



HALIFAX, TUESDAY, MARCH 5, 2024

COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE ON SUPPLY

3:47 P.M.

CHAIR
Danielle Barkhouse

THE CHAIR: Order. The Committee of the Whole on Supply will come to order.

The honourable Government House Leader.

HON. KIM MASLAND: Chair, would you please call the Estimates for the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing, Resolution No. E15.

E15 – Resolved, that a sum not exceeding \$680,055,000 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: The honourable member for Bedford South, with 90 seconds remaining.

BRAEDON CLARK: I'll take 90 minutes, Chair, but 90 seconds it is - which I didn't think I had, so that's a bonus. I just wanted to make one point. I know we won't really have time for a question and answer in 90 seconds. I know that the minister's department interfaces with Service Nova Scotia on the rent side. I know that's not solely the minister's purview, but rent is certainly out of control, not just in Halifax but in all of Nova Scotia. It's increasing dramatically year over year, and I think it's a matter that we have not seen adequate responses to from this government.

I would also urge the minister and the department - and I'm sure they're aware of this - there was a report released, I believe, today from the Task Force for Housing & Climate I have here, *Blueprint for More and Better Housing*. There's a section here about things that provinces can and should be doing to deal with the housing crisis, like legalizing more density, abolishing parking minimums, pre-approving CMHC designs - I know the federal government is working on that. Province-wide zoning standards - that's something that British Columbia is doing. There's innovation in home-building, factory-built housing, modular housing, incentivizing that as much as possible. Then one thing that we've proposed as well: setting housing targets annually for municipalities and providing a fund if they meet those goals. I think those are all worthwhile.

THE CHAIR: Order. The time for the Liberal caucus has now ended. It is time for the NDP.

The honourable member for Halifax Needham.

SUZY HANSEN: I just want to follow up on the matter of the estimated \$80 million to \$100 million that will go towards the 10 per cent HST rebate on the new construction of purpose-built multi-unit apartments. In 2023, the Premier stated: "In many ways, I hope the cost goes up because that means there's more housing starts and more construction happening." I'm just wondering - I know that the minister spoke previously about it, it's a combination of federal money, and there are not really criteria in place by the federal government right yet - I'm curious to know: Is there a cap at \$1 million, or is this government prepared to go over budget on this program?

THE CHAIR: The honourable Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing.

JOHN LOHR: First, before I begin, I just want to acknowledge my staff. I counted 15 of my staff in the gallery, and I just want to say how much I appreciate working with them on housing for Nova Scotians, on Municipal Affairs, and on the Emergency Management Office, and all the things that all of you do. Thank you very much. I should say finances too. I appreciate - there are lots of different functions there, and it is a very hard-working staff.

To the member's question: The program that the federal government announced in September of 2023 - we said we would follow suit - the estimate for the amount of investment on our part is really an estimate from the Department of Finance and Treasury Board. It is really an estimate of revenue loss. To go back to the Premier's comment, if there are more units built within the scope of this program, then there is more revenue loss on our part. There is no particular - there is an estimate of what that will be, but there isn't a particular budget line for us.

I'll just explain to the member how this works. When a developer is building a multi-unit apartment building, during the construction period, if they buy a couple sticks

of 2x4 at Home Depot or wherever, they pay HST like we do, but because they are a business, they can claim that back as they are building. At the end of the process, the rules were that the developer had to estimate the actual market value of that unit. Say it cost them \$400,000 per unit to build, but the actual market value if they sold that building and each unit was worth \$500,000; they would immediately pay the government 15 per cent HST on the estimated value of that unit.

The logic of that was that's a one-time payment to the government to account for the fact that they got all their GST or HST back as they were building, and tenants never pay HST. No renter - when you are paying your rent, you don't see HST added on like you do if you get your hair cut or buy a meal. This was a one-time thing from the federal government to balance out, but for the developer - the builder of that unit - it's a hard bill to pay because they pay every possible cost to get that building built. When they are all done, they must pay quite a bit more - 15 per cent of a \$500,000 unit is \$75,000. If there are a hundred units in the building, that is a lot of money.

This was something the federal government had committed in their platform, I believe, in a previous election to do, which they did. We signed on to that, but we don't know how many builders will use it - we really don't. We know there will be some, for sure, and the estimate of \$100 million - not a million but \$100 million, a big number - is really something the federal government has, through their federal Department of Finance, provided us with. That's where that number has come from. It will take a bit of time.

You know, a typical building takes two or three years to build. We started this program in September 2023. Some of them will get built quicker. We'll start to see that cost - maybe at the end of this year we will be able to say, That's the first one who has made a claim on that.

Meanwhile, the other reality is that the federal government has not given the program guidelines. What is the application process? We don't know. What we've said is that we are dovetailing in with the federal government on the guidelines.

Developers in Nova Scotia who would like to know the details are waiting for those details. They're asking us for them, but the reality is we're all waiting for the federal government to provide the details. They announced the program in September of last year, so we're already six months out. That should be adequate time to generate a set of program guidelines, but we're still waiting for them. They're very important. Those guidelines will be an important factor. That's how that program works. To the Premier's comment - if it's more than \$100 million, then that means there were more apartments built in Nova Scotia.

The reality is that building apartments is an expensive enterprise, and rents have to cover the cost of building. Part of the cost of the building was always this GST/HST charge, which was a lot of money. If that cost isn't there, that building becomes more competitive. I can tell you, the Number 1 complaint we've heard is from people who started their build

in August 2023 and they're not happy because at the end of this, their build is going to be more expensive and they won't be as competitive in the marketplace. They'll have to charge a higher rent to cover their costs. We're hearing from them.

That's one thing I can say. We've said that in Nova Scotia we would mirror the federal guidelines. I'm sure the federal government is hearing that too.

SUZY HANSEN: My next thought would be, will this government bring the matter to debate in the Legislature if the program were to exceed \$100 million? At some point, when we receive the total costs at the end of that, and it does exceed \$100 million, I'm just curious to know, will we be debating that here on the floor of the Legislature?

[4:00 p.m.]

JOHN LOHR: Just to reiterate, the program is an estimate of lost revenue. The revenue would be the HST. Presumably if nobody builds a multi-unit apartment building that qualifies for the program, there will be no expense for us. But it's lost revenue. That's what it is. The rate of sign-up will depend on how much revenue was lost.

SUZY HANSEN: Non-profits have a proven track record of providing quality affordable housing to low-income Nova Scotians. However, many of the projects receiving funding through the Affordable Housing Development Program are going to private development companies. Can the government explain why this is the case?

JOHN LOHR: You're asking - what I understand the question is - about projects that we are doing with developers versus projects we're doing with not-for-profits. Basically, we're doing a lot of work with not-for-profits - for instance, the North End Community Health Centre. We did an 11-unit project for \$613,000 with the Department of Community Services. We did another project with them for 32 units, the North End Community Health Association, for \$3 million; another one for 31 units with the North End Community Health Association for \$2.7 million; another project with the North End Community Health Association for 6 units for \$420,000. We've done work with the Needham Housing Co-operative for 22 units for \$250,000; another one with the North End Community Health Association for 28 units for \$250,000. We did a project with Longhouse Housing Co-Operative for 20 units for \$1 million; the Mi'kmaw Native Friendship Centre, 21 units for \$1.9 million.

These are all projects that - not all of these get announced. Sometimes they don't get announced because the proponent doesn't want the location - we might say we did it, but we don't announce the address.

We've done a lot of other projects. The exact program you're talking about, if I look at the list, it's about 50-50 not-for-profit versus private sector, in terms of the number.

In terms of the dollars, it's probably quite a bit more with the not-for-profit sector. I just had a quick glance, but I can read some of them to you.

We have done a project with - I apologize on the pronunciation - Wenjikwom Housing Commission, a not-for-profit in Truro; we did a \$600,000 contribution on 11 units. I mentioned the Dartmouth Non-Profit Housing Society, \$4.5 million on 18 units in Cole Harbour.

There was one called the Stephen Jamael Property Rentals Ltd., which is a for-profit in Sydney, \$600,000 on 11 units. Future Growth Co-op, a non-profit in Sydney Mines, \$1.6 million on 22 - that's a not-for-profit. Tata Holdings Inc., private sector, Tatamagouche, \$1.2 million on 21 units. Six Point Star Homes Ltd. - this is private sector in Amherst, for \$600,000 on 8 units. Atlantic Edge Properties, a private sector one in Guysborough, for \$1.3 million for 36. These are all what we would call purchasing affordability for a certain number of years, which range from - most of them are 20 to 30 years. One is 15 years.

This is a program that you would be familiar with, the per-door program, which started - the first ones we've seen in this started in 2009, in your government at the time. It was really a federal program which the NDP government utilized, the Liberal government utilized, and we're utilizing it. In the beginning, the per-door was \$50,000 per door. It's more than that now. If you do the quick math here, we can figure that out per door - \$50,000 is no longer enough per door. Some of them are still \$50,000 or in that range. Sometimes it is a bit more.

We did a 30-year program with the Housing Trust of Nova Scotia, which is not-for-profit. We did \$20 million in that. South Shore Open Doors Association - \$2 million, non-profit. We've done projects with Affordable Housing Association of Nova Scotia. This one in particular - I know we've done more than this - but the \$200,000 project in HRM and not-for-profit. Compass - \$500,000 project for 57 units.

We've done a lot. I'd say it is at least 50-50 non-profit or maybe more. Certainly the dollar values are quite a bit higher to the non-profit sector than the for-profit sector, if you added them all up. We are working hard - if anything, you could say we've had more of a focus on the not-for-profit sector than in the for-profit sector.

In other programs as well, if you look at our making land for housing available, most of the ones that we've made available land for housing available have been in the not-for-profit sector. We've had a focus on that. We really lifted the boat of many of these organizations I've mentioned to you, and we've done a tremendous amount of work with not-for-profits like the North End Community Health Centre, for instance.

SUZY HANSEN: I am just curious after hearing all that, with the cost of housing going up, and like you said, it is more than \$50,000 a door now. You mentioned that there

is a 20- to 30-year - I don't know if we want to say a contract - but a 20- to 30-year extension. I am just curious. Is that the longest - 20 to 30 years - or is there a longer time to be able to hold that affordable housing within those organizations?

JOHN LOHR: The length of - I mentioned, when I look at this list of what we needed in 2023-2024, there was one that was 15 years affordability, and most of the rest are 20, 30, or 50 years. There is one in that list that was 50 years affordability. If I look at what we did in 2022-2023 - which I didn't mention - again, it's about 50-50 private sector versus not-for-profit sector. There are a number of them. There are three of them that are 50 years affordability, a number of them that are 30 years, and two of a list of about 12 that are 15 years.

What we mean by affordability is - the member should know that this is a program that is running in partnership with the federal government and somewhat defined by the National Housing Strategy, I believe. Affordability is a federally defined number, which is, I believe, 80 per cent of average market rent in that area as defined by Statistics Canada. That's 80 per cent. That's correct. What is meant by "in that area" is a little bit of a different thing. We might think an average market rent might mean Nova Scotia, but it doesn't mean Nova Scotia. It's a locally defined area that is defined by Statistics Canada. It might mean part of Dartmouth. It might mean Cole Harbour. The average market rent in any one area, we wouldn't - it's something that we have to go look up every time. It depends on where the site is. It depends on how Statistics Canada defines an area. It depends on what Stats Canada has for average market rent in that area. Their definition of affordability is 80 per cent of average market rent in that area.

I think I told the member that this program started in 2009. At that time, I think even then it depended on the developer. I shouldn't say, but I know for sure that there were some for-profits then. There were probably not-for-profits in 2009 - definitely for-profits, definitely some that were 15 years. If you think about 2009, 15 years - that's now.

The 80 per cent of average market rent, we're starting to see us coming to the end of some of those programs that were purchased in 2009. Some of them will have 20 years, I'm sure, and maybe there's some that have more than that, I don't know.

Certainly, one of our goals as a government is to try to make the 20 years, 30 years, and 50 years - that's a long time, 50 years. We're trying to buy or trying to incentivize affordability for longer periods than 15 years. We're trying to get 20 years or 30 years. We're mostly successful, but not in every case. When this program started, there were some that were 15 years, and we're starting to see some of them come to an end.

SUZY HANSEN: That was why I was asking, because I know 15 years, if we think about 2009, that is now. What happens to those affordable units at this point, when their time is up? Are we going to continue on and add an additional 30 years? I'm just thinking about how we save the stock of affordable housing that we do have so that it doesn't get to

a point where folks can't afford to live where they have been living for the past 15 or more years. That was my question. I'll let you think about that, and maybe we can get back to that.

With the Affordable Housing Development Program, affordability is defined as 20 per cent below market rent, and the minister did say that. With the average rent continuously increasing, 20 per cent below market rent will still be too expensive for many. Are there any funded projects delivering more deeply subsidized units? If so, how many units will have more affordable rents?

JOHN LOHR: What I can tell the member is that the average market rent target is 80 per cent. We try to get more than that. We have averaged ourselves - in terms of how we run the program, my deputy tells me - a lower number, 70 per cent of average market rent. So we're actually doing better. That's one of our goals, to try to get more affordability. That's our average, so sometimes it might be 80 per cent, and sometimes it might be lower than that. It might be 60 per cent, if that's our average.

The other thing, in terms of the program, are what you would call a forgivable loan to the builder of the building - the developer - for a set amount of time to hold this rent at a percentage of average market rent. The developers who signed on in 2009 for this program under the former NDP government would have agreed to a 15-year period. At the end of 15 years, they've achieved the requirements of the forgivable loan, and they no longer have to pay the loan back. If they were to be in default of that forgivable loan, then they would have to pay part or some of the loan back.

There's really no more - they then completed what they signed on for in 2009, if you understand what I'm saying. We don't really have any more responsibility to them, and they don't have any more responsibility to us, if you understand what I'm saying.

SUZY HANSEN: For the Affordable Housing Development Program, how much is budgeted for this program in 2024-25, and how does this compare to last year?

JOHN LOHR: I appreciate the question because I'm learning too. The number we show for the Affordable Housing Development Program is \$20 million this year. That represents - I think I mentioned a few seconds ago, as the loans that are given are completed, they're written off. That represents the write-off of the loans that have come to maturity. As far as how many loans we will put out this year - that's a loan program. We have a bank, so to speak. We will loan out based on the number of applications, but there isn't really, in theory, a limit. We would like to put out more.

The number you see of \$20 million is based on the maturity of the loans that were made in the past and written off. Presumably if we were to make a \$20 million loan this year to builder XYZ for 20 years, then 20 years from now there will be a line in the budget

saying, “Affordable Housing Development, \$20 million.” If I know my staff correctly, I would guess that it’s written off little by little, year over year. That would be correct.

[4:15 p.m.]

If you don’t understand what I’m saying - if you have a 20-year period on it and a \$20,000 loan, just for argument’s sake, every year that they have fulfilled their commitment, one-twentieth of the loan is written off. It’s annualized over the years. That represents the amount that has been written off. As long as we continue to add new people to it and continue to have people fulfil their 15- or 20-year term, that number will continue to change. As far as how many more we would do in that program, we will respond to the applications.

SUZY HANSEN: I wanted to ask about the Fall River South special planning area. As the announcement said, there was housing coming to Fall River - a 120-unit project area. It can now move ahead under provincial legislation. In 2022, the regional council did not approve of that planning. I’m just wondering: Can the minister explain why it wasn’t approved in 2022?

JOHN LOHR: I can tell you some things about the Fall River special planning area. It was compliant with municipal planning strategy. It met the criteria of the existing municipal planning strategy. It was recommended to go forward by HRM staff. It was compliant with local bylaws. What I can’t tell you, because I don’t know, is why Halifax Regional Council - or the community council, I think it was - turned it down. I don’t know why they did that. I can tell you that it met the criteria that we have that anything we would make a special planning area does meet and is compliant with municipal planning strategy.

SUZY HANSEN: I spoke to the councillor of that area, and I spoke to the councillor of my area, who voted against it. I also spoke to community members and watched municipal council videos. It was because the infrastructure wasn’t there. There were no services or any transit in that area. Water and sewage were a big issue because Halifax Water wasn’t on that site at that time. What has changed? Nothing. When I spoke with the councillors, nothing has changed. Water and sewer continue to be an issue. There isn’t any. As well, there is no infrastructure built and available around that area. Community didn’t feel that it was the right place.

In saying that, I’m curious to know why we would continue to push through. I understand it met the criteria of municipal planning, and it’s a special planning area, but I just would be concerned as to why we’re not listening to the folks who are living in the space, as well as the councillor in the area, who says it’s not a good idea to move forward.

In saying that, my question is: How long will it take for this special planning area of 120 units to be built if they’re going to move forward?

JOHN LOHR: Just to say what I said previously again: Municipal planning staff recommended that the project go forward. They would have done due diligence on the provision of these pieces of municipal infrastructure, such as water and sewer. We were confident that, if the HRM's own planning staff felt this project could go ahead, it could go ahead.

As far as how long it will take to develop it, that goes into the hands of the private developer. I can't predict how long it will take for the units to be built. That just depends on the pace at which they choose to build.

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

KENDRA COOMBES: I'm switching up to municipal affairs. Despite what the Premier said about a PR stunt, we are having once-in-a-lifetime storm after once-in-a-lifetime storm after once-in-a-lifetime storm. Just recently, the CBRM got clobbered with 200 centimetres of snow.

I'm going to start off with some climate questions with regard to municipal affairs. There was a line in the PC platform around ensuring that municipalities have what they need for climate adaptation. What is the department doing to promote local and community specific action on climate change at the municipal level?

JOHN LOHR: The truth is that we're doing a lot across the department in all the various ways. We have a program called the Flood Risk Infrastructure Investment Program we do with our municipalities. We have done, in the last couple of years, nine projects for - it's an application-based program. FRIIP, we call it - Flood Risk Infrastructure Investment Program.

We are doing, through Invest in Canada - the ICIP, the Investing in Canada Infrastructure Program - which is a partnership with the federal government, we are doing millions and millions of dollars' worth of work. Some of that work relates exactly to strengthening municipal infrastructure for flood risk, waste water, storm water - separating storm water and waste water, because that's a big issue. The member may know that, in some places in the province, we have storm drains tied right into the municipal sewage. When there's a big flood event, what happens is the municipal sewer system is overwhelmed, and it just releases to the ocean, which is not acceptable. We have to separate out storm water and waste water. We're working on that.

We work regularly on EMO training for when we have these big climate change events. All our municipalities have their own EMO centres. One of the things we're doing in response to increased storms is we regularly do training every three months with all our EMOs. The primary EMO response on the ground is at the municipal level, which we manage through our provincial coordination centre.

In terms of the coastal protection action plan, we're providing flood line mapping, flood risk mapping. We have about a third of the province mapped now. We think we'll be finished about 2026-27 or 2027-28, mapping the entire province for flood risk with LiDAR, which is a type of radar. It's very accurate mapping. You fly over and do this type of radar. That's under way now. We will be doing more with our municipalities through the coastal protection action plan to help them with flood risks.

[4:30 p.m.]

We've done quite a bit as a department to make our public housing units more energy-efficient. In fact, there's a pretty massive project with our public housing units in CBRM to have more energy efficiency, more CO₂ emissions reduction from our public housing.

We have also just recently - and we haven't rolled out all the announcements - but the member may know we had the Municipal Capital Growth Program, which was \$32 million on our part, \$32 million to subscribe to by our municipalities, which was oversubscribed by a substantial amount. We raised our contribution to \$102 million, so there's \$102 million from us and \$102 million from the municipalities to do over 60 projects that are just being announced right now - many of which have to do with waste water and storm water, again, to make municipal infrastructure stronger. The funding in that program will provide 25 kilometres of water and waste water pipe and reduce flood risk for 638 properties.

I know the Department of Agriculture is up right now, and I think you're here. If you talk to the Department of Agriculture, they will tell you that they're doing an extensive program on our dike system in Nova Scotia. We have, if my memory serves me correctly, somewhere between 250 kilometres and 300 kilometres of dikes. They are doing a lot in the Department of Agriculture. It's their responsibility, which actually does impact our communities, maybe not so much up in the member's area, but most of the communities on the Minas Basin. They have an extensive number of dike systems. For instance, the Town of Windsor, the Town of Wolfville, the Town of Kentville. All of these are being worked on or will be worked on in turn when their turn comes.

Again, for the type of thing the member is talking about, these very large storms that we have, whether they produce a storm surge or inland flooding, we're very concerned about it. The reality is, we know the weather's changing. We know the climate is changing. As a PC government we can point back to EGSPA, the Environmental Goals and Sustainable Prosperity Act, brought in - if my memory serves me - in the early 2000s by then-MLA Mark Parent, which was a leader in Canada on climate action.

The new climate EGCCRA goals, which we brought in recently - my colleague from Dartmouth - are really the most substantive and ambitious goals in the nation on climate change reduction. Really, Nova Scotia has a lot to be proud of from those two

pieces of legislation, which have really made Nova Scotia a leader in the nation on climate action.

That being said, no doubt there's more to do. We will do more, and we know there's more to do. This problem isn't going to go away. We recognize that. We need to do more. We will do more.

KENDRA COOMBES: In my next question I'm just looking for an amount, just a specific amount across the board. How much is in this budget for climate adaptations for municipalities?

JOHN LOHR: The reality is, I named a number of different things which are current, which in some cases have a climate action component in them, and some don't. Adding up the numbers actually complicates it. I'm certainly willing to task my staff with providing you that number in a couple of days. I don't have that number right with me, but we can certainly provide that.

I can tell you that it also touches other departments as well. We have a pretty substantive program to get people off furnace oil for home furnaces, and there are a lot of different things across government that are working on this, but I can commit to ask my staff to provide you that number from the point of view of Municipal Affairs and Housing. It will take a day or two.

KENDRA COOMBES: I'd ask the minister to table that when they can, regarding the amount - particularly that's going to municipalities - for adaptation. I'm not concerned about any other departments except for Municipal Affairs and Housing.

I want to ask the minister with regard to federal funding as well. My question to the minister is: Are we getting the maximum we can from the federal matching funds, leaving no money on the table, and how much of this is there available to reduce our own budget?

JOHN LOHR: The answer is that we are maximizing every federal dollar. Let me give you some examples: the rent supplement program, which was a dollar-for-dollar match program - we're no longer dollar-for-dollar. We're now at about - we will be at \$50 million, and the feds are at about \$10 million. We're overmatching the rent supplement program by a fair bit. We have addressed that a number of times with the federal government, asking them to step up.

In terms of the National Housing Strategy, we're dollar-for-dollar. We're not leaving any dollars on the table. The federal government has a program called the Housing Accelerator Fund. You may have heard about that program. (Interruption)

This is federal dollars. I want to explain federal dollars coming into Nova Scotia. Sometimes we are asked on the Housing Accelerator Fund project to contribute, which we

do, but the reality is that the federal government - if we look at Atlantic Canada, we have about 7 per cent of the population and we've gotten about 5 per cent of the Housing Accelerator Fund money; 2 per cent might not sound like a lot, but it's a lot of money. It's a couple hundred million dollars more that should have come to Atlantic Canada in the Housing Accelerator Fund.

If it was being done the normal way, the federal government distributes money across the nation on a per capita basis. We know, whenever there is a federal program, that Nova Scotia should expect to receive about 3.5 per cent of that money. We are maximizing the federal dollars available through the National Housing Strategy. In terms of the Housing Accelerator Fund, the federal government has focused more on the big cities. Nova Scotia and the rest of Atlantic Canada are more rural. We are starting to see some of those Housing Accelerator Fund programs come to some of our communities. There has been some recently announced in Cape Breton and in Pictou County, and of course, Halifax. Sometimes there's a request for us to match that. We normally do.

KENDRA COOMBES: That was an answer to some question. It wasn't an answer to mine. I was asking about municipal funding. But I'm going to move on because time is of the essence here.

One thing we often hear about climate adaptation and municipalities is that there are not enough opportunities for them to come together on applications. Does legislation need to be updated to allow municipalities to collaborate more across district lines?

JOHN LOHR: I'm happy to tell the member that there's no legislation required. I can give the member current examples of municipalities working together already that get funding from us. For example, Kings Transit Authority in the Annapolis Valley, which has a service area of 125,000 people, represents at least five or six municipalities - I don't have the number off the top of my head - all working together to provide a transit system for the Annapolis Valley. And they received funding from us and the federal government.

There is no reason municipalities can't choose to work together. Another example would be - again, going back to my Valley roots - Valley Waste-Resource Management, which is the same municipalities all working together on garbage collection and recycling. There are a lot more examples of that around the province: municipalities that combine their resources.

Another example would be - there are more examples than just Kings County - but in Kings County, five municipalities share one emergency management office - four, pardon me. The three towns - Berwick, Kentville, Wolfville - and the municipality of Kings. Four municipalities have one EMO. I know there are other municipalities that are sharing emergency management offices as well.

We do have a Municipal Innovation Program through which we provide funding to municipalities to do studies if they want to look at working together. We actually encourage them to do it. That Municipal Innovation Program would fund a study if a municipality decided it wanted to work in partnership with another municipality to make things more efficient in the ways that I just described.

KENDRA COOMBES: Five years ago, the Coastal Protection Act was passed unanimously in this House by all sides. Now it has been scrapped by this government. Instead, this government is downloading more responsibilities on municipal units. We just heard in Law Amendments Committee from a PC member, who actually said that there are times where they can't even find the expertise needed with regard to buildings and inspectors. We also have heard this on multiple occasions. The minister just stated that there are municipalities that share EMO. They share EMO most of the time because of financial restrictions. We hear of three or four municipalities that share inspectors because they cannot find the full expertise that they need in their municipalities.

With all of that, with all of those things that are working together, working against municipalities, and the fact that it's a full shared coastline, and the fact that the coastal walls are also problematic - and for the fact that almost every single municipality we have talked to has stated that they want the Coastal Protection Act, not a plan, nothing downloaded on them, that they want the provincial government to govern that Act - why is this government scrapping the Coastal Protection Act when the municipalities across this province are begging for it?

JOHN LOHR: First of all, the shortage of building inspectors has been noted. Through the Department of Labour, Skills and Immigration, we are investing money, and through the Nova Scotia Building Officials Association, we are investing more money in training of building inspectors. We know we're short building inspectors across Nova Scotia. It's a huge issue. It doesn't just affect the municipalities; it affects homeowners who are building.

As you can appreciate, a building inspector - it's complicated. The building code is complicated. There's a lot to know. Every building that you go into is a little bit different. It's an extraordinarily important thing to have enough building inspectors. We realize the impact that's having on our municipalities as well. In a municipality that can't find enough building inspectors, that function kind of resides with them. It has an impact on the pace of construction. So that's a very important issue. We've invested a lot of money in acquiring more building inspectors.

In terms of the coastal protection action plan, there are a number of things that we are doing. We are providing a coastal hazard map, which will show what the scenario looks like for each property in 2100 - just 75 years from now. Because as we all know, there is a projection that sea levels will rise. What will that look like? We are also providing flood line mapping for our municipalities so that they can better understand what's happening.

We know that the ocean level rise - this might sound counterintuitive - won't be the same everywhere. You might think, Oh, yes, it should be the same everywhere. The other reality is that parts of the province are sinking. Maybe parts are going up - I don't know. It sounds strange but the level of the land changes too. Through the Department of Environment and Climate Change, flood management and adaptation . . .

THE CHAIR: Order. The time for the NDP has now elapsed. We will now have an hour for the Liberal caucus.

The honourable member for Cole Harbour-Dartmouth.

LORELEI NICOLL: It's great to stand and I guess I'm going to be challenging the minister. I have heard a lot of comments about finances and money, but I'm going to challenge you on the actual vision that the Province has - to quote you, "Growth is a good problem to have." You said that. It is, but it must be managed and planned strategically so that taxpayers are not negatively impacted by the need for capital infrastructure, as you mentioned - such as water and waste water.

Population growth needs to be matched with economic growth, and Nova Scotia's net debt to GDP went from 32 per cent to 38 per cent, which indicates that our population has grown faster than our economy. The One Nova Scotia report recommended a goal that Nova Scotia's net debt-to-GDP ratio by 2024 - and it's 2024 - be 30 per cent or less. The report is called *Now or Never*, and there's a reason why. We are there at 2024 and it's now. When do you expect the goal of 30 per cent net debt to GDP will be realized, and what steps are being taken to achieve that goal?

JOHN LOHR: I think some of that might be more appropriate for the Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, but I will answer some of it.

First of all, in terms of climate change adaptation and addressing climate change, Nova Scotia has been a leader in Canada, really based on the EGSPA - Environmental Goals and Sustainable Prosperity Act - brought in by my predecessor in Kings North, MLA Mark Parent, which was groundbreaking in the nation. It has been followed up recently by the EGCCRA - Environmental Goals and Climate Change Reduction Act - goals, which have been updated by my colleague for Dartmouth East. We stand out in Canada as being a leader in CO₂-emission reduction, absolutely.

In terms of what we are doing as a government - and we do have a goal, as the member knows, which is a very long-term goal to double the population by 2060 - go to two million people by 2060. We're investing across government in many areas, that are what I would call - having come through eight years - areas of deferred maintenance where we're investing in health care, we're investing in housing, and we're investing in infrastructure. The member mentioned infrastructure. The reality is that we're in a gap right now between the federal programs. Their ICIP is not available this year to apply to. The

New Building Canada Fund is not available this year for municipalities to apply to. We're waiting for the next version of those programs, so we have a gap year right now. We did our Municipal Capital Growth Program, which we've provided \$32 million in, and which was oversubscribed by a long shot. We provided another \$70 million for \$102 million on our part. Most of those projects are just being announced now. They affect municipalities right across the province - HRM has been a subscriber. There are some projects in HRM.

We're investing in many different things - health care. As our province grows, everything has to happen at once. We're investing in the growth and the future of our province. We're seeing net debt to GDP climb slightly, but the reality is that we made tremendous investments in the last two years - projected deficit budgets the last two years and saw that those budgets came out with very small surpluses.

At the same time, we know that through many factors, including our management - but not only that, other factors too - we're very pleased to have had that happen. We don't know the future. We don't know what the future holds for the province in the sense of will that continue?

We know that as government, we want to maximize the growth in Nova Scotia - people coming to Nova Scotia from parts of the world - war-torn countries, really. Ukraine, the Middle East, parts of Africa - that model of people coming here will continue. My family came here in 1958 from war-torn Europe in what was really near the end of the Dutch diaspora across North America.

We're investing in the province. I think that's the best way that we can say it. We're investing in the province after what I would maybe politely term "deferred maintenance," where we didn't see those investments for a number of years. But our world has changed. That's the reality. We feel we need to make those investments to see this province grow.

LORELEI NICOLL: It's interesting. I was trying to get planning and the economy in Nova Scotia, but I went on a safari trip to Africa, so thank you for that, Minister.

Faster is not always better. Municipal Affairs and Housing, it's my understanding, guides the municipalities across Nova Scotia. In the One Nova Scotia report, the year 2024 that we are in, was set at the Province's planning horizon, and here we are on the horizon, which is a critical point for this government to be. How are you going to finally arrive at - given that the original report, the one unified Nova Scotia approach, was first presented to the provincial government in the 1930s. It was reintroduced in the 1960s, and a few other iterations have been passed to the government since then. In 2013, once again, *Now or Never* was presented to the government.

Are the minister and the government using the *Now or Never* report as a guiding document for growth? Has it implemented any of the goals identified since forming government in 2021?

JOHN LOHR: I remember the One Nova Scotia report, the Ivany commission, which I believe was an NDP government-commissioned report that came in early in the McNeil government mandate. I don't think we've talked about it in a few years, really. What I can recall of that, I would say we have a more ambitious population-growth target than the Ivany report had right now, with our goal of having two million people by 2060.

In terms of what we're doing, we have the five-year action plan for housing, which also has very ambitious goals of adding an additional 41,000 units. It's really going to be a goal that requires a response from not only us as a provincial government but from all of our municipal partners, from the federal government, and even ordinary Nova Scotians who sometimes talk to me - I talk to some of them about that - who can step up.

[5:00 p.m.]

We have very ambitious goals as a government. In terms of health care, I know - and I remember the 2013 election fairly well. There were health care goals in the McNeil government at the time. The reality is, we're working very hard as government on health care. We are continuing to invest at record levels in health care and record levels - unprecedented levels - in housing. Recently, this budget that we're debating, which isn't really part of Municipal Affairs and Housing - we're bringing in the school food lunch program, which has been talked about.

There's an enormous number of good things we're doing in the budget. We're investing in all those things. We see the province at a time when we see true growth. I will just tell you one story. When I was elected in 2013, somebody gave me the biography of George Nowlan, who was the minister of everything - a very famous individual in Kings North. When I started to read it, every single problem he was facing in 1930 were the exact same problems we were facing in 2017: rural decline, out-migration, the decline of Nova Scotia, and Nova Scotia's demographic was getting older. We saw for the first time in 102 years our median age drop last year.

As a government we want to do everything possible we can to invest in the infrastructure and in health care and in the education system and in the housing of Nova Scotians to achieve the growth that we are seeing. We're seeing the debt-to-GDP ratio grow slightly, but maybe not as much as we projected. When you see the GDP grow, that's a big factor. We're seeing actual growth in our provincial GDP, which is unprecedented. That's because more people are here. That's why we want to invest in people in Nova Scotia.

LORELEI NICOLL: Municipalities are facing many challenges and financial pressures such as upgrading water and waste water, protecting coastlines, protection of wetlands, and environmental regulations. How will all municipal units across Nova Scotia be supported under these financial pressures?

There was an announcement in Pictou County yesterday by the Premier to support improvements to that municipality's pressure to upgrade its water and waste water. Will other municipalities receive similar treatments?

JOHN LOHR: We are investing in our municipalities. That's the reality. The member may recall that we renegotiated the 1995 memorandum of understanding. Last sitting we brought that in, which was, I think, over 25 years ago. A lot of things changed since 1995. The internet didn't exist in 1995. That renegotiated MOU - in that, we took expenses that our municipalities had of the net operating losses of municipal - of our public housing, which was about a \$10 million or \$11 million or \$12 million bill each year, and corrections costs, really, which added up to about \$40 million more in our municipalities each year - in their pockets, which they could choose to use as a tax break or put that money into other services. But it's real money.

We also provisioned - I just mentioned a few minutes ago the Municipal Capital Growth Program - \$32 million in just this past year, which we added another \$70 million into, for \$102 million, mostly for municipal sewer and waste water. The announcement you're referring to is, I believe, what is ICIP. I told you there was no portal this year for ICIP, but some of these are announcements that were approved last year that hadn't been announced yet. That was, I think, the announcement you're referring to in Pictou County.

There will be announcements in most of our municipalities for this Municipal Capital Growth Program, which is 100 per cent us. We're investing in our municipalities. We've really done an unprecedented investment in municipalities as a provincial government that's never happened before at this scale, certainly in terms of dollars - probably in terms of real dollars, if you understand what I'm saying. It's unprecedented. The reason we're doing that is that we recognize the importance of our municipalities in addressing the housing crisis, to have better water, waste water, sewer, better infrastructure. Some of the program we're doing is for flood risk, in terms of our Municipal Capital Growth Program. We're making an unprecedented investment in municipalities because we recognize how important our municipalities are to true growth in our province, and the role that our municipal leaders have.

I think you'll recall the incredible endorsement of that we had in the last sitting, when we had more than 35 municipalities send in letters of support for our renegotiation of our MOU. Our municipalities are seeing that they're an important partner for us. We recognize that.

LORELEI NICOLL: With regard to coastal protection, this government is now relying on the municipalities in Nova Scotia to do proper planning to address coastal erosion on private properties. What role is the government taking to ensure that there is not a piecemeal approach across the province, and will financial assistance be provided?

JOHN LOHR: The coastal protection action plan that we are bringing in - we're doing a number of things for our municipalities. We're going to work in partnership with them. We're going to provide an interactive map on which property owners and our municipalities can see what the projected 2021 coastline will look like to help them make better decisions in construction. We're going to provide accurate flood line mapping, which we are about a third done now. We project a couple more years to be finished that. We're certainly funding through FRIIP - Flood Risk Infrastructure Investment Program. We're funding municipalities on that. We're going to provide municipalities with example bylaws for their own areas.

The reality, if you think about our province as a whole - we've got 13,000 kilometres of coastline. Some of it is very rocky, mountainous coastline with very little tidal surge. Where I come from, the Annapolis Valley, we have rocky coastline, but we have very erodible coastline with the highest tides in the world. We have an incredible range of tides in Nova Scotia, from very minimal to incredible. We have a range of coastline, from highly erodible to very rugged and solid. We also have a very big range of the built environment on our coastlines. Many, many of our communities were built right on the coastline. I think of my own communities: Port Williams, Kentville, Wolfville, Windsor, and Truro were built right on the coast, because 200 or 300 years ago, accessing the ocean was the means of transportation.

That's the reality we have. The reality is we know that our municipal partners know their own circumstances the best. We need them in the conversation. We're not trying to abdicate our responsibility. We just don't know how we can make one set of rules that accommodates all those possible situations. That's the reality. We know that in some places, we have to defend against the ocean. Where we have towns that have built right on the coastline, I'm sure the map in 2021 is going to show significant portions of these towns, possibly water with - right in the tidal range. What will we do? We're going to defend. We're going to build better dikes. We can't let these towns be relocated. We have to continue to invest in infrastructure, which we're doing through the Department of Agriculture to defend, but there are places where we have to retreat and say no, we can't build there.

Our municipal partners know their own communities best. This is a very granular process. We can't, at a provincial level, simply tell every property owner, "You have to back up." That isn't going to happen. We're not going to tell that to our towns right on the ocean and our villages right on the ocean. We're going to work with them. There are significant parts of my community that are on a high tide that would be underwater right now. They're protected by dikes. We have somewhere between 200 and 300 kilometres of dikes.

How do we accommodate all those possible variables? When we look at the reality of this, we know that our municipalities know their own communities best. They're stepping up. We have climate action plans in our municipalities, and through Environment

and Climate Change, we have a Sustainable Communities Challenge Fund, which is managed by the Nova Scotia Federation of Municipalities to look at what communities can do.

We know our municipal partners are very aware of this issue. They're very concerned. They're not abdicating their responsibility. We're not abdicating our responsibility. We know the only way forward is for us to work together. It's got to be a conversation. It can't be us putting a stamp on the whole thing and saying, That's the coastline in 2021, and you can't build. We can't say that to these coastal towns. We simply can't. We're already defending there, in many places. We already have seawalls.

The reality is, we've got to work our way through the process. That's just a reality. We recognize that, and that's what we will do. We're not abdicating our responsibility at all.

LORELEI NICOLL: You mentioned the interactive map. I wanted to clarify - I think you said the 2021 coastline. That's three years ago. I just wondered, was that an error?

Before you get up to answer that, with regard to the interactive map, will this identify hazard areas to ensure that new housing is not built in high-risk areas prone to climate impacts, in particular flooding and wildfires?

JOHN LOHR: I did misspeak. What I meant to say was the year 2100. The interactive map will show the estimated mean sea level in 2100. That's 75 years from now.

We know projections are for the ocean levels to rise. I don't know the projection, but I think what I've heard is by as much as a metre, which is a lot. That will obviously impact what Nova Scotia's coastline will look like in 2100.

In terms of where people can and can't build, that's been an area of municipal jurisdiction already. The municipalities have had the responsibility already for a long time of deciding, through their municipal planning strategy and land-use zoning, where people can and can't build. We will be providing them with sample bylaws in relation to the projections of what the ocean and what the coastline are going to look like in 2100.

The reality is, in my community there are already significant parts of the community that are built below sea level. That's the reality right now. Do we say no more development in that area when there's already significant amounts of the built environment in that area? I think the simple fact is that it's complicated by every circumstance you can imagine.

Just simply, it has to be a conversation. We have to work our way through it. Partners in this conversation have to be the public and the municipalities and the Province. We're not abdicating our responsibility in any way, shape, or form, but we recognize that this is a very complex situation in which circumstances change. Maybe in as little as a

hundred metres, circumstances change. There might be infrastructure that's been there for a hundred years or more already. Does that mean we say we'll never give a building permit for you to change your building because you're in the flood zone? They've already been there a hundred years. Are we willing, as a government, to say that? The answer is no.

[5:15 p.m.]

We have to apply the lens of what's going to happen and what we can live with, and where are we willing to say, That property in this community, we're going to defend against the ocean - which we're doing now. We're doing it now in many communities. Where are we going to say that we're going to retreat from the ocean? That's a complicated question. That's not something that we can make a one-size-fits-all law from this Chamber. It's more granular than that. It has to be done in partnership with our municipal partners.

The reality is, it'll be a very short line pointing back to the provincial government if they want to say, Well, the provincial government told us to do it. Fine, but the reality is it's got to be very granular. It's got to reflect what the reality is of the coastline in each circumstance - what the history is, how much of the built environment is already there, how much of the built environment is already there and already underwater right now. That's the reality. There are communities - there are many places that a good high tide, in the absence of the dike systems that we already have, good portions of the town would be underwater. There are a number of communities that are in that circumstance right now, let alone 2100.

How do we manage that? We've got to manage that together with our municipal partners, and obviously there have to be massive investments. Those investments are being made in the dike systems that we have that protect homes around the province. Maybe in places we're adding to the existing seawalls, and maybe in places we're saying, "No, you can't put a seawall in there. You can't put rock there." That's also a tough decision, and there's no one-size-fits-all answer to: Are we protecting the natural environment or are we protecting the built environment? That's a tension in the whole thing that is an incredibly tough tension for us to address at this level. We have to do it in partnership with our municipal partners.

LORELEI NICOLL: The minister stated in the House that he is willing to work with the federal government and HRM on the buyout of homes continually flooded in Bedford. You spoke again about working with them. Can the minister commit to this and provide an update?

JOHN LOHR: What I can tell the member is that the current DFA guidelines do not have a defined process, is what I can say, for the purchase of homes. However, the new federal guidelines are coming out in April of this year and will be enacted in April of the following year. We'll see what those guidelines have. We know some things. There are some things predicted in those guidelines that the federal government has already indicated

publicly over the last couple of years, what will be in those guidelines. I have written the federal minister on this home purchase issue, and I haven't received a response yet. I did raise it verbally with the minister and with his deputy in Ottawa two or three weeks ago. I've got to think of the date. It might be three weeks ago now. Anyway, I have not heard back yet.

LORELEI NICOLL: It's interesting, trying to follow whose guidelines we're following on different matters. There are the acts that the Province does have, and I just wondered if there was a plan going forward for a lot of these things. The government has stated repeatedly that the answer to Nova Scotia's housing is more housing stock. If that's the case, what steps are being taken to ensure that we're building housing stock in an energy-conscious way, not building on wetlands, and adjusting the building code, et cetera - your guidelines?

JOHN LOHR: We've done a number of things. I mean, we have our five-year action plan on housing, which has a goal of 41,200 extra homes in five years, which we know we need, above and beyond what's already being built. We've got the executive panel on special planning areas in HRM. The reality is, we're bringing changes to the Municipal Government Act to bring it more parallel to the HRM charter in terms of some of the things that we've done in HRM.

One example is we're adding in some efficiencies for our municipal partners in more modernization - I'd say bringing some modernization to how they function. Hopefully that will speed them up - there's a requirement in the MGA that they put in notices in newspapers. There are lots of places where there's hardly a newspaper anymore - lots of our municipalities. We're allowing online notice. We've done a lot as a government.

You asked a very broad question. I could talk at length about all the things we've done in government, but I don't know if you want me to. If you want to make a more specific question, I'd be happy to try to answer that rather than talk out for 25 minutes about everything we've done. I can do that too. Maybe I'll ask you to ask a more specific question about what we're doing, or what is it that you're really getting at in this question?

LORELEI NICOLL: I guess specifically what I'm asking is I know that you spoke the other day when referring to housing and how you've created special planning areas. There were some applications put forward that took seven to eight years - I think that is what you said - but those special planning areas are supposed to be on water, waste water, and transit. Some of them are not, and some of them are on wetlands.

That's what I am asking you: Going forward, if in a leadership role, are you going to guide all municipalities with regards to increasing the housing stock, to do it right and in a conscious way?

JOHN LOHR: In terms of special planning areas - one of the criteria we had, and we have, on special planning areas, is that they have gone through a substantial part of the process with HRM. We've always said that for our special planning areas, any development has got to be municipal planning strategy-compliant and has to comply with all of the permitting that's required.

We're trying to speed them up. I can tell you that I have a friend who tells me that when the Mount Hope Development Project was first proposed, which was probably 10 years ago now, he had a friend who sold his house because he was planning to move into it a year later, and seven years later, when we came to government, still nothing had happened.

What we saw were projects tied up just in an endless cycle and not getting approved. One of the things we wanted to address with the special planning areas was that, but we never wanted to give anybody a free pass on the municipal planning strategy or land use bylaws or permitting. I think that's an important thing to understand.

Our goal was simply to speed them up in the process. Most of the special planning areas that we've announced, I think, would have been, in some cases, recommended by HRM planning staff.

We're working hard to speed things up there. It's interesting to me, personally, that we see the federal government stepping into this space as well, with the Housing Accelerator Fund and again putting requirements on municipalities - not just HRM, but the municipalities - to make changes in their bylaws to speed up development. We've asked municipalities all across the province to look at densification. If we're going to meet the housing challenge, we need to live closer together, that's the reality.

We've put in our Secondary and Backyard Suite Incentive Program, and it's interesting - if you follow the media, there has recently been a story about somebody who built a secondary suite but then found out that their municipality didn't allow it. Not every municipality allows a secondary suite. HRM does but if you go around to our 49 municipalities not all of them have provisioned that. Those municipalities are addressing that.

Our municipal partners are incredible partners in all of this. We really don't want to diminish their role; we just see the urgency of the situation such that we've stepped into this place, and you'll be happy to know that in the FMA we've announced that we've given a two-year extension to the Executive Panel on Housing here in HRM.

It was a very telling moment for me when I was asked by media why we didn't make it longer. I was expecting to be asked why we extended it. Clearly the housing needs are there, and the panel has done good work, I'm very proud of them. I know I have panel members in the gallery. I'm very proud of the work that has been done there. Our staff has

worked incredibly hard, not only on the executive panel but on all the things that we're doing. My staff in public housing has worked incredibly hard, and I look across at the group there. I appreciate the work they're doing there.

[5:30 p.m.]

We're looking for good ideas. We have made public land available through our property opportunity notice process for housing. We see B.C. just recently emulating Nova Scotia and giving us credit. Our community housing acquisition program - again, a program that has gotten national attention. The executive panel has gotten national attention. We are doing everything that we can do. We're still on the hunt for new ideas and good ideas. We'll still do more. We'll try to do more. I don't know if that answers your question, but I'm sure you can continue.

LORELEI NICOLL: I guess the point I was trying to make is that, as I started off saying, growth is a good problem to have, but it has to be managed, and that's what municipalities are tasked with. From my understanding, I think that many of the waste water plants in HRM are nearing capacity. The more housing that is permitted, the more the waste water plants are going to have to be addressed, especially in the regional centre. That's what I was getting at earlier when I said, Is this government going to be helping? As it's allowing more and more housing, is it actually going to be helping out the municipal units once the housing units are built to deal with the capacity in their waste water plants?

JOHN LOHR: We certainly recognize how critically important water and waste water are to housing, absolutely. That's why we had provisioned a \$32 million municipal capital growth fund to be applied for. I believe we got applications in October to November. Just after Christmas, we were looking at this, and it was incredibly oversubscribed. We looked at what we can do. So \$32 million was our part. It was a 50-50 program with our municipalities. We upped our share by \$70 million, which allowed us to do a \$102 million program with \$102 million from municipalities right across the province. It's primarily for water and waste water. My staff have done a calculation that that will allow 7,000 new units. We're funding that.

Meanwhile, we're also funding ICIP. We have committed to 52 projects as a province. I'm told our ICIP projects are a total of \$860 million. We have 52 water and waste water programs in ICIP, but there are other streams too. There's transit, there's solid waste, there's marine improvement, there are road improvements, there's clean energy, there's social. ICIP has a number of program streams, but just quickly, the two largest streams, which are almost the same size, are transit and water and waste water. Surely, both of those are incredibly important to development of housing. We're doing a lot as government. The federal government is also in this space. The reality is we're in a gap year between the New Building Canada Fund and the ICIP. There hasn't been an application portal this year, but we expect a federal portal on that coming soon.

The reality is that we know that water, waste water, and sewers are critical to the growth of our communities. That's one of the reasons why we've asked our municipalities to look at increasing density, because then they can make better use of existing infrastructure. Clearly, that may put pressure on the waste system at the far end, where it's actually dealt with and remediated, and we'll invest in that if necessary, absolutely, and we have. We continue to make those investments as a government, and we know that it's a very important investment.

One of the other areas that we are investing in that is the separation of storm water and sewer. We have communities where the storm water going down the streets goes into the grates there, but then that goes right into the waste water stream. That's a problem because then the waste water treatment plant is overwhelmed if there's a large storm, and that puts raw sewage right into the ocean. We're working to address that as well, and that happens because we have infrastructure in parts of Nova Scotia that is very old. A long time ago, that wasn't seen as a problem, but it is now, so we're working very hard on that too.

LORELEI NICOLL: Let me reframe that because I didn't get a commitment. Right now, from my understanding - and having been on Halifax Regional Council, I know about waste water very well - many of the plans now, they only have about 15 per cent left for capacity. When the time comes - and the time is approaching, and I'm sure the municipality will be asking, if they're not already asking - are you saying that ICIP and all these funds that you identified here today will be available to HRM when it requires looking at rebuilding and upgrading their waste water plants?

JOHN LOHR: What I should be clear about is the federal program, ICIP, and the New Building Canada Fund. We are awaiting a new version of those. Until we have a new version of those programs, it's hard for me to speak to what we will and won't do. When we see the new version of those, then we will certainly be a participant. What those programs look like, or what their focus is, is probably not for me to say, but I would be very surprised if they didn't have water and sewer components.

I think the federal government is also very focused on housing and very aware of how important this infrastructure is for the growth of housing stock across the nation, not just in Nova Scotia. It's my expectation that we will see future versions of these programs, and we will participate. At that point we don't control what the municipalities apply for. It will be up to the municipality to look at what their own - and there's always a municipal share in any project, so it will be up to the municipalities to look at what their needs are - they know their needs better than we know them - and what they need to have done and apply for - look at the programs available, which we will participate in for sure, and look at what can be done.

You're asking about what will happen in the future, and I can say that it is my expectation that there will continue to be opportunities to have more work done in water

and sewer. In fact, it's my expectation that this work will never finish. We'll be doing it 100 years from now, 200 years from now. Municipal and provincial governments, I hope, will still be working on water and sewer because that will mean, all things being equal, the country continues to endure and grow and prosper.

LORELEI NICOLL: Oh, I can dream, I guess, of having a made-in-Nova Scotia solution, but I don't think, from the answers I heard here today, I'm going to get one.

I'm going to switch to municipal reform. I listened yesterday at Law Amendments, and everyone who spoke, regardless of where they stood in regard to consolidation, they all agreed that municipal reform is necessary. It's identified, again, in the One Nova Scotia report, Goals No. 17 and 18. What lead role is the minister taking to guide all municipal units in Nova Scotia toward municipal reform? Will it be waiting for residents and respective elected officials to come forth, or will the government provide a framework and a directive to each county toward reform?

JOHN LOHR: In terms of municipal modernization or municipal reform, the reality is that we as a government look to the municipalities themselves to make these decisions and come to us. There's a framework already in the Municipal Government Act. We do fund the Municipal Innovation Program, which can be used by municipalities to decide how they want to modernize.

There are a number of different examples of things that have been done. I can point you to my own county, Kings County, which has four municipalities sharing one Emergency Management office. We have five or six municipalities in the Annapolis Valley sharing Kings Transit, which services a population area of 125,000 people. We have that same geographic area on Valley Waste-Resource Management, the sharing of resources for Valley waste and recycling. These aren't unique to our area. There are other municipalities that also share infrastructure, that work together to co-operate in various ways.

The reality is it's happening now. It will continue to happen. I know that it happens now in waste water and sewer. There are lots of places where the waste water and sewer travel across municipal boundaries and these municipalities simply work together to make this work.

There are lots of areas where our municipal units are working together. There are provisions for this in the Municipal Government Act. Through the department, we have money for studies - if municipalities want to do studies on how they could better co-operate, we do fund those studies.

LORELEI NICOLL: Last sitting, the government put forward a new memorandum of understanding for every municipality except for the HRM. Could you please provide an

update on where this might be, how the negotiations are going, and when might a new MOU be finalized?

[5:45 p.m.]

JOHN LOHR: We certainly appreciate the question. I can tell you that our staff continues to be in conversation with HRM. These conversations are going forward in good spirit, so when we're ready to say more about that, we will say more.

LORELEI NICOLL: I noticed today in the FMA bill that was tabled that there were a lot of amendments to the Halifax Regional Municipal Charter. I just wondered if that was part of the MOU discussion.

JOHN LOHR: I appreciate the question. There are a number of different things in the items in the FMA that relate to the MGA and the HRM Charter - some to both - and some of them are responses to things we've been directly asked by the HRM to do. For example, one of the things which applies to both the MGA and the HRM Charter is requiring accommodation marketing platforms to collect and remit marketing levy fees to the municipality directly. In other words, if you were to do a stay at an Airbnb and there was a municipal levy on that stay, the platform would provide that levy directly to the municipality and not to us. These marketing platforms, short-term rental platforms, are well enabled to do that in their software systems, so we're providing for that.

There are many other things. There are four changes to the MGA and HRM Charter which relate to the code of conduct. As the member may know, in the last couple of years there has been quite a bit of work done by the NSFM on a new code of conduct for municipal councillors, mayors, wardens. In order to enable that, we needed to make these changes in the Charter - both the HRM Charter and the MGA - so that...

THE CHAIR: Order. The time for the Liberal caucus has expired. We will now move on to the NDP caucus, with one hour.

The honourable member for Cape Breton Centre-Whitney Pier.

KENDRA COOMBES: I want to go back to coastal protection. Again, five years ago, unanimous consent of this House for this legislation, and it's been scrapped. The municipal units from every part of this province have said they want the Coastal Protection Act. They don't want the plan. They don't want the government just to provide an app. They want the Act, because they want the government - the provincial government - to enforce the Act.

THE CHAIR: Order. I apologize. There seems to be a lot of noise in the background. I ask that everyone respect the honourable member who is asking the questions and the honourable minister who is answering them.

KENDRA COOMBES: The municipal units all want the Act, because they want it enforced by the province because most of them do not have capacity in their bylaws to actually enforce them. They want it to be uniform around the province so that one area of the province doesn't have a varying degree of protection than another.

Again I'm going to ask the Minister: Why scrap the Act that municipal units are asking for in place of a plan that gives all responsibility and downloading to municipal units who are already having issues with bylaw enforcement as is as well as many other issues with regard to hiring more in their departments?

HON. JOHN LOHR: The reality is that we are not abandoning the municipalities at all in the coastal protection action plan. We're going to provide them with a number of things. A map showing what the ocean levels will be in 2100, which both property owners and municipalities can see we will be doing very accurate flood line mapping, which is under way now. We're about one-third done. We'll be completed, I think, in the year 2027.

We're putting additional money into this flood line mapping program. We're working with various assets through the Department of Environment and Climate Change. We're doing things like providing our municipalities with the Sustainable Community Challenge Fund, which is a fund to help our municipalities deal with environmental change, which they are accessing now.

The reality is, when we look at the province of Nova Scotia, we see 13,000 kilometres of coastline, some of it very rocky, mountainous, some of it very low-level. Almost 300 kilometres of dike land, land that is below sea level now that has been built on. we see tidal ranges from very little to the highest in the world. So as a government, it's a very big challenge for us to provide a one-size-fits-all law for the entire province which addresses all of these different scenarios.

We know the reality is in some places we have to defend against the ocean, we have to build up dikes, we have to build seawalls that already exist - we have to make them better. In some places we have to retreat. There may be some places where we say we're going to build out into the ocean. That decision - that granular decision - is not something that we can dictate from here in Halifax.

We know that our municipalities know their own circumstances best. That's the reality. They already have responsibility for land use planning. They're already doing that. The decision of where, for instance, we're going to allow people to put more rock seawall in, or where we're going to say, No, you can't do that: That has to be made at a municipal - that's a very granular decision. When we talk about coastal protection, some people I've talked to understand it as protecting the built environment. Some people understand it as protecting the natural environment. Which is it?

That's a very difficult decision. That's a decision that's made right in the local areas. We have towns now that, in the absence of the dikes that protect them, on a good high tide, half the town would be underwater. They're underwater now. What's that going to look like in 2100? The reality is we're not going to tell people in that coastal zone, You can't build in that town. We're going to figure out a way to defend - continue to build up the dike systems that protect these towns.

This conflict between defending and protecting the built environment and protecting the natural environment is inherent in making these decisions, and that is a decision that has to be made at a very local level. It may change in 100 metres from doing one thing to doing another. We're not abdicating our responsibility. We're providing all the tools. We'll provide sample bylaws. It's a very short distance for our municipal partners to point their finger at me. I'm okay with that.

We simply have to respect the fact that land use decisions have been made at the municipal level. We've never said that we want to make those land use decisions ourselves. We respect that level. We know it's not easy. We'll be providing the information, and we will work with our municipal partners. This is a big conversation that will carry on for a long time to come as we adapt to changing realities in our province.

We're making massive investments now in protecting our shorelines through building up our dike systems. We're going to continue to do that. Maybe there are places where we will defend the built environment, and there are places where we'll defend the natural environment. That decision is going to end up being a local decision, and it's going to change depending on what's there now. There are places where the built environment - homes and businesses - have been there for 150 or 200 years, and they're right in the coastal zone. We're not going to abandon them. We're not going to tell people they can't make any changes there - you can't get a building permit to invest in your property there. We're going to help those communities address those challenges. That's the reality. That's the challenge we see. That's the challenge I see in the Act. That's why I think it has to be, ultimately, an ongoing conversation that we will have with our municipalities and with the public as this evolves.

We will continue to adapt in how we address this coastal protection action plan and how we deal with the reality of an ocean that surrounds us which we love. We want to interact with it. Every Nova Scotian loves the ocean. Nobody lives very far from the ocean. We want to continue interacting with that ocean. How do we find that balance of allowing that and keeping our population safe and protecting Nova Scotians from the ocean? That's a tough balance, and we have to find that balance.

KENDRA COOMBES: I disagree with the minister, as do all the municipalities, it seems, that they're not abdicating their responsibility. The municipalities think this government is abdicating. I also think they're abdicating their responsibility on coastal

protection. For whom, I don't know, but I'm sure there are a lucky few for which that's happening.

I'm going to move on to another issue: municipal funding. Does the minister really think that using 1996 dollars for the municipal financial grant equalization in 2024 is acceptable? A simple yes or no would be great.

[6:00 p.m.]

JOHN LOHR: The reality is that there are a number of ways we are funding the municipalities. When we renegotiated the MOU here last year, we put another \$40 million-plus out to our municipalities through simply alleviating them of bills they had to pay. One was the net operating losses on the public housing, and the other was a corrections fee that they were paying, which my colleague in the Department of Justice alleviated them of so it didn't come right out of Municipal Affairs and Housing.

The reality is every year we're putting another \$91 million into our municipalities in unconditional operating funding grants. I can give you some of them. There's the Municipal Financial Capacity Grant of \$30.4 million, which the member knows of. There's a five-year agreement that we would continue to top that up for municipalities that were seeing changes in that, so that's \$3.07 million.

We have a Town Foundation Grant of \$1.5 million. We have an HST offset program for municipalities and villages of \$6 million to municipalities and \$70,000 to villages. We have grants in lieu of provincial property taxes of \$24.7 million, which go to our municipalities. We have grants in lieu of Nova Scotia Power property taxes of \$22.1 million. We have a fire protection grant of \$1.4 million, and a Farm Land Grant in lieu of \$2.2 million. Those all add up to \$91 million in the coming fiscal year, so we're investing.

That's not to mention the fact that we had a Municipal Capital Growth Program of \$32 million, which our municipalities applied for and which just very recently, a couple of weeks ago, we announced a top-up of \$70 million. We're putting \$102 million into municipalities right across the province, including the member's own municipality, most of which has not been announced yet because we just provisioned it about two weeks ago and the letters are going out right now.

The reality is, we're investing in waste water, sewer, flood protection, and sidewalks in that program right across the province, enabling approximately an extra 7,000 homes to be built through our investment in waste water and sewer. There's a fair bit of money flowing from municipal affairs to our municipalities. The reality is that that will continue, I'm sure.

KENDRA COOMBS: Yes, housing corrections were taken off, but education remains as part of all municipal units paying for and which we all have learned, hopefully,

in October and November when I stood up here for hours, that education is going to be the highest. Yet the minister, also during his conversations with municipal units, told the municipal units that they could continue to tax their residents on corrections and housing by just simply not removing that tax.

I don't think the minister really understands equalization, and that is comparable taxes with comparable services. Using 1996 dollars in 2024 is inappropriate. Using 1996 dollars in 2024 is completely unacceptable - especially when the federal equalization payments continue to grow - to this province.

Seventeen municipalities are going to lose funding in five years. Under this new MOU, 17 units are going to lose funding, CBRM being one of them. With that, I'm going to ask: When this government tabled Bill No. 340 with regard to municipal funding, it included a revised formula; how does the revised formula account for the recent projected population growths?

JOHN LOHR: The member asked about a number of different things, so I'll work my way backward through them, if I can remember. In terms of the formula, the reality is the formula that we're using to determine municipalities belongs to the NSFM. It's more than 10 years old. It's a complicated formula. I had a one-hour briefing on it and really realized how incredibly complicated it is.

In terms of where the municipalities will be in five years' time, it's impossible to say because it depends on the relative growth and the relative financial position, and those things are changing all the time as our municipalities grow. What we committed to was keeping the municipalities at the current formula, right now, for another five years. This was part of the Service Exchange Agreement. The municipalities agreed to that.

In five years' time? We don't know. A lot will depend on what happens in each municipality. Some municipalities are growing faster than others. It's possible that the formula will change in unpredictable ways. We don't quite know what that will - when we put that formula through the lens of five years from now, the reality is we don't know where, relatively speaking, all the municipalities will be.

That will be for me - or whoever is the Municipal Affairs and Housing minister five years from now - to evaluate and look at and talk with the municipalities about. That's the reality. We committed as a government to put \$3 million per year for the next five years to keep it at the current numbers because it had already changed.

If we used the formula today - the member should know that the formula was frozen about 10 years ago. The numbers were frozen. The formula is still the formula, but where the numbers were, relative to each other for all our municipalities, was frozen about 10 years ago. The current iteration of it, that same formula employed right now, meant that there was about a \$3 million shift of municipalities losing money. That's what we funded.

Four or five years from now we don't know what that will look like, but whatever that is, we'll deal with it then.

I do want to say a few words about education. One of the important things that we, in this MOU renegotiation, have taken on is the pre-1991 schools. What has happened in the past is that when a school has become redundant and no longer needed, it's gone back to the municipalities. Why did it go back to the municipalities? Because the municipalities, at one time in the province, were responsible for education and did own these schools.

Now the other reality is, if you were to ask me or give me a list of pre-1991 schools, it's a very tough thing to do, because there are also places where churches were the supplier of the school, and maybe it'll go back to a church or some other organization. It's not guaranteed. Every school - the history of that school has to be looked at in terms of who it goes back to. It's a surprisingly complicated question in which you have to go back into the history of each building. By and large, they go back to the municipalities. By and large, they have been a pretty severe liability to the municipalities because they have all got asbestos in them. That was a pretty big thing 50 or 100 years ago. They have been very complicated for municipalities to deal with, and they're expensive. This is a liability that we have taken on as government.

The reason I point this out is that the reality of property taxes - they have an education portion - goes back to the fact that, at one time, that's how education was funded. Municipalities were funding 100 per cent of education. They're no longer doing that. We're funding that through other sources, as well, through provincial income tax. We're even taking over the pre-1991 schools that come available.

The reality is that this is a municipal contribution to education that was there in history and continues. Over time, we have taken on an increasingly larger portion of the education costs as a province. Rather than being something - I would disagree with the way the member characterized it. I would say this represents a partnership in an area of increased provincial responsibility, recognizing that the reality is that we want every single student in Nova Scotia to receive the same education whether they're in one part of the province or another. We recognize this as an area of provincial jurisdiction but also recognize the history that this was something that was a municipal responsibility that we have taken on over time as a province.

We're not abdicating our responsibility, but there is a partnership there that goes back in history. There are historical reasons for that partnership.

KENDRA COOMBES: I don't know what that's going to do for the 17 municipal units that are going to be losing funding in five years.

Moving on. For many years, since I have been in this Chamber - and prior to, when I was a councillor - I talked a lot about the cannabis tax, as did the member for Pictou West,

who also put in a bill on the cannabis tax. Municipal units are getting shortchanged in the disbursement - or lack thereof - of the cannabis tax revenue. For those who may not know, the federal government said the split on the cannabis tax was going to be 50/50 between the provinces and the federal government. The federal government came back after speaking with the Canadian Federation of Municipalities and said, because of policing and other issues, that the municipalities would get 25 per cent. The federal government would take 25 per cent. The province would get 75 per cent, with 25 per cent of the 75 per cent going to the municipal units. When will the department work with the municipalities to create a better way of distributing the cannabis tax revenue that aligns with the agreement made with the federal government?

[6:15 p.m.]

JOHN LOHR: I appreciate the question. I'm unusually well-served in that my deputy minister was there for a lot of that and knows the history, which I wouldn't have known. The reality is that the federal government made that commitment but at a certain point asked the municipalities to provide information on increased policing costs due to the legalization of cannabis. The reality was that there was no increase in cost. Policing costs went down.

At that point, as I understand it, the provinces had to make a decision, and the previous government made the decision to retain the funding on it. That's the reality. The previous Minister of Justice in here - I don't remember what his constituency was - but it was South Shore. This was a decision of the previous government.

KENDRA COOMBES: I'd love to be the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing.

I asked this question to the last government as well. Same thing. Same question. It's interesting the various responses you get, though, when you ask this question. Every minister's had a different response to this question. Under the former Liberal government - under Stephen McNeil - it was, "No, we're not doing it." Under another minister, I think the response was, "I don't know." Another minister also tried to say, "Well, it's ours. We're taking it, and we want to show receipts."

The fact of the matter is that cannabis tax - that 25 per cent - the only reason the provinces are getting 75 per cent are because the feds took away their 50 per cent to give it to municipalities. At the end of the day, that was the agreement.

I want to move along, though, because time is ticking by quickly. I want to know: What funding is the department providing to municipal units to assist with local action on anti-racism and equity?

JOHN LOHR: The Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing has an Executive Director, a Lead of Community Engagement, to assist Municipal Affairs in ensuring a diversity and inclusion lens is applied to our work in supporting municipalities.

The Community Engagement Division is working with municipalities and provincial departments to support several provincial strategies, for example the Action for Health, accessibility, and population growth. The department is collaborating with the Office of Equity and Anti-Racism Initiatives to support municipalities in meeting Bill No. 96-legislated obligations, including the creation and dissemination of templates, tools, and training. A welcoming and inclusive community practice for municipalities was launched in October of 2023.

The Municipal Infrastructure team promotes project eligibility and exploration under the Sustainable Services Growth Fund, and partners with the Department of Public Works and the Department of Community Services to successfully leverage federal funding from the ICIP to increase accessibility capacity and projects through all applicable grant programs that promote accessibility and inclusivity.

The department is also partnering with the Advisory Council on the Status of Women Act to deliver the 2024 Municipal Campaign School, and the African Nova Scotian community was engaged during a Nova Scotia Housing Needs Assessment. Internally, the department has launched the reimagined Diversity and Inclusion Committee, championed by the executive leadership to help build a culturally competent and supportive workplace that promotes a deeper level of understanding of equity and diversity, inclusion, and accessibility.

We know that our municipalities are important partners in this, and we're working with them for everyone who lives in Nova Scotia.

KENDRA COOMBES: The bill to dissolve the Town of Antigonish and establish a new consolidated municipality acknowledged that some jobs may be lost in the consolidation process. The Transition Committee has the ability to provide early retirement, pre-retirement, termination, or severance benefits for these former town employees not kept employed by the consolidated municipality. Has the Department budgeted for this, and if so, how much?

JOHN LOHR: In terms of the question about job losses, one of the guiding principles that the two councils have agreed to is that everybody's job is protected. That's one of their guiding principles, so that's our expectation.

In terms of funding, we know that there will be costs associated with amalgamations, and if we look back through recent amalgamations such as Windsor-West Hants, we know that the previous government did assist in the amalgamation costs in that

process. We know that there is an expectation that as a Province, we will do the same in government. The reality is we will.

In terms of a budget or an amount, we don't have that number right now. We don't know that number. We expect there to be some costs associated with the consolidation process. We will assist in a manner similar to previous governments assisting in Windsor-West Hants.

KENDRA COOMBES: Switching to the Emergency Management Office, the budget notes that in 2023-2024, the Emergency Management Office was originally estimated to have spent \$12.8 million but was actually forecast as having spent \$71.2 million in the 2023-2024 year.

Budget 2024-2025 again estimates that the EMO will spend about \$12.8 million. Given the high amount of spending last year that was not anticipated, why is the government confident that spending will only be about \$12.8 million this year, given that storms have only been increasing?

JOHN LOHR: The reality is that the big jump in the number in this previous fiscal year is related to Hurricane Fiona, floods, fires, and our response to those. The Disaster Financial Assistance Arrangements process is part of that.

Nobody knows the future. We don't know what will happen this coming year, but I can assure you that if there's another similar event in fiscal year 2024-25, we will respond. We don't budget that, but we certainly, as a government, will respond if there is an emergency in fiscal year 2024-25.

The reality is that \$71 million is a combination of about 3,000-plus claims through the DFAA portal going out to individuals, small businesses, and not-for-profits. It's also a very powerful tool for our municipal partners who have damaged or lost infrastructure. They can apply through that DFAA portal.

I don't know if you recall, but we know that at some time - I think it was earlier this past year, in 2023 - there was talk about the 2016 DFAA claim where HRM hadn't submitted all its invoices and finished. In terms of the municipalities, it can have a very long tail, because there's a requirement for the municipalities to have the work done. We know there will be some DFAA portion spent in the coming year. We simply react to that.

We hope that there won't be any emergency events in 2024-25. In fact, the province went through quite a long period of time without any in recent memory. If there are, we will respond.

KENDRA COOMBES: I think the minister just proved my point. We are seeing, as Winter storms and hurricanes and wildfires and other extreme events are becoming more

common with climate change, more thought might be needed about putting this stuff in the budget and planning for it, should it happen. Given all that, isn't it time to look at expanding the department's budget and the mandate?

[6:30 p.m.]

JOHN LOHR: The reality is these types of reserve funds are held for that type of unexpected spending, which I hope you can appreciate can happen in other departments as well, is held centrally in government. That's the reality.

Certainly your suggestion is something we will think about. I'm not saying it's a bad suggestion. It's something that as recently as - and this is coming from my meetings in Ottawa - you may remember back to 1997, 1998, 1999 - prior to those years there had been very few disaster events in Canada. In those three years there were three \$500-million-plus disasters, including the 1998 ice storm. Since then, the federal government is now seeing approximately 300 disasters a year. It's almost happening every day, from the federal government's point of view.

Dealing with weather and storms and natural disasters and fire is becoming more routine at the federal level. Maybe that's happening at our level too. We'll see, going forward. I hope not. If it does, we will start to look at how we manage the process as well. That's the reality.

The fact is our understanding of natural events and our own vulnerabilities is evolving, there's no doubt. Your suggestion is a good one, it has merit. It's something for us to think about in terms of how we respond.

In terms of the availability of the money, it's not an issue. The money will be there. We will react to events as they happen. It doesn't really change the response, but in terms of our evolving understanding of these events, the reality is that it is evolving and our understanding is changing. We are looking at all of that as a government.

It's a fair suggestion and certainly has merit and we will consider it.

KENDRA COOMBES: I'm just wondering, has the Emergency Management Office looked at developing a provincial vulnerable persons registry for across the province?

JOHN LOHR: If we look across the nation, we see that these vulnerable persons registries are municipally managed. In fact, we have one in Kings County. I know HRM is moving that way. I know CBRM is considering it. The reason they are municipally managed is that it's our municipal partners that have the resources. They have the fire departments. They have the search and rescue resources.

In fact, if you look at how emergency measures are managed in the Province of Nova Scotia, our primary partners are our municipalities through their EMO offices. We have what is usually erroneously called the provincial command centre, but is in reality the Provincial Coordination Centre, where we coordinate with all our municipalities on our response to emergency events.

We also see Nova Scotia Power has a registry of those for whom electrical service is critical. It's typically people on home oxygen. That's one reason. There could be other reasons, I suppose. Those are areas.

We see the primary focus of this being a municipally driven thing. We certainly are willing to work with our municipal partners on it.

KENDRA COOMBES: Before I move on, I just want to maybe give some information to the minister here. That is to say, Chair, that in many municipalities, oftentimes EMO is happening off the side of somebody's desk in a municipal unit. Many people have only maybe one dedicated EMO person. The rest of it is happening off the side of desks of other people, like clerks and what have you, who are doing this work. Again, they're not dedicated people. They're just people who do it off the side of their desk. Most municipalities have only one dedicated person.

I would ask the minister to maybe look at either increasing the budgets of municipal units so that they can afford actual full staff for EMO for municipalities, or take it in house, like most municipalities want the Province to do, and have it there in the provincial government.

I'm going to ask another question and I'd ask the minister to provide the answer. Does this office support the coordination, through EMO, for getting people who are homeless somewhere safe in preparation for severe storms? Also, does EMO provide this coordination across the province or in Halifax/HRM only?

JOHN LOHR: The answer is that when there's an emergency that could impact the homeless people, we would look through the service providers to those homeless people to do wellness checks. The municipalities themselves would open a warming centre, if they see a need for that. That would happen here in HRM with the HRM EMO. Across the province, there would be a number of community centres that could be used as warming centres that the local EMO would activate, put the information out on, and know which ones are open and which are not.

One of the things we recognize as a result of Hurricane Fiona is the fact that if a warming centre doesn't have a backup generator, it's not that great, especially if the power is off for a prolonged length of time. We did do a pretty massive investment in generators for fire stations and for warming centres across the province - for community halls - just to address this problem.

We have made a very big investment post-Fiona in that program. We certainly, in terms of the EMO response - as I said on the previous question - is a municipal response. We see our municipalities helping not only our most vulnerable but all our citizens with providing these types of services.

KENDRA COOMBES: Just to clarify something with the minister: A warming centre only opens after the storm, not during the storm. They don't do shelter; they are just warming centres. Just to be clear for any persons who might - people get them confused all the time. I don't want anyone who might be watching this to actually get confused between a shelter and a warming centre.

Another question for the minister that came up in the CBRM - during the fact that we got 200 centimetres of snow dumped on us - is that although Nova Scotia Public Works is in charge of plowing, they do not plow private roads.

Through an EMO perspective, does the minister believe - during extreme situations such as we saw in the CBRM - that all roads should be plowed after a weather event for safety reasons?

JOHN LOHR: In terms of snowplowing policy, I would say it is probably better to ask Public Works exactly what that is. I know that when people choose to live on a private road, they would invest typically in their own snowplowing kit and gear. Many Nova Scotians do. I can appreciate that the volume of snow could overwhelm that equipment. That's very possible. In terms of the actual policies, I think I would defer to Public Works. You should have an opportunity to ask Public Works that question during this process.

KENDRA COOMBES: I do plan on asking Public Works this question. I was hoping to get the minister's perspective though, through an EMO perspective for emergencies. Yes, we did see a lot of snow in CBRM. It was an overwhelming amount that plows could not get through. We needed backhoes. We needed industrial equipment to get through. In fact, it took the rain to finally get rid of a lot of our bigger problems.

It's something that I would like the minister's office to consider and look at when they're talking to the Department of Public Works on these roads. It's extremely important for safety. If an ambulance had to get through, they weren't getting through. If fire had to get through, they weren't getting through.

With the remainder of time that I have for this, I'm going to go to municipal infrastructure. More than 40 per cent of Nova Scotia households get their drinking water from their own private wells. Well water should be tested every six months for bacteria and every two years for chemical contaminants. The test costs \$30 to \$50.

I would ask the minister if he would comment on whether this government is considering offering a permanent subsidization to the program for testing. If they're not

going to, what is the rationale for not offering a permanent, subsidized program as a form of preventive health care?

[6:45 p.m.]

JOHN LOHR: Obviously, we're having a bit of a conversation because there are a couple of different angles on this.

I can say that the monitoring of water quality resides in the Department of Environment and Climate Change, not the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing. We do as a department invest considerable money in providing water. We work with our municipal partners to provide municipal water and sewer. We do that, but we don't have responsibility for the body of law around water quality, how that's managed, and the requirements. It's in the Department of Environment and Climate Change.

I can tell you that the other side of that question we were discussing is that we do manage the public housing in the province, and as a department do the water testing for public housing. That is being done ourselves, as the landlord. In terms of your question, I think it would be better directed to the Department of Environment and Climate Change.

KENDRA COOMBES: I only have about 20 seconds left, so it doesn't really give much time to ask a question. Hopefully, we'll be back to ask some more. With that, I'll take my seat.

THE SPEAKER: Order. The time for the NDP caucus has now elapsed. I recognize the Liberal caucus for an hour of questions.

The honourable member for Cole Harbour-Dartmouth.

LORELEI NICOLL: I raise a glass, as you did earlier, to the water. Thank you to the ratepayers of Halifax Water for providing this today.

I just wanted to say that, having passed 12 municipal budgets with HRM, and having gone through that worrying, trying to keep the rate down because we're bound by law and by the Province to not run a deficit, this process here is beyond strange to me. Because what's before us and what I'm hearing as responses - they're not really responses. I'm going to ask you to clarify some of the things you said earlier.

When it comes to coastal protection - we heard from the NDP, all municipalities want it. But now, rather than take a leadership role as a government, as a province, here in Province House, the government is placing the responsibility on each municipal unit. Some municipal units, as we've said - we know HRM probably has the resources to do it, but others don't. There are at least 10 or more municipal parties in the province that simply cannot take this on.

How will this be addressed? Will you assist them? I wanted you to clarify what you said earlier about coastal protection not being dictated here from Halifax. What exactly are you referring to, and whom?

THE CHAIR: The honourable Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing.

HON. JOHN LOHR: To be specific in my comment about Halifax, I probably misspoke. What I meant was “our government.” I didn’t mean Halifax, the city - being dictated from Halifax, the city. I was referring to our government not going to dictate.

The reality is that the previous government required all municipalities to have land use planning for their entire municipality. For every square inch, you could say. I believe that was in 2017 or 2018 that that happened.

The reality is that process is at least 98 per cent done if not 100 per cent done. It’s almost completed. I can’t categorically say that every municipality is done, because when we’ve been asked for extensions, we’ve provided them, but the reality is that the land use planning is in place in all our municipalities.

In terms of the Coastal Protection Action Plan, we will assist them in providing the high-resolution LiDAR mapping that will tell them where they’re vulnerable. That will be current mapping that is mapping the province, which is about one-third done now. We have another two-thirds to do. We think we’ll be done around 2027.

We will assist not only the municipalities but the public in providing them an interactive map that will show them what the sea level rise is projected to be in 2100 - 75 years from now. We will provide the municipalities with sample bylaws that they can use. We will put more money into municipal flood line mapping. We are also providing to municipalities through something managed by the NSFM called the Sustainable Communities Challenge Fund.

We’re doing a fair bit to help municipalities. The reality is we recognize that we’ve got 13,000 kilometres of coastline in Nova Scotia and that varies from very rocky and mountainous to very low, highly erodible to not-that-erodible. In those 13,000 kilometres we have an extreme range of tidal possibilities, from very little to the highest in the world.

In those 13,000 kilometres we have a built environment going back for the last 300 years, in some communities, where we’ve been building right on the coastline for 300 years, and we have communities that have that built environment that’s already below sea level because it has been there 300 years and there have been dikes there for 300 years.

How do we make a one-size-fits-all coastal protection law that our government does from right here in Province House? How do we do that to meet every one of those conditions? Some people expect the Coastal Protection Act to protect the built

environment, some people expect it to protect the natural environment, so which is it? Is it protecting homes or is it protecting the natural environment?

That comes right down to: Are we going to let somebody build a rock wall in front of their coastal property which protects the built environment but damages the natural environment? Or are we going to say no rock wall because we're protecting the natural environment, not the built environment?

This is an incredibly complicated question for us to put in a one-size-fits-all set of regulations right from here that respects the fact that Nova Scotians have a 300- or 400-year relationship with the ocean. As a province, we are seafaring people, we've been a seafaring people. We have a love affair with the ocean. People absolutely love being out on it, they love living near it, they love watching it. That's another part of the equation too. How can we be fair, as a government, to everybody?

The other reality is that the municipalities have had the responsibility for land use planning for a long time. That's an area of municipal jurisdiction. We've never said, as a government, that we didn't respect that. Even in the HRM executive panel we've always said we respect the municipalities' role in land use planning - the Municipal Planning Strategy, we respect that.

How do we take that responsibility in this area and put it on us when it's so local? The answers to this question are in every part of these 13,000 kilometres, a very local question. How do we tell somebody in one of our towns on the Minas Basin that if it were not for the dike that's already there, on a good high tide half the town would already be underwater? How do we tell them you can't build on that empty lot in between those two businesses? How do we say that when we know they're already underwater?

The reality is that in some places we're going to defend against the ocean. We're going to build bigger dikes. That's the reality. We're doing that now. That's being done through the Department of Agriculture. We're investing millions of dollars in dike infrastructure across the province. It's a challenge the Department of Agriculture, which has the primary responsibility, takes very seriously.

We're defending against the ocean now. We will continue to defend against the ocean and there are places where we're going to retreat. That decision is a local decision. Homeowners will have better information themselves.

We can't not make it a conversation. It has to be a conversation that happens between us as a provincial government and the municipality, and between the municipality and the citizens.

What is the decision in any given spot? The municipality and our government and the federal government may choose to continue to invest in building things like the Gabarus

seawall. That's been rebuilt several times. There are seawalls in other parts of the province that have been invested in. We're going to continue to invest in building the dike infrastructure, but there are some places we're going to say, no, we're rationalizing this dike infrastructure. We're going to cut it off and give that back to the ocean. That's a reality. There will be places where we do that.

It's not an easy question to answer when you really look at what the challenge is here. How can we make this work for the property owners of Nova Scotia? I did hear a comment made by one of your members: "The Province does not want to tell property owners what to do." I would say that is correct. We want to work together with them to come up with solutions and work together with our municipalities.

[7:00 p.m.]

It's not a matter of us telling people what to do. It's a matter of us having the big conversation with our municipal partners and with the public on every single location; recognizing 300 or 400 years of history of a built environment in that spot or not; recognizing the hazards in that location, which maybe they are not; recognizing what's going to happen by 2100 in that location. How do we accommodate all of that? The reality is we have to do that location by location. That's bylaws.

We're not abandoning our responsibility in any way. We're going to provide municipalities with the tools, including sample bylaws. We have no intention of abandoning our responsibilities. This conflict between protecting the built environment and protecting the natural environment is something that has to be decided literally property by property, almost. That's the reality, and we have to do that with our municipal partners.

LORELEI NICOLL: In that regard - because you talked about the built environment - is it homes, or is it land? Is that not the Province's decision to make, in that regard? I'm getting the understanding that in one way you're saying it is, and in another way you're not sure. And why was the year 2100 chosen as the actual point of when you have to do something? As we know, there are many environmental and rain events, and flooding is happening more often. Why is 2100 the end goal for it?

JOHN LOHR: What I can say to the member is that we are absolutely seeing the municipal role and municipal planning strategy and municipal bylaws. That goes back to the previous government's decision in 2018, I believe, to require every municipality to have every square inch of its jurisdiction have a municipal planning strategy on it. Our municipalities have been doing that.

Your government made that decision too, that our municipalities be required to do land-use planning and a municipal planning strategy. We certainly respect that. We know that they've worked hard on that, and we respect their right to make those types of decisions. We want to work with them.

In terms of why the year 2100, there are a couple of reasons why 2100 has been chosen. One reason is that if you were to build a house today, you would have a reasonable expectation of it lasting 75 years. Certainly, there are homes in the province that are 200 years old - that's the reality - or more. In terms of the lifespan of a typical asset, that was a consideration. It could be that that's not long enough.

In terms of the general conversation around climate change in our world, 2100 is sort of a marker that is discussed in terms of sea-level rise. It's often referred to as, "What will it be like in 2100?" That's probably the reason why that was chosen. It is often referred to by people who try to put an estimate on sea level rise. In the general public, this is a conversation. Often it's projected in terms of: What's the worst-case scenario for 2100? I think that you'd have to ask the Department of Environment and Climate Change more specifically about why that is chosen as a marker.

In terms of our need to reduce our pollution in the world and our greenhouse gas emissions, that's seen as being needed to be done right now. In terms of 2100, that's seen as, if we don't get it done right now, that's what it's going to look like in 2100. That is something that is commonly, in the general domain, something that is under consideration by people who study this. To get a more fulsome explanation, I would recommend you ask the Department of Environment and Climate Change.

LORELEI NICOLL: You mentioned the year 2018. Prior to that - while I was on Halifax Regional Council - the Province had a plan and asked HRM if they could borrow some of our planners to actually help smaller municipalities create land use bylaws. How many planners does the Province employ now, and will those planners be assisting the smaller municipal units who do not have land use bylaws?

JOHN LOHR: It's interesting when we talk about staff, because my staff are all up there. I do want to acknowledge the fact that we've had an enormous increase. Pretty well since the fiscal year 2021, we've doubled the amount of money we're spending. If we haven't doubled the amount of work, we've probably almost doubled the amount of work, and we haven't added staff. You're all doing - I know we have added some in Public Housing - you're doing a lot of work. I want to acknowledge that.

In the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing, we have four planners on staff who evaluate the planning work done by municipalities across the province. Those planners will be working with Environment and Climate Change to develop sample bylaws to provide to our municipalities. The reality is that most of the planning function resides within our municipalities across the province.

LORELEI NICOLL: I will continue on some comments I was making, and questions about municipal reform. Having listened for many years from residents on the subject of amalgamation - I was an elected official in an amalgamated municipality, so the

topic naturally came up - it was obvious and evident that there is confusion around the need to consolidate, as we're calling it today.

Will the minister take the lead role and treat municipal reform in a unified manner to clarify the need to consolidate, so that the burden for change is not simply placed on the shoulders of municipal leaders in Nova Scotia? If this government truly sees consolidation as beneficial, why would it not take the lead?

JOHN LOHR: What I can say - and I don't know, the member probably did read my mandate letter two and a half years ago, which was an ambitious and aggressive mandate letter on many fronts, but not on municipal modernization or amalgamation. It was silent on that topic, and as a government, the reality is that we respect our municipal partners and the municipal decision, so it's not per se - the previous government was much more for making this happen or getting involved. That's the reality. We have been much more - if that's what our municipalities want to do, we'll do it, we'll help them.

In terms of what we fund, we do fund the Municipal Innovation Program that municipalities can access for many different purposes, including how best to work with other municipalities, whether we see that municipal co-operation in transit, in water and sewer, in waste management, in many areas where municipalities work together.

In terms of the decision on whether a municipality consolidates with another municipality, that is entirely a decision of the municipality itself, and not one which we are in particular funding to encourage. We will, as the previous government did, fund the process if that's the decision that's made. It's something that's a municipal decision, and we respect that.

LORELEI NICOLL: I believe you mentioned earlier about Kings County - are other municipalities - and possibly Kings - currently looking to amalgamate or consolidate?

JOHN LOHR: To the member, I just want to clarify my comments related to Kings County, on how they were working together on EMO on sewer, on transit, and not only in some cases within Kings County, but also with Annapolis County. It was not a comment about municipal modernization or amalgamation in the context of Kings County.

I can tell you that I'm not making any comment about Kings County in that regard, and I'm not even suggesting that's happening in Kings County. What I am saying is that it is an area of municipal choice and municipal decision, and if it comes forward, we will address it wherever it does come forward.

LORELEI NICOLL: On the subject of mandatory education funding as part of the MOUs, all municipalities in Nova Scotia have been paying a high mandatory education tax to the Province. This is bound by the Education Act. The Act itself is bound by the Province

to educate each and every child. The municipalities are not tasked with educating each and every child.

[7:15 p.m.]

My question is: How much revenue did the Province receive from this tax this year, and what percentage is the mandatory education tax on the total property taxes?

JOHN LOHR: What I can say is that the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing - I don't have that number in my budget. That's probably what that number is - it's probably best asked to the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.

What I can say is that the reality is when we renegotiated the 1995 Service Exchange Agreement, we did several things which really benefited our municipalities in this equation. One is that we put over \$40 million back into our municipalities through alleviating them of paying our net operating losses on public housing, and a corrections fee that went to the Department of Justice.

The other thing we did was we said we would take over the pre-1991 schools which were a municipal responsibility in general. The reason they were a municipal responsibility was because at one time in the province, the municipalities had responsibility for education, so the schools were the municipalities' schools. We're taking them back.

We've taken over that responsibility from the municipalities, and this municipal education tax portion is the municipalities' recognition of that history. Things slowly evolve into processes. Will that change? I don't know. But that's the reality. That's how we got to where we are now.

LORELEI NICOLL: Nova Scotia property taxes are based on property assessments, which are based on the real estate market. Property assessments across the province have all risen in assessment, resulting in huge increases in mandatory education and other funding received by the Province. Is this government reviewing the means in which increased assessments are resulting in increased funding to the Province for education and et cetera?

JOHN LOHR: Again, I would suggest the member refer that question to the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development in terms of the calculation of that number.

What I can say is that PVSC, Property Valuation Services Corp., is something that's been enabled by our Legislature at some point in the past. It's owned by the municipalities. It has a board of directors that manages it. The rise in property values remains subject to the cap. Municipalities themselves have seen substantial increases in revenue as these

numbers rise, and will continue to, given that we continue to see property values rise and actual PVSC numbers lag by about a year.

The reality is that we have seen a very large increase in property values. That might sound like a good thing, but it's really a problem for most Nova Scotians because it's a problem to purchase, and the increased value of homes. It's a problem for Nova Scotians to pay increased taxes on those. We recognize that. The thing that we are trying to do as Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing is find ways to make housing more affordable. We're doing that for rentals through an estimated \$100 million investment in partnering with the federal government on taking the PST/HST off multi-unit apartment buildings.

We're working through a down payment assistance program to help new home buyers. We're working through a program to help senior citizens and vulnerable Nova Scotians stay in their homes by investing in furnaces and roofs. We're working through a program that continues to add Nova Scotians to it, through the rent supplement program. There's a variety of things we're doing to help with this affordability issue even as we see property values rise.

I sometimes get asked what I think will happen to property values: Will they go back down? The truth is I don't think so. We're still low compared to central Canada and we're still kind of underneath in terms of property values, what it would cost to rebuild a typical home. There are challenges from that. There are going to be ongoing challenges. This is an area of big concern for us as a department. How can we help new home buyers? How can we help people have more affordable homes? How can we increase the number of homes in the province? We know we need so many more homes.

We're addressing that through programs like helping with water and sewer. I know that many Nova Scotians - and I'm one of them; I don't have water and sewer provided, I have a well and a septic field. If you're building a new home, the cost of putting a well and a septic field in can easily exceed \$50,000. It's expensive. Can we do that more efficiently by working together with public infrastructure? Yes, we can, where it will work.

We're trying to address all these equations. We recognize that the values of people's homes have gone up. We sometimes have municipal politicians who don't understand that PVSC is their organization and is only trying to get an accurate value of people's property values. That's the reality. Across the housing spectrum, we're working as a government to solve these issues.

LORELEI NICOLL: I can guarantee you this politician understands Property Valuation Services very well. What I don't understand is the silo effect that continues to be given back to me in your responses. You are the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing. You are negotiating an MOU. The education component to it is part of the MOU. I know that the revenue is received by the Province, and I know the taxes that everyone

pays ; 30 per cent of the taxes received by HRM goes to the Province in mandatory funding. Therefore, all municipalities across Nova Scotia, because they don't have that revenue, are faced with having to decide whether to put up their tax rate or not.

I was just asking if there was some flexibility to discuss the possibility of using that 30 per cent as a means to keep tax rates down for properties across Nova Scotia.

JOHN LOHR: What I can say to the member is that we do recognize how important the municipalities are to our province. We want them to be successful. We continue to invest in them. I do want to point out that the renegotiated Service Exchange Agreement that we were here last Fall on, that we saw overwhelming support from our municipalities for, puts another \$40 million into their pockets, really.

We have a commitment to continue to work on the issues in that service exchange that weren't addressed, such as policing and fire services. I hear the member talking about the silo effect, but that's the reality, where we have different departments working with our municipalities in different ways - in terms of the Department of Public Works and our roads, incredibly important. In terms of the Department of Justice and what happens there, and policing. the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, they have a role.

I apologize for the silo effect here, but that's the reality. Some of these questions need to be asked to those ministers, in terms of the specifics, because this is what they deal with. The reality is that, in the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing, we've had an already historic accomplishment in renegotiating something that was - the reality was the NDP government took a swing at it. The previous Liberal government took a swing at it. It's complicated. That's the reality: It's complicated.

We worked hard at it, and not only us but NSFM and the members on the Service Exchange renegotiation committee, which had representatives from our towns, municipalities, rural municipalities, from the Association of Municipal Administrators, and from our department working very hard on putting that together.

We're not basking in that achievement, but I'm saying we know that the next step is some of these other issues the member is raising, and other members have raised, like roads and policing and education, so all that stuff we will continue to work on in the fullness of time as a government. We made that commitment. For instance, we're fulfilling one in this FMA, in terms of the code of conduct, which was an endeavour which was enabled by legislation by the previous government that we're really fulfilled working two years with our municipal partners.

The amendments to the MGA and HRM Charter that are required are being provisioned for in the FMA. We continue to work to provide the needs and respond to our

municipalities, and we're working hard at that. Obviously, there continues to be things that need to be done, and we will continue to work on them.

[7:30 p.m.]

THE CHAIR: Before I recognize the honourable member, I would like to just point something out: conduct when another member is speaking. When a member is speaking, no member shall pass between the member speaking and the Chair, nor interrupt the member speaking, except to rise on a point of order.

I say this because three times now, my ability as a Chair has been impeded by somebody blocking my view of the minister in order to recognize him. I ask that no members impede my ability.

The honourable member for Cole Harbour-Dartmouth.

LORELEI NICOLL: I hadn't noticed. The questions I'm bringing up today are to do with what I said you quoted, that "growth is a good problem to have." The growth that we have seen is primarily here in the Halifax Regional Municipality. Other than Annapolis - they are second, they placed as far as growth goes.

With growth, taxpayers and ratepayers to Halifax Water will have to pay more. Therefore, I am asking if you are entertaining - through the Service Level Agreement, as Halifax put their taxes up 5 per cent last year, they're entertaining 7 per cent this year. Is that going to be a continual thing? You see people are complaining that they can't afford to live in Halifax because of the taxes.

You have many powers, and as you discussed these things, I know when I was on council that many people would call. "I can't live in Cole Harbour anymore, I'm moving to Windsor." "I can't live in Cole Harbour anymore, I'm moving to Truro." Is that our plan for growth, to just continually have people not be able to afford to live here?

When I moved here in the late 1980s, I couldn't live on the peninsula. I couldn't afford it. That's how I came to Cole Harbour, but it's getting harder and harder as growth is happening everywhere. In your special powers, you came in here blustering as the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing with Bill No. 329, taking on those powers. I'm asking: Are you giving any consideration to the affordability that the people in the HRM are facing with regards to their property taxes?

JOHN LOHR: What I can say is that the reality is we see growth in every part of the province. Absolutely. Not just in HRM we see it, and not just in the Annapolis Valley, in particular. In the South Shore, as well, we see tremendous growth. We see growth everywhere. We know that if we break the province into regions and we call one region

Western and Northern and Central and Eastern and HRM, the demand is approximately 10 times greater in HRM than in any one of those single other regions.

We focus a lot of our effort on HRM. We know there are affordability issues with housing. A lot of that is driven by global circumstances that are essentially beyond our control - supply chain issues, the cost of goods, the cost of transportation to bring goods here. Driven by taxes. Driven by the carbon tax, for example. Just one thing.

The reality is that the growth we're seeing has driven the need for skilled trades. There's a shortage of skilled trades, which we are working hard to address through the MOST program, through the Department of Labour, Skills and Immigration. It's a \$100 million investment in training more skilled trades. We're investing in more building inspectors.

We're doing all kinds of things to try to help the affordable building thing. We believe that one of the solutions in the future will be more modular housing. I've said before that we don't buy a car by having three mechanics show up in our driveway and build it right there in the driveway. We don't buy cars that way, but we buy houses that way. We have to change that. It has to become much, much more efficient.

We have to look at every possible thing we can do. In terms of HRM - one of the things that I admire about cities is that they're inherently efficient. We know in HRM, on the peninsula, there were more people in 1961 living on the peninsula than today. That's simply a demographic issue. Home composition has changed. We now have about 2.1 people in the average home, I believe, whereas in 1961 it was probably three or four.

We have to get more efficient as a people in terms of density. We have to increase density. We have to find ways to increase the efficiencies in how we deliver housing. People make choices on where they want to live. Some people commute in every day into work in the city. I'm a commuter from the Annapolis Valley, every day into the city. That's a choice people make for many reasons. It's not necessarily less expensive to live in the Annapolis Valley, honestly. It's not necessarily less expensive in the South Shore than it is in HRM.

Still, this whole affordability issue and taxes play a role in that for sure. The reality is there's one taxpayer and whether we're getting it from the bag of chips you buy at the corner store and we're getting our HST on that, or your property tax or your income tax, which is federal or provincial, there's still only one taxpayer.

The reality is that sorting out who does what, who pays for what, how we interact with our municipalities is something that will never be finished. We'll continue to work on that. It will continue to evolve as our world continues to evolve and change. We're committed to that process. We certainly respect the municipal level.

I take issue with the suggestion that I was ever blustering in this House. I think that's unparliamentary language. I don't expect the Chair here to rule on that, but I'm disappointed to hear that kind of language in terms of what we've done. We've always expressed as a government - I've always expressed concern for people who are looking to buy a home, and for our children. How are our children going to be able to afford a house if we don't address some of these structural problems? If I ask myself who I am working for here, I'm working for my children. I hope you're working for your children and your grandchildren and my neighbour's children. That's who I'm working for here as an MLA. I want to make this a better world for them, a world that makes sense for them. That's what we're doing here as a government, and that's who my staff are working for, too. I might be in charge, and technically they might be working for me, but in reality, we're all working for the people of Nova Scotia.

THE CHAIR: The honourable member for Bedford Basin.

HON. KELLY REGAN: I just have a couple of questions more related to the EMO side of the portfolio, and some housing too. The minister would know that I have reached out a number of times about issues on Union Street, post-July 21st flooding. Today I was talking to some folks on Union Street, and hearing from them that they're stuck, they're out of money, and they have not heard back from the Province. In some cases, I think they have received a small amount of money toward the eventual resolution of their claim, but they don't know if this is their money that they get to keep or not, and they've been warned that.

One fellow I heard from today received \$10,000, but his claim is for much more than that. We have people who, in some cases, have two mortgages, two sets of insurance, they can't move on, they're still waiting to find out what is going on with their particular claim. They're not getting phone calls returned about their claim, and they're extremely frustrated. That's one issue.

I'm going to put them both on the table here now, because I know the minister is giving fulsome answers, and so I want to make sure I get time to get both of my questions in here. Perhaps the solution is that the minister and I have a chat about this offline, so I can bring the particular cases to his attention.

I'm very concerned about families who still don't have their entire family complement living with them because of the situation their house is in. A lot of people on Union Street, seven months later, they still can't move on. There's still damage in there, they're still living in a half-finished house, and those need to be dealt with.

The other thing is, of course, about the homes that were severely damaged and have been repeatedly flooded along Union Street. Some of them are just a few metres away from the Sackville River, and they continue to flood time after time. I can tell you that this past week, when we had that extensive rain, I was driving along, looking at the Sackville River,

thinking. Is this the next big one? The water was so, so high. I know the residents there, every time it rains, they're clenched, too. They're very worried after what happened last July 21st.

The two things are there are people who are waiting - they need to know. In some cases, there are lawsuits against insurance companies. They can't proceed with those until they have numbers, and they need accurate numbers. Also, the buying of the homes for the people who have flooded repeatedly, sustained extensive damage, and live close to the Sackville River.

[7:45 p.m.]

JOHN LOHR: I appreciate the question. We recognize the tremendous stress that flooding in all parts of Nova Scotia, and all of the events that we've gone through in the last year and a half, have had on Nova Scotians.

In terms of EMO, there have been somewhere between 3,000 and 4,000 DFAA claims - I can certainly get the exact number - that have put tremendous stress on our system. In order to be compliant with the federal government, all of them need an adjuster to be involved or they won't be honoured by the federal government.

In terms of Union Street, we know that we have 25 claims; 9 of them have been paid. The majority of the rest have received an advance. If you want to talk to us offline about any one, we're happy to do that - my EMO staff are up there. We certainly care about every individual.

In terms of buying homes one-off, that is not provisioned or envisioned in the DFAA process. It's not provided for as a process. I have raised it with the federal minister. I wrote him a letter about it, and I did ask him verbally. I did also ask his deputy minister. We haven't heard back.

That's the reality. We know the DFAA program is going to continue to evolve. There's been a fair number of signals by the federal government on that over the last two years. We should know in April of this year what the new DFAA program looks like to be implemented in April of 2025. That's what the federal government has indicated to us. We will continue to work with people not only on Union Street, but across the province. We're working - my staff - we've provisioned for and we've funded more adjusters. There's just been so much work, and adjusters have been tied up elsewhere on other claims, if you can understand. If it was just us, that would be one thing, but the whole industry has been challenged by the last year and a half in Nova Scotia.

KELLY REGAN: I think with that, I will reach out to the minister's office for the particular claim that I heard about today. I'll encourage the other folks to get in touch with

me, and then we can get in touch with your office and we'll get to work on those. They really do need to know where they stand.

THE CHAIR: The allotted for the consideration of Supply today has elapsed.

The honourable Government House Leader.

HON. KIM MASLAND: I move that the committee do now rise and report progress and beg leave to sit again on a future date.

THE CHAIR: All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

The committee will now rise and report to the House.

[7:47 p.m. The Committee of the Whole House on Supply adjourned.]