax rate by 3 per cent, that would mean approximately a 10 per cent increase in taxes. What we know is that all of the municipalities, without even changing their tax rate, are getting approximately a 7 per cent increase in taxes.

We didn't see that same extent of increase in commercial properties, but commercial is not subject to the cap and neither are apartment buildings. Anyway, what we know is that the property taxes are going up. By the same token, we know that all of the costs that the municipalities bear for all of the things that they do are going up as well. In some ways we're paying more taxes, and the municipalities are getting more tax revenues in general, but they have increased costs too.

[7:30 p.m.]

We as a department don't advise municipalities on their own tax rate or their own budget. They set that themselves. We certainly respect their right to do that.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: I'm glad that you mentioned caps. One of the things that I know some municipalities want - I think most municipalities - is removal of the cap on assessments. I'll say publicly I'm not for the removal. I know that some people are, some people aren't.

I'll take my own place where I'm at. Five houses down the road there's a new subdivision. Those homes were bought at three times the value of when I bought my home. I understand that. I understand people being upset that they're paying more than I am. I would also argue with them that my house was built in the 1970s, 1960s. It's a lot older, yada yada yada. What is the department's position on the removal of the cap? Now that I gave you mine.

JOHN LOHR: What I can say is that I think I have a very ambitious mandate letter to do things like - and we're doing pretty major projects, reorganizing public housing. I have a mandate to renegotiate the MOU, which hasn't been done since 1995, which is a big task. I don't have anything in my mandate letter about the cap. That's not on our agenda.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: I appreciate the comment. I will say that I'm sure you've already had meetings with the municipalities, municipal leaders. I'm sure it's come up. I hope that before any decision is made - I understand it's extra revenue coming in for municipalities and things like that, but it's also extra money coming out of people's pockets, some people's pockets, at a time where it's very difficult to pay more. That's my own personal opinion, not of the party or any party, just me.

Can you give us an update on the RCMP's access to the emergency alert system? I know this has been in conversation since shortly after Portapique. I think we are now the only province in Canada where they don't have direct access. My question is - I know some of the information myself personally, obviously, but I'm just wondering where we're at.

Again, I know that I became a little frustrated with the negotiations. I'm wondering where we're at on the negotiations with the RCMP, and have they asked for anything specifically from the province? Have they asked for money, have they asked for resources? Have they asked for anything in order to take on that responsibility?

JOHN LOHR: What I can tell the member is that the RCMP have had direct access to the Alert Ready system themselves, independent of us, since 2021, as has the Halifax Regional Police department. The remainder of the police forces that are in the province would go through our EMO to issue an emergency alert. There are still a number of towns that have their own police force, but the RCMP have had direct access since 2021.

Our EMO staff work very closely with the RCMP and the Halifax Regional Police department in training on that. Actually, I believe that is something that was done by the previous government. That was already done before August of 2021. I think it was done earlier than that in 2021. It was, obviously, given the circumstances around the mass casualty events of 2020, something that needed to be done, and it was done by the previous government in 2021.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: I'm going to bring it a little bit local for a moment here. It feels like forever, but years ago we did announce federal and provincial funding for water and sewer. I liked that you actually touched on it earlier, saying water and sewer is not the sexiest thing on Earth, but it is essential. Maybe being from Halifax Water I might be too keen on water and sewer.

We know that in order to grow our communities, water and sewer is essential. We did announce, probably three or four years ago, at least four years ago, we announced funding for water and sewer to Herring Cove, from the province and the federal government. I fear at this point nothing is started. I don't even think they've done consultation yet.

I fear at this point that the cost that is going to be associated with this project is - it's got to have ballooned by now. I mean, I'd be shocked if it wasn't 20 per cent or 30 per cent more than what it was four years ago. Is there any conversation or update on that project with the municipality? I know it's probably very specific; you won't have those answers on you. What happens in this case?

It's very frustrating to me that we're waiting on the municipality to move on this project, and nothing's been done. At what point does your department or does the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing or his staff step in and say, you've had X number of years, this money has been set aside for the project. I was going to use an expression that my mom used to use all the time, but it's probably - move or get off the pot. What happens in that - and is there a point where you just take the money back?

THE CHAIR: I recognize the honourable Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing with five minutes, 54 seconds remaining.

JOHN LOHR: My staff are checking on that. If it's all right with you, we'll get back to you on that exactly, if that's okay. We're given the time. I don't want to - if we get an answer, I'll answer it in the next question too.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: I have one last question and then I'll leave it. We'll close it down for you. I think that for those of us who are in HRM compared to those who are maybe in some of the more rural municipalities it can be more difficult for us to get - especially when there's federal-municipal funding involved in these projects. If we're looking at new ice rinks or we're looking at things, we know that lists have to come from

the municipality. I think it's a little more difficult with so many different needs and MLAs and stakeholders in HRM.

When the list comes in, do you actually - are you able to look at it? I know that your department is making decisions based on that. It's less of a question and more of a frustration when you continuously ask for projects and we know that the municipality has to request it first, and it's not coming through. I don't know if there's a better process. There's probably not a better process, because in the end it's for the needs of the municipality.

I just want to say it is a little bit frustrating when we see some of the smaller municipalities get it, more because of the relationship between the MLAs and the councillors and there being fewer pressures on that city council. With that, I'll probably end it there. I do want to say that I'm watching with bated breath everything that's happening in housing. We are in desperate need and I'm glad to see a bit of a rush on some of this stuff. Thank you for everything you do. We'll leave you with - four minutes is okay to close it up?

JOHN LOHR: Just to go back to your Herring Cove question for a moment. I've just had confirmation that it was a decision of HRM to pull that project. They decommitted from the Herring Cove project. I'm not sure why. I don't have that information.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: I'll find out.

JOHN LOHR: You can find out. I can tell you that we were . . .

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: If you're watching, HRM, you're in trouble.

JOHN LOHR: We were asked by the federal government to have everything allocated by March 31st or lose it. That funding has all been allocated, but there will be future iterations of water and sewer. I'm sure the federal government hasn't abandoned it. We haven't abandoned it. There'll be future iterations. Unfortunately, that's the reality. Actually - my goodness, your second question has left my head totally.

Anyway, I just want to take the last couple of minutes to, again, thank my staff. It's a tremendous, humbling feeling to be working with such a great team of people. I'm privileged to be there at this point in time. They're all working hard, very hard, on the housing file, on the municipal file, and on EMO, and on Office of the Fire Marshal, all the things that we've got our hands in.

It's a real privilege for me to be involved with such a great group of people and to see them so energized on all of the changes that are being made. It's a real privilege for me to be there, and I want to thank them for all their hard work. They know who they are. A lot

of them are up behind me here, the key staff, even extending throughout the department and into the housing authorities. I want to express my appreciation.

THE CHAIR: Shall Resolution E14 stand?

The Resolution stands. (Applause)

Order please. On the advice of the Clerk, we are going to wait patiently for the next minute and seven seconds to elapse to make it official. Just be on warning that once that minute has elapsed, I will be recognizing the Deputy Government House Leader.

Order please. The time allotted for the consideration of Estimates today has expired. I recognize the honourable Deputy Government House Leader.

JOHN WHITE: Mr. Chair, I move that the committee do now rise and report progress and beg leave to sit again on a future day.

THE CHAIR: The motion is carried. The committee will now rise and report the business back to the House.

[The committee adjourned at 7:43 p.m.]