

HANSARD

NOVA SCOTIA HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY

STANDING COMMITTEE

ON

VETERANS AFFAIRS

Thursday, November 20, 2003

Committee Room 1

Royal Canadian Legion

Printed and Published by Nova Scotia Hansard Reporting Services

VETERANS AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

Michel Samson (Chair)
William Langille
Cecil O'Donnell
John Chataway
Jerry Pye
Gordon Gosse
David Wilson (Sackville-Cobequid)
Harold Theriault
Stephen McNeil

[Harold Theriault was replaced by Wayne Gaudet.]

In Attendance:

Darlene Henry
Legislative Committee Clerk

WITNESSES

Royal Canadian Legion

Victor Barnes
President of Nova Scotia/Nunavut Command

George Aucoin
First Vice-President of Nova Scotia/Nunavut Command

Jack Hatcher
Honorary Treasurer and Chair of Veterans Services Committee



HALIFAX, THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 20, 2003

STANDING COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AFFAIRS

9:00 A.M.

CHAIR
Michel Samson

THE CHAIR: Order, please. I would like to call this meeting of the Veterans Affairs Committee to order. This morning we have representatives from the Royal Canadian Legion, Nova Scotia/Nunavut Command. I'm wondering if our guests would introduce themselves.

VICTOR BARNES: Yes, I'm Victor Barnes, President of Nova Scotia/Nunavut Command.

GEORGE AUCOIN: George Aucoin, 1st Vice-President of Nova Scotia/Nunavut Command.

JACK HATCHER: Jack Hatcher, Honorary Treasurer and Chairman of the Veterans Services Committee.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. I certainly want to welcome you here today to this committee. I'm wondering if committee members would take this opportunity to identify themselves and their ridings for our presenters.

[The committee members introduced themselves.]

THE CHAIR: It's my understanding that Mr. Jerry Pye, the member for Dartmouth North, is unable to join us this morning, and I'm sure he sends his regrets. Gentlemen, we're here today to hear your presentation. I imagine there will be some questions afterwards from some of the committee members. I would urge you to lead us off with your presentation.

VICTOR BARNES: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and a good morning to all members of the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs for the Province of Nova Scotia. This morning, members of our Nova Scotia/Nunavut Command of the Royal Canadian Legion Veterans Services and Seniors Committee would like to make presentations to your committee. First, I would like to introduce our members - of course we've already done that.

If you agree, Mr. Chairman, I will start off with a few remarks, or I can wait until after the presentations have been made.

THE CHAIR: Whichever you prefer.

VICTOR BARNES: Okay, I will start now. Over the past several years, I have been a member of this Legion committee, and I must tell you we are very pleased with the results. Some examples are: the renaming of a section of Highway No. 102; the establishing of a compulsory Canadian high school history course, which is being well accepted by our high school students; the veterans licence plate, which incidently is being copied by most other Commands, again Nova Scotia leads the way; and many other projects. This speaks very highly of the co-operation between both of our committees to the benefit of our veterans, seniors and our Legion members, and we look forward to continuing with this co-operation in the future.

Mr. Chairman and members, it has come to my attention that some members of government are advocating a statutory holiday for Remembrance Day. This is not what we are looking for at this time. The Nova Scotia Remembrance Day Act is probably the best Act in Canada, as it satisfies our needs perfectly. Our thinking is that if you make this day a holiday and it falls on a Friday or a Monday, we feel that most people would take off on a long weekend and our ceremonies would suffer. If you look at New Brunswick, their statutory holiday may cost up to \$16 million. We would just as soon see that money go to health care in our province. We have supplied copies of the Nova Scotia Remembrance Day Act to each member of the committee.

Mr. Chairman and members, please think twice before making this a holiday. The Royal Canadian Legion is pleased with things the way they are. Thank you. I will now ask our Chairman, Comrade Jack Hatcher to speak.

JACK HATCHER: Mr. Chairman, would you prefer to field any questions for Comrade Vic with regard to Remembrance Day before I do mine?

THE CHAIR: I think we can probably wait, hear all your presentations first, and then I am sure members will have questions afterwards, and we can deal with them at that point.

JACK HATCHER: Mr. Chairman, I would like to start by thanking the committee on their past performance following meetings with the Legion. Just to name a few of them, there's the meeting with the fire marshal, that item has been resolved to our satisfaction and to that of

our Legion branches, it's working quite well at this point; the new no smoking regulations, well, I don't know if we could ever resolve that but we got the answers we were looking for, and we have a working relationship with the regulations people; the senior safe driving program, which, as you probably are aware, is going quite well and we're quite satisfied with that; and the new bill, Bill No. 98, Volunteer Protection Act, has placed a lot of our people at ease as far as helping out in the communities, and we were very thankful for that one.

Two items that appear not to be resolved to date are: self-service gas stations - the problem with self-service gas stations was addressed earlier this year at this meeting. In February of this year, we addressed the problem some of our veterans and seniors in the province are experiencing. To date, we have received nothing on this issue. We would certainly appreciate it if you could send some letters off to somebody and have some meetings with the regulatory people.

Our other item is the VLTs. Over a number of years we have addressed problems with the cash breakdown on VLTs. Being advised that we would receive a letter or a meeting with the Minister of Finance, we have had several meetings with the minister and staff over this period with no results. We would certainly appreciate it if you could help us out with that problem.

Mr. Chairman, that's all I have at this point.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Aucoin.

GEORGE AUCOIN: Good morning, Mr. Chairman and members of the legislative committee. Having read through past reports and correspondence from the previous and present committee members, it is most obvious that a lot of time and effort has been put into these proposed programs for veterans and seniors. I have polled several zone commanders from across the Province of Nova Scotia, and my response from them about most of these programs is a definite positive. Being a new member on the block, I am most pleased to be part of this vibrant team. I am here on a learning term.

Respectfully yours, George G. Aucoin.

THE CHAIR: Well, certainly, I want to thank each one of you for your presentations. Mr. Aucoin, your last remarks, how you're pleased to be part of this vibrant team, I think all committee members would agree, in fact I believe that other than one or two, all of the members on this committee are new members also who are looking forward to working on this committee and achieving some of the results that have been seen in the past.

We certainly join in that enthusiasm. Now I'm curious if any of the committee members have some questions they would like to raise. Mr. Langille.

WILLIAM LANGILLE: Not really a question, Mr. Chairman, but a comment. On the proposed statutory holiday, as you know and as you said, our Act in this province is probably the best Act in Canada. To me, the word remembrance is just that, we remember. It's not a holiday, it's to remember. When you have a holiday, you create a scenario where four times a week the holiday would make it a long weekend. If it falls on a Friday, of course it's a long weekend. If it falls on a Saturday, that would give you a holiday on Monday. If it falls on a Sunday, of course that would also give you a holiday on Monday, and if it falls on Monday, it would give you a long weekend also.

I think the Legion has to bring it forward to the people of Nova Scotia for people to remember, and that's what it is. I believe that with the poppy sales and more people turning out at the cenotaphs when Remembrance Day falls, that is the day that we remember. You people are doing an excellent job at the schools, we have more school children out. Just for an example, in Ontario there is still school. They're not even out. That's just one example. I had an opportunity to go to three cenotaphs, laying wreaths, one on the Sunday before Remembrance Day and then two on Remembrance Day, and also attending a function at another Legion. The turnouts are just overwhelming. Granted we did have good weather, which would help. Over the past few years, the turnouts have been excellent.

Just in conclusion, I think we all must remember that Remembrance Day is a day to remember, it's not a holiday. Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Gaudet.

WAYNE GAUDET: Mr. Chairman, I guess just coming from the Remembrance Day, speaking with veterans in Clare, I was basically asking for some feedback on this proposed statutory holiday. My comment is just the opposite of my colleague. Some of the veterans from home are telling me that they're hearing from individuals who are forced to work on Remembrance Day, and they're unable to attend the services on Remembrance Day. For a lot of them, they feel that if it was a statutory holiday, they could participate. Unfortunately, because of Remembrance Day not being a declared statutory holiday in Nova Scotia, they're unable to support their neighbours, their friends at these remembrance gatherings.

So, I guess what I'm looking for is, I expect that your association has received feedback from throughout Nova Scotia, I know it is practically impossible, where you have a percentage in favour or a percentage not in favour, so I am just curious in terms of have Legions around Nova Scotia provided you with some clear direction that they're dead-set opposed to a statutory holiday in the Province of Nova Scotia?

VICTOR BARNES: Nothing written, but it is our feeling at Command and it has been for quite a few years that, as you know, we have all the zone commanders - there are 29 of us - meet at our council meetings, and the feeling is, just leave it the way it is. We like it that way

and we feel very strongly that we have the best Act in Canada for our sakes. That's as it stands today. Now, what happens in the future, I have no idea.

[9:15 a.m.]

If you look across the province, there is no more room in the Legions for anybody else anyway. The Legions are packed, each and every one right across the province. I was at the cenotaph in Halifax this year, and you could hardly move in the place, with the amount of people who were there. So, we bring it up at all our council meetings. As I say, our executive and all our zone commanders, who represent every area in the province, and everybody agrees, we like it the way it is.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Chataway.

JOHN CHATAWAY: I very much appreciate the opportunity and certainly, I think all the reports that you had are very encouraging. It is a very important committee to all the 52 MLAs, they're very, very knowledgeable - maybe not as knowledgeable as they should be, but basically very knowledgeable - on the efforts that have always been done by Nova Scotians. I understand the Nova Scotia/Nunavut Command has basically sort of been seen right across the country as a modern, up-to-date executive that is really helping all the veterans and their families, et cetera.

To that point, I know, Mr. Hatcher, you mentioned self-service gasoline stations. Could you just update me on that, what actually was the request?

JACK HATCHER: The request was made at the last meeting that we had with you people to put us in contact with the appropriate people in order to cut down on the number of self-serve stations. What is happening is, and we're getting a number of inquiries and complaints about handicapped people, whether it be physical or if they're having medical problems, having to get out and serve themselves at a service station. If you look around, you will note that there is a large number of self-serve. Come nine o'clock at night, it's almost impossible to get a full-serve station, unless you want to drive quite a distance. We want to try to stop the progress of the self-serve stations and make sure that in each area there is a full-service station.

JOHN CHATAWAY: I know the area that I live in that, basically, yes, you may have pumps here, pumps here, you know, they can serve four cars at one time and about three of them may be self-serve, but there is always at least one full-service.

I think maybe another request, and I think we would all agree too, was that after Hurricane Juan, a lot of the gas stations did not have emergency pumps, so they had lots of gas to sell, but it's in their tanks and you can't get it out of the tanks unless - and that could be a

request too, I would think, to make sure that all gas stations, when you have to have gasoline and the electricity is off, have to have some alternative source of electricity.

I have just one more question, is that okay?

THE CHAIR: First, just for the committee's information and I'm not sure, Mr. Hatcher, if you received these letters but we did get a response from the minister at the time, the Honourable Peter Christie, the Minister of Service Nova Scotia and Municipal Relations, it is dated March 14, 2003. A letter was sent from the chairman of the committee, following your meeting and we did receive a response from the minister. If you haven't received a copy, we will certainly provide you with one.

There was a letter also written to the Retail Gasoline Dealers Association of Nova Scotia and we did receive a response dated March 4, 2003, dealing with the issue of self-serve stations. I'm not sure if you had received that one either. If you haven't, we will certainly provide you with a copy.

JACK HATCHER: I would appreciate it.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Chataway.

JOHN CHATAWAY: Of course, your other concern, Mr. Hatcher, was, over the years we addressed the problems of the cash breakdown for the VLTs. You met with the minister and his staff over a period of time, what was your request and what would you like to see happen?

JACK HATCHER: Our request is that the government, as it stands now, receives 78.6 per cent of the take on the VLTs and the Legions get 21.4 per cent but that is before we take out any expenses. So our actual take is down in the 10 per cent area and we want to try to get that raised. There were meetings with the minister and his staff on two occasions, I believe, Vic, and we never got any reply back, other than well, we will look at this and get back to you. But we've never heard a reply back, there have been no replies to our letters that go out.

JOHN CHATAWAY: The VLTs, of course, some are for non-profit associations, which the Legions are.

JACK HATCHER: That's correct.

JOHN CHATAWAY: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

THE CHAIR: Mr. O'Donnell.

CECIL O'DONNELL: Mr. Chairman, I would like to ask the question, what measures can our provincial government do to be more responsive towards the needs of the veterans in Nova Scotia?

VICTOR BARNES: There are several. I spoke before at other meetings here on a hospice that's being built down in our area, in the Valley. It's being built around Kentville, near the hospital there. There is no hospice east of Montreal, so we're trying very hard to get this hospice up and running down there. Unfortunately, our treasurer just up and died on us, a darn shame, he was a veteran also, Robins Elliott, and we certainly miss him because he was an outstanding Legion person and citizen, dedicated his life to helping others, this man did. But we're still in the act of trying to raise funds to build this hospice. Now, if we can get the hospice built, you have to understand that this can save the government loads of money, because we can put them in the hospice at a lot less than what it's costing to put those people into a hospital right now. I don't remember the exact figures, but it is an awful big saving, for each person, per day as well.

We're out trying to raise funds for the hospice. Once the hospice is up and running, we are asking the government to maintain it, so we're right now raising funds for it and we've received no help whatsoever from the government, to my knowledge anyway, right yet.

This will be a first in Nova Scotia and if we can get this going, get it up and running, I'm sure it will spread all over Nova Scotia because it is a wonderful, wonderful thing. A hospice - in case some of you might not be up to date on it - is where a person who is dying can go and die in peace. It's sort of like a family-oriented environment, where the family can go in and visit, they're in private rooms, and if they can get up and walk they can go to the kitchen and make whatever they feel like they want. It just makes their last days a lot more comfortable than being in a hospital. In a hospital they are restricted to visitors and different things like that. In a hospice, that wouldn't be the case, it would be open, I believe, 24-hours-a-day for visitors. Right now that is a big project taking place down in the Valley and we would like to see this go all across the province.

THE CHAIR: I'm just curious, Mr. Barnes, just for our own information, I think you mentioned that there were these types of facilities that existed in Montreal. In how many areas around the country do we find these types of facilities, or are you aware of that?

VICTOR BARNES: The only thing I know there are none east of Montreal. If you look at things, Nova Scotia is a small province, but by God we've been leaders in just about everything that has ever come along. I would like us to be leaders in this because everybody else is going to catch onto it as soon as we get it going. This is just about the greatest thing I've ever heard of and I'm so pleased to be involved with it, with the VON. I have had doctors with me and have gone in and spoke to every Legion throughout the Valley, and they're all for it.

All Legions are trying to raise money towards this, as well as other organizations. I don't know how many there are across Canada.

THE CHAIR: We're hoping to get representatives from the Department of Veterans Affairs as our next presenters at our next meeting, and that might be a question that we want to put to them at that point to see if they have that information.

VICTOR BARNES: I could probably dig up some more information on it and supply it to you for your committee if you would like.

THE CHAIR: That would be great, any information that you do have, if there have been any letters or correspondence with government officials. You did mention at this point that there has been no help from government. Are you aware of what specific discussions may have taken place and with which departments?

VICTOR BARNES: I'm aware that the VON has been after the government for it. I'm aware that we spoke on it here before; as a matter of fact, I was the speaker on it. Before I became president, I had to turn this over to other people. It's in Hansard, February 13, 2003, I think is when I spoke on it. It's certainly a worthy cause and it's something the Legion is backing all the way.

THE CHAIR: I would appreciate it if you could provide us with as much information and then certainly the committee, after review, we will look at that.

VICTOR BARNES: I will do that. Where will I send it?

THE CHAIR: You can send it right to Darlene and she can give you the contact information afterwards on that and after we've had a chance to review it, the committee will take some direction from the committee members on that.

VICTOR BARNES: Thank you, sir, very much.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Wilson.

DAVID WILSON: Thank you. As Mr. Aucoin said earlier, being the new member on the block - as I am - a new member of the House of Assembly, and a new member on this committee, it is an honour for me to sit on this committee, as a member of the Legion in Sackville, and participated over many years for the Remembrance Day celebrations. Just a couple of quick questions on the hospice if you don't mind. Was this initiated by the VON, or was this in your local area down in the Valley?

VICTOR BARNES: It was initiated by the VON.

DAVID WILSON: Is it Nova Scotia Command and Nunavet Command coming together to raise funds, or is it more or less your local Legion where you're . . .

VICTOR BARNES: It's the local Legions right now; however, if it catches fire, which it will eventually, it will spread right across the province and all the Legions will be involved in it.

DAVID WILSON: I think it is an important issue, where my previous career was in dealing with a lot of palliative care patients and knowing the needs and wants of people who are in their last few years or their last few months, needing a place to go where their family is around them is important. I look forward to reading up on this.

[9:30 a.m.]

VICTOR BARNES: Comrade Wilson, I just can't get over seeing you sitting there. The last time I saw you, you were knee-high to a grasshopper. (Laughter)

DAVID WILSON: I appreciate that comment, thank you very much. So I look forward to reading about it and learning more about it and, hopefully, getting more support for you.

VICTOR BARNES: I will certainly supply the information.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Mr. Barnes.

Mr. Gaudet.

WAYNE GAUDET: Mr. Chairman, I want to go back to the VLTs. Are there VLTs in all Legions throughout Nova Scotia?

VICTOR BARNES: No, most though.

WAYNE GAUDET: I heard earlier that the percentage that Legions have is 21.4 cents. I think I heard also that the Legions that do have VLTs have a cost. I am just wondering, do the Legions have to pay a rental fee to the province?

JACK HATCHER: They dropped the insurance last year but we still have to pay for telephone lines and we have to keep somebody in the building to maintain the machines, as far as keeping paper in them, et cetera, counting the money and depositing it, the whole bit. It is all cost related to the machines.

WAYNE GAUDET: That's what I wanted to find out, thank you.

THE CHAIR: I'm just curious, as a follow-up to that, Mr. Hatcher. You indicated there were some discussions that have taken place. Who were the discussions with, was it the Gaming Corporation directly?

JACK HATCHER: It was the minister and the Gaming Corporation.

VICTOR BARNES: Yes, we had a couple of meetings with the Minister of Finance and we did have a meeting, I believe - I wasn't at the meeting, however, the feeling I got from the input that came from the meeting was that they walked in and said here is the way it is, bang, that was it. We didn't have a chance to voice our opinion on anything, they came in and it was just cut and dried. When they left we wondered why they called the meeting.

THE CHAIR: I'm curious, Mr. Barnes, is there any correspondence that took place between the Legion and government on this issue that you could provide the committee with, or was it just a face-to-face meeting without any minutes?

VICTOR BARNES: No, there has to be correspondence and if you would like, I will look it up when I go back and have copies sent to you, sir.

THE CHAIR: I'm just curious. The meeting you are referring to, do you recall who was at that meeting?

VICTOR BARNES: With the Finance people?

THE CHAIR: Yes.

VICTOR BARNES: Well, he was there himself and he had the Health Department officials with him because I had raised quite a bit about the (Interruption) Oh yeah. And also the inspectors, we were supposed to have a meeting with them because we sort of had, I don't know, it was a confusing issue. There were criteria laid down for inspectors and there were criteria laid down for Legions, but we weren't allowed to see what the inspectors had. So there was quite a conflagration over that . . .

JACK HATCHER: It was on the smoking.

VICTOR BARNES: Was it on the smoking? I'm sorry, it was on the smoking, but it was a terribly confusing issue, anyway.

THE CHAIR: I'm just curious. Which minister did you meet with and when did this meeting take place?

WILLIAM LANGILLE: I can shed some light there. Actually I was there at the meeting because I helped set it up with Minister LeBlanc. At the meeting it was discussed that the Legion used to receive more money and that was taken at a lower rate, and also through

our government, there were concerns, where there is a moratorium on VLTs, there were only so many of them in the province. We were taking VLTs that didn't make a certain amount of money out and the only concession we received, the Legions, I think it was one machine per Legion and if there were more not making that certain amount of money - and I'm not sure, I think it was \$350 a week - that they would only take one machine out. I believe if there were only two in that Legion that they would stay. I could be corrected, Mr. Chairman, but as I recall that's it.

Where you have 10 machines and four were not making the amount of money, they would only take one machine out of that Legion. That was a bit of a concession, but as to the percentage, no, there was never anything done. I don't know if there's correspondence from the minister, but I know from personal discussions with him that other charities would come on stream and different places and it would maybe have a snowball effect: if we do it for one, we would have to do it for everybody. I think that was the consensus from the minister. What we did achieve is only removing one machine per Legion, and where there were only two machines, they got to stay.

THE CHAIR: I'm just curious, just for my own information, am I to understand that the Legion used to get a better rate of return, once upon a time, and that that has now changed?

JACK HATCHER: Yes.

THE CHAIR: Was it only the Legions getting this preferred rate?

JACK HATCHER: No.

THE CHAIR: It was all around, it's just that the rate was reduced across the board for everyone. Okay.

JACK HATCHER: Mr. Chairman, may I just add that we have to look at the fact that in Legions and other service clubs that are involved with these machines, the bulk of their monies go back into the community versus a business that has to make a profit to maintain their business. We're looking at helping the community, so every time we lose money on percentages that's money that doesn't go back into the community.

THE CHAIR: I'm curious, just as a follow-up question to that, were you ever given a breakdown of, other than the Legions, how many other non-profit groups had access to VLTs? We just heard the comment about a snowball effect, and I'm just curious how big this snowball would be. Outside of the Legions, I know locally I can only think of one place that's a non-profit group that has VLTs, other than that they're all private businesses. Were you given that breakdown?

JACK HATCHER: We haven't been given that breakdown, no, but I understand the other charities that have VLTs are on the same breakdown that we are.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Gosse.

GORDON GOSSE: You just asked my question, I was just wondering how many non-profit organizations in the province were receiving this kind of breakdown. Are you looking for the committee to do something on getting a better breakdown for all non-profit organizations in the Province of Nova Scotia?

JACK HATCHER: What applies to one would have to apply to the rest. That's our feeling on it anyway. Sure, we're out for the Legion, but it would have to apply across the board.

GORDON GOSSE: I was just wondering.

VICTOR BARNES: What all this boils down to, really, is we're having problems meeting our commitments, as well as everybody else, believe you me. We just do not want to lose the programs that we have in effect today. Most of it, or a good portion of it, deals with students. We put \$53,000 every year into a leadership camp for students, high school students, and this is absolutely the most wonderful camp you will ever see, believe me. We've had lawyers, doctors, we've even had a politician or two go through this camp. The other day I was speaking to a teacher from a school and he said you wouldn't believe the attitude in this school, how it changed when those students came back from that camp. He said it's unbelievable.

I have 10 teachers - I say I because I've been chairing it for the last six, seven years - all from the Valley, the most dedicated people you will ever find in your life. It's the most wonderful camp and there's not another one anywhere in Canada. It's one of a kind. This is only one. We also send - how many students do we send each year to sports?

JACK HATCHER: Thirty-eight.

VICTOR BARNES: At our expense. They go anywhere across Canada. We've had some fantastic results from these students. This year, I can't remember the exact figure of how many of our students . . .

JACK HATCHER: We sent 38 athletes to Kitchener-Waterloo for the national championships. Of the 38, we have 23 first-year, and we brought home 25 medals from those first-year athletes, which was a tremendous showing. That cost this Command in excess of \$45,000, to send those 38 students. So that's where the bulk of our money goes.

VICTOR BARNES: This is only a part of the programs that we really don't want to lose. We're having problems meeting our obligations.

GORDON GOSSE: The Legion in my community actually donated the land for the school. Without this money from these VLTs, I know that the Scotia Legion is now gone and the building was sold and other things, are there any other Legions in the Command that are in jeopardy of closing because of a lack of revenue?

VICTOR BARNES: We have a few, sir, that we're having problems with, but we are trying to resolve the problems. Since I became President, I've created a different system of doing things. We're getting financial reports from every Legion now, it's compulsory, monthly financial reports. So we're able to see a Legion that seems to be leaning towards problems. I have three of them right now that I've had to put trusteeships in, that's three Legions and three people as trustees. They go in, run that Legion, get it back on its feet, hold an election with new officers to try to get it going.

With Scotia, I'm sorry, we were too late. There was nothing we could do. The bank was foreclosing on it. Believe you me, we were very lucky we were able to talk to the bank and stop the foreclosure, otherwise we would have lost everything. That was a real low blow to us at Command. When we went to the meeting, the only tears in the whole place were those on the platform, I kid you not. It's a terrible thing.

THE CHAIR: I'm curious, Mr. Barnes, just for the committee's understanding, how many Legions are there across Nova Scotia, just for a better perception of what we've got here?

VICTOR BARNES: I believe it's 119 now. This includes Nunavut and Rankin Inlet, it's in Iqaluit. There's one Legion in Iqaluit and another Legion in Rankin Inlet. I just had the privilege of going up and opening up a new building for Rankin Inlet. It's a marvellous place up there. You can see a dog running away for three days. (Laughter)

THE CHAIR: Mr. McNeil.

STEPHEN MCNEIL: Mr. Chairman, Mr. Gosse actually asked my question. We've been talking about percentages, what is the dollar figure, do you know, that the Legions take in from the province?

JACK HATCHER: I don't have a dollar figure. I didn't bring it with me. I don't have that figure with me. I would just be guessing.

VICTOR BARNES: We could supply it.

STEPHEN MCNEIL: The other question that I had is with regard to the Remembrance Day Act. You mentioned earlier that there had been no formal survey taken, other than of your 29 Commands. Is there going to be one with the Legions across Nova Scotia?

VICTOR BARNES: We had never considered one. The reason we never have is, when we sit down at our council meetings, this is all brought up. We've never had a negative remark from any of the zone commanders, that's 15 zone commanders, not a negative response from any of them.

STEPHEN MCNEIL: Having said that, is it brought up at the local Legions from the local veterans, to have that . . .

VICTOR BARNES: That I really couldn't tell you. I would expect so.

STEPHEN MCNEIL: That would be helpful, I would think.

VICTOR BARNES: We can certainly do that.

[9:45 a.m.]

THE CHAIR: If you could provide this committee with any feedback that you receive or any correspondence, we would certainly appreciate that also.

VICTOR BARNES: When I go back I will have a letter put out to all Legions, requesting their feelings, but they must take it to their meetings, through their executives to their meetings, and then we will get the . . .

WILLIAM LANGILLE: One thing I've found, being a regular member of the Legion, the big thing I've found is the majority of Legion members don't realize this Act exists. When you talk to them, as I have - I'm not talking about the presidents or zone commanders, I'm talking about the members of the Legion - they don't understand the Act that we already have in place. Just for clarification on that point. I think when anybody states we will declare a holiday, sure everybody is for it, until they look into it and see what you have. The simple truth of it, they just don't know.

THE CHAIR: I guess only time will tell.

Any more, questions? None?

I had a few questions, myself. I am curious. There have been some changes to the Veterans Independence Program and I am sure we're going to get more detailed information when Veterans Affairs Canada comes in January. But I am curious, from your understanding, what are the changes, do you have any comments as to the impact or any negative impact of those changes?

VICTOR BARNES: So far we're quite pleased with the changes. This last one that came out was on VIP, that is if a veteran dies, the widow now keeps the VIP until she dies. That is a real big asset to us.

There is another one in the works. I don't know how far in the works but it is any war veteran receiving a 48 per cent or more disability pension, will have all medications paid by DVA. Now, this hasn't gone through Parliament yet, to my understanding, but I believe it is coming.

With the widows. I think it was remarked upon earlier that we only go back to 1990, anything beyond that, that's as far back as they will go with the widows for the VIP. In other words, they will regain it, but they wouldn't go any further back than that. But we are constantly, constantly, going after DVA, through Dominion Command, when we go to our conventions, it is a remarkable thing to see the resolutions that come in that Dominion Command has to take up. Our President, Alan Parks, from Prince Edward Island, is a pretty fantastic man and very, very, well respected by the recipients up in Ottawa. So he has quite a few meetings and we've gained a lot of things by them.

Another thing, I don't like to brag too much, but I'm going to tell you something. When Nova Scotia puts resolutions in up through to Dominion Command, at the Dominion convention, they pay attention. They always have and as far as we're concerned, they always will because we've brought in a lot of good stuff that is well needed. We've got two or three up there right now and we've had calls from every province in Canada asking for copies, before it goes to the Dominion convention, which incidentally is coming up next year in London.

THE CHAIR: I am sure, as chairman of the committee, we would want to commend the Legion for the work it has done and the respect that it has gained, not only here in the province but certainly throughout the country.

I am just curious, as the MLA in Richmond County, I've received a number of calls from veterans and their families concerned about the level of service that they are getting from Veterans Affairs. The idea is I think they've gone to a bit of an automated system now where it's almost like calling a call centre with all these options before you get to someone. What feedback have you received from your membership on the level of service to the vets?

VICTOR BARNES: Three or four days ago I had a meeting with Veterans Affairs people, with the highest up you can go in the province and her delegates at the Command, as a matter of fact, and addressed a lot of these problems that seemed to have been occurring. A lot of the problems occurred because of some of the members getting carried away with themselves. In other words, there was a phone number available to service officers and one service officer gave the phone number to everybody, which plugged the lines solid, so the reps couldn't get out onto the street to do their job properly, so they cut the line. Okay, that's where the problems began. Then they were worried about cutting down the size of the office in Cape Breton, but we got that solved, they just hired two new people up there.

THE CHAIR: Good.

VICTOR BARNES: So, we did have a good meeting and now we've set up a schedule, we will be having one every three months with a committee of Veterans Affairs, and we resolved a lot of the problems that were bothering Cape Breton.

THE CHAIR: Good and I am certainly pleased to hear that and I know that the Sydney office, specifically, had some problems.

JACK HATCHER: Mr. Chairman, if I may just expand on that a bit. If any member here has a veteran having problems with Veterans Affairs, if they will tell him to contact their nearest Legion, and there is a 1-800 number, the service officers will have a direct line that they can get to Veterans Affairs and get an answer for them, especially if it's an emergency.

THE CHAIR: Great, that is good information to have. I know Ralph Roberts who is the Service Officer for Branch 150 in Arichat is just a tremendous fellow to work with and every time I go to church he has a different announcement in the parish bulletin announcing different changes to it. So I encourage all members to stay in touch with their service officers locally because they do a tremendous job.

Just one last issue. I got a phone call from a gentleman who is not from my constituency but ironically he tells me that he is the uncle of one of the Conservative members - I won't say which one - but he raised a great deal of concern with the veterans' licence plates and who can get them and the criteria that's established. I'm curious, what has the membership been telling you about the criteria? I will tell you basically this veteran was quite upset that service personnel who had never served in a combat type situation could have access to this. That was his main concern. I'm curious, what sort of feedback has the Legion itself been getting on that issue?

VICTOR BARNES: We've had some feedback on it. The thing is that you have to prove that you are a veteran or have been in the service. What a lot of them are mad about is the having had to serve three years. We couldn't change that in Nova Scotia because that's a fact that came from Ottawa. Ottawa declares anybody who has served three years in the service as a veteran. We as a Command could not change that. That's what DVA accepts.

THE CHAIR: That's great information, because I know that the veteran in question had the impression that it was a Nova Scotian-made rule, which was why it was causing . . .

VICTOR BARNES: No, it isn't.

THE CHAIR: . . . and that's great information to have, because I wasn't aware.

VICTOR BARNES: It's a national rule.

THE CHAIR: That's great.

Mr. Langille.

WILLIAM LANGILLE: Just a comment on the licence plate. It was the government that had the licence plate made and it was the Provincial Command that stated what regulations and that would be in it. The government had nothing to do with the amount of service or anything else that was included in it. It was all the Provincial Command of the Legion that had that input.

THE CHAIR: I appreciate that, Mr. Langille. The question wasn't, who determined it, I guess the question was, what feedback were you getting and were changes required? But obviously it is quite clear that this is a national rule that did come down. So that's good information to have.

Mr. Chataway.

JOHN CHATAWAY: Maybe a question about that. If a person was a veteran, from World War II or the Korean War or any other thing, they didn't have to be in some Armed Services for three years, did they? If they did time, the three years refers to as a veteran, his term is three years. If you were in the Armed Services in proverbial peacetime, you had to have at least three years spent there, but if you are an actual veteran from the wars or anything like that, you could get it for just being enlisted there.

VICTOR BARNES: Yes, that's our understanding of it. The only other problem we have come across is people coming in and saying they're a veteran but with no proof. Sometimes it is pretty hard to get the proof. So we have forms for them that they will fill out and we either send them in or they can send them in to get this proof that they need. Without a proper regulation, we would get lost on this. So they're pretty sticky with it at Command.

We have had two or three people really get upset but there is really nothing we can do about it, because we cannot change the rules for one or two people. The rules have been set and we have to stick with them.

THE CHAIR: Just one last question. On Merchant Marine benefits, I'm sure that I must have at least 10 to 12 different constituents who either themselves or their families have been applying for these benefits, and it has been basically a nightmare. I'm curious whether it's just in Richmond County that it has been a nightmare, or how much of a problem has this been since they announced the introduction of benefits for those who have served in the Merchant Navy for people throughout this province to be recognized for these benefits?

VICTOR BARNES: Our information is that it is all over the province and I imagine it's all over Canada, as well, because there are so many of them, and I guess DVA just has to take quite a bit of time to evaluate it all and see who actually is what they say they are. I believe that's where the problems are coming from.

THE CHAIR: So it is a problem throughout?

VICTOR BARNES: Oh, yes, oh, yes.

Mr. Aucoin.

GEORGE AUCOIN: I have been working somewhere around 17 or 18 years on one particular merchant seaman down in the Cheticamp area, in western Cape Breton and the problem is, most of the people who served with this person on that coastal vessel are dead. It has been almost 18 years now, going on 18 years I believe it is. So there is a problem. They won't sanction it. They need somebody who served with him who is also getting a pension now and the status of that vessel.

THE CHAIR: I know it is very frustrating. I know a number who have come to see me and you ask who is the captain and in some cases it was even local captains, but unfortunately, it has been 20 or 30 years since they've passed on. So, it has been very frustrating. It is unfortunate because without any sort of identification, or any sort of paper records, it is almost impossible. I'm both pleased and saddened to hear that it's not only a problem in Richmond County, that it's a problem for individuals throughout the entire province.

Are there any other questions?

Mr. Wilson.

DAVID WILSON: One quick question. After hearing a few talks here, it brought up a concern of one of my constituents in the last few days. I'm not too sure about the name of the program, but it has to deal with the placing of a headstone for veterans. I guess this gentleman is finding it hard for a friend of his who passed away and who . . .

VICTOR BARNES: The Last Post Fund.

DAVID WILSON: Do you know if there is a big concern in our province with members going without having a proper headstone?

VICTOR BARNES: We haven't heard of any. Believe you me, if we do hear of any, we would soon contact the Last Post Fund, and they're available 24 hours a day.

DAVID WILSON: I guess there was some correspondence through Veterans Affairs and letters. So maybe I might talk to you later and maybe get your address and maybe give you a call and see if we can help this gentleman out.

VICTOR BARNES: I would refer him to Marc Gauthier and he is the service officer for Nova Scotia Command, an excellent, excellent man.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Chataway.

JOHN CHATAWAY: I would appreciate it, if there aren't many more questions, I just wanted to get back to you on the request that we look into the hospice creation somewhere in the Valley. I know that there is a veterans' wing in the hospital in Lunenburg, one in Middleton and one in Yarmouth. What's the difference between the veterans' wing and the hospice? Is the hospice only for palliative care?

VICTOR BARNES: The hospice can be used by anybody. The veterans' wing is strictly for veterans. However, a veteran's dependant could go to a hospice, but they can't go to a veterans' hospital.

Now, as I say, I think you will understand quite a bit more about it when we get some information down to you about the hospice. I think it is the most wonderful thing that I have ever come across and we're really fighting to get it built down in Kentville.

JOHN CHATAWAY: It depends, of course, on what the capacity is, it depends on how much the cost, I would assume, and things like that. So you would have some figures on costs and whatever.

VICTOR BARNES: Yes, we can get those. I can speak to the VON . . .

JOHN CHATAWAY: I very much appreciate and the whole committee would very much appreciate what literature you have other than what we specifically discussed.

VICTOR BARNES: I can get you literature right from the horse's mouth, sir.

Mr. Wilson, the number you want is 429-2993, that's Marc Gauthier, service officer.

GORDON GOSSE: There isn't a 1-800 number for that, is there, for around the province?

VICTOR BARNES: No.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Langille.

WILLIAM LANGILLE: I would just like to make a quick comment on the self-serve gas stations. This is a problem and it is going to get worse, it certainly isn't going to get better. For example, last week on the way home I stopped in Dartmouth to get self-serve gas and I couldn't get it, but they also had full there, and it said credit card. I put my credit card in - I don't know what they wanted, but anyway, I had to go to full service, even I couldn't understand how to get the gas.

[10:00 a.m.]

I just wanted to bring to your attention on Highway No. 104 and the turnoff to Westville, the Irvings put a big new station there. When I went in there, as I recall, there is only self-serve gas. At that time, I'm thinking of you people, not just the Legion members but seniors in particular, and disabled people. More and more service stations are going to self-serve. If you look back a few years ago at how many full-service stations as compared to self-serve now, the gas retailers of Nova Scotia, I don't know how concerned they are, but this is a big concern. I don't know what clout the government has on regulating this. It comes under Service Nova Scotia. I don't know if we have a letter back on the matter or not.

Anyway, it's a problem and it's only going to get worse. I don't think there's another group that brought it up, except for you people, to recognize just how bad a problem this is and is going to be.

VICTOR BARNES: I think the Group of Nine did as well.

WILLIAM LANGILLE: Yes, okay.

JACK HATCHER: I think they were looking into that also.

VICTOR BARNES: Incidentally, Jack is our representative on the Group of Nine, as well.

WILLIAM LANGILLE: I don't have a solution, it's just a comment.

THE CHAIR: If I'm not mistaken, I believe there were some representations made to the Community Services Committee from a few groups representing disabled persons who also raised the concern of the self-serve stations.

Of interest, Mr. Langille, from your comments, if I am not mistaken, the service station in question in Westville did receive some government funding and is declared a provincial rest stop, which if I'm not mistaken is the only provincial rest stop we actually have in this province. So, this committee may want to actually raise some questions as to if it did receive government funding, why does it not have any sort of full service in light of the concerns raised by the Legion and by disabled groups. But it is a provincial rest stop. There is signage indicating so and I believe there was some provincial funding and the granting of the land in question for that station. So, if any of the members want to make a motion on that, we can certainly maybe look into that issue a bit further.

Mr. Langille.

WILLIAM LANGILLE: I wasn't aware of that, Mr. Chairman. But if that is, in fact, a provincial rest stop, somebody must have been sleeping at the wheel not to have a full-serve. I think that should have been one of the requirements to put a service station in there.

WAYNE GAUDET: Mr. Chairman, I'm ready to make a motion that the Veterans Affairs Committee ask the - do you know where the funding came from?

THE CHAIR: I don't know which - it may be best to ask the Premier directly, I guess, unless Mr. Langille is aware?

WILLIAM LANGILLE: I believe it was Transportation and Public Works.

WAYNE GAUDET: Then my motion would be to write a letter on behalf of the committee members, addressed to the minister requesting information, twofold: just to confirm if there was provincial funding that went into that project; and if so, if they could certainly look into providing full service to motorists, not identifying senior motorists or whoever it may be, but just to make sure that we have that on record.

THE CHAIR: Is there a seconder for that motion? (Interruption) Mr. McNeil.

Any discussion on the motion? Would all those in favour of the motion please say Aye. Contrary minded, Nay.

The motion is carried.

We will certainly endeavour to have that letter out as soon as possible.

Are there any other issues?

Mr. Gaudet.

WAYNE GAUDET: Mr. Chairman, early this morning you made reference that the committee had received letters from the Retail Gasoline Dealers Association and Service Nova Scotia. Would it be possible to circulate copies of those responses to the committee members as well?

THE CHAIR: Yes. I assumed that you had them in front of you but if not, those responses will be provided. In fact, the letter sent from Mr. Langille who was then chairman is attached also and the response has come back. That will be made available to all committee members and will certainly be made available to the Command.

Mr. Langille.

WILLIAM LANGILLE: Mr. Chairman, just getting back to the service station in Westville, I have only stopped there once and it was a while ago. We want to make sure that there is not full-serve there. Now have you stopped there? Has anybody stopped there?

THE CHAIR: I have stopped there numerous times and there is none at all.

GORDON GOSSE: There's a new Ford dealership there, though. (Laughter)

THE CHAIR: We're not sure who owns that one but no, I have stopped there regularly and there is no full service as of the last month or so when I last stopped there.

Gentlemen, as chairman of the committee, and I'm sure on behalf of all the members, I want to thank you for coming in here today to discuss some of the important issues. As we all know, veterans and their issues do fall under federal jurisdiction but there is certainly an important role for us to play here in the province, as legislators, and to address some of the concerns. We all have constituents who are veterans and legionnaires and ladies auxiliary members, so I certainly want to commend you for coming in this morning, and for the tremendous work that the Command is doing on behalf of all Legion branches and on behalf of all veterans.

Never hesitate to contact us if any issues do arise or if you have any correspondence you would like this committee to consider, feel free to either contact myself directly, or Darlene at the Committees Office, with any issues that come up. We will make sure that all correspondence that comes out of some of the issues that arose today will be copied to you and we certainly would appreciate any feedback that you would have on those issues.

Mr. Hatcher.

JACK HATCHER: Mr. Chairman, if I may. I think you probably just answered my question but the Legion will have another presentation that they would like to present to this committee. It is with regard to our youth programs. What would be the procedure on meeting with this committee?

THE CHAIR: As we adjourn this particular meeting we are probably going to meet for a few minutes just to discuss our schedule. We will certainly notify you when we will be available to have that presentation.

JACK HATCHER: It would be just the one subject.

THE CHAIR: Sure, and I would imagine at this point it would be safe to say it will be early in the new year that we would be prepared to meet again, and we will certainly notify you of that.

JACK HATCHER: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: We will recess for five minutes and come back to deal with our schedule. Thank you.

[10:08 a.m. The committee recessed.]

[10:17 a.m. The committee reconvened.]

THE CHAIR: I would like to call the meeting back to order. In front of you, you will see this piece of paper which has our witnesses who appeared before us today from the Royal Canadian Legion. Down below we have, as our next meeting date, Veterans Affairs Canada. The Regional Director General, I believe, is going to appear before us with some of her staff to discuss some of their programs that are available to veterans and answer any questions that we have. We have that scheduled for January 15, 2004. Are there any concerns with that? Is that agreed with the members? Hearing no concerns, we will have that set.

Now we have just heard from our presenters today that they would like to reappear before the committee to speak on a specific project that they are working on. I was going to propose possibly February that we would set up a time, mid-February, similar to our January date, and I'm wondering if that is agreed with the members or are there any comments on that?

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

THE CHAIR: It is agreed.

We will contact the Legion and suggest to them a date in mid-February for them to come in before us.

That is what we have for now. We have not received any requests from other organizations to come meet with us and I am curious if members want to deal now with possibly other witnesses or do we want to wait until our next meeting, and depending on what we hear from Veterans Affairs Canada, make a decision at that point. At the same time, we will have had the opportunity to exchange correspondence that the Legion is going to provide to us and we will have that letter going out to Transportation and Public Works with regard to the provincial rest stop. So we can probably discuss any outstanding issues following the January 15th presentation.

SOME HON. MEMBERS: Agreed.

THE CHAIR: Mr. McNeil.

STEPHEN MCNEIL: I just want to know, are we going to get any briefing notes before the meeting on January 15th?

THE CHAIR: I appreciate that and I believe the request will be made to Veterans Affairs Canada if they can provide us possibly with briefing notes before. I know when other government departments have come in sometimes, they will send a binder of information before they appear and we will certainly make that request from the Regional Director General to see if they can provide us with information maybe a week or two beforehand so that members have a chance to look at it and ask questions at that point. So it is a good suggestion and we will forward that to them.

DARLENE HENRY: Most times with this committee, though, we don't have briefing packages. It is just the Legion members coming in with their notes before them and they just give their presentations but whenever there is material available, you will get it as soon as possible.

STEPHEN MCNEIL: If they are coming to make presentations on programs, it would be nice to . . .

DARLENE HENRY: Sure.

STEPHEN MCNEIL: I don't know about anybody else but I have not accessed any of those programs, so to have a little bit of leeway or lead time to review them, I think it would make things go a little smoother.

THE CHAIR: Mr. Langille.

WILLIAM LANGILLE: I believe the next time they come in they will be talking about a track and field event.

THE CHAIR: No, I think Mr. McNeil is referring to Veterans Affairs other than . . .

STEPHEN MCNEIL: I'm talking about Veterans Affairs Canada.

WILLIAM LANGILLE: Oh, I'm sorry.

THE CHAIR: I believe Mr. Hatcher, in discussion at the end of the meeting, did indicate that if they had some correspondence they could provide to us before the presentation they would send it to us beforehand prior to the presentation. No, that's a more than reasonable request, Mr. McNeil, and we will certainly ask Veterans Affairs Canada if they can provide us with the information before we meet.

Mr. Chataway.

JOHN CHATAWAY: About the track and field, I think it is very wise that we would meet with them in February. It might be interesting just to have that question sort of posed to Sport and Recreation because they do a lot of promoting athletes in Nova Scotia and things

like this, just to see how well they work with the Legions because I know the Legion, it's a summer event but they basically go to schools and encourage and it's a very great expense for them. It's very important too and it might be interesting to know whether Sport and Recreation can help them out or whatever.

THE CHAIR: I think at this point it might be advisable maybe to hear the Legion first and raise any of those issues with them and then if there is a need for follow-up at that point with any other government agency, we can certainly undertake to do so at that time.

So, other than that, we will be meeting January 15, 2004. I wish all committee members happy holidays. Correspondence will be sent to you on some of the issues raised today and on some of the upcoming presentations we will be receiving.

So until we meet again, this committee is adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 10:23 a.m.]