



House of Assembly
Nova Scotia

DEBATES AND PROCEEDINGS

Speaker: Honourable Karla MacFarlane

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First Session

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 25, 2023

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House of Assembly
Nova Scotia

HALIFAX, WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 25, 2023

Sixty-fourth General Assembly

First Session

1:00 P.M.

SPEAKER

Hon. Karla MacFarlane

DEPUTY SPEAKERS

Lisa Lachance, Danielle Barkhouse, Nolan Young

THE SPEAKER: Order. Before we begin the daily routine, I will read the late debate topic that has been submitted by the honourable member for Halifax Atlantic:

Whereas the Affordable Housing Association of Nova Scotia states, there are over a thousand people in the HRM alone who are facing homelessness;

Whereas it is the responsibility of the provincial government, who are responsible for supporting those in need;

Whereas housing is in crisis, we have some of the highest rents in Canada, vacancy rates lower than 1 per cent, and housing starts down by 52 per cent this year from the CMHC and more needs to be done, and we need the government to take meaningful action to prevent even more people from having to experience homelessness and to support those who are unhoused to find shelter;

Therefore be it resolved the House works together to come up with a plan to house the thousands of people living in tents before Winter comes.

We'll begin the daily routine.

PRESENTING AND READING PETITIONS

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Annapolis.

CARMAN KERR: Speaker, I beg leave to make an introduction prior to that.

THE SPEAKER: Yes, please do.

CARMAN KERR: In the West Gallery, I'd like to introduce Rob and Laura Bright from Annapolis. I am proud to be their MLA. They are leaders in our community and great advocates for the environment and other things going on in our neck of the woods. Thank you, and I'd appreciate everyone giving them a hand of applause. (Applause)

The honourable member for Annapolis.

CARMAN KERR: Speaker, I beg leave to table a petition with the operative clause that reads:

“Therefore we, the undersigned residents of Nova Scotia, call upon the Premier to pause all harvesting and roadbuilding activities in forests over 80 years old on Crown land in Annapolis County until such time as 20% of Nova Scotia lands have been permanently protected.”

I have affixed my signature to the petition, as per the rules of the House.

THE SPEAKER: The petition, for now, is taken under advisement. I will certainly rule in due course whether it can be tabled. I believe it's simply due to not recognizing your signature. I'm sure everything will be fine once you indicate where you have signed, but we cannot visibly see your signature.

The honourable member for Clare on an introduction.

RONNIE LEBLANC: Speaker, I'd like to make an introduction. I'd like to introduce Vernon Belliveau, deputy fire chief for the Saint Bernard Fire Department, and his father, Michel Belliveau, also a dedicated firefighter. Strong community volunteers, love politics - they drove up from Clare today just to watch the proceedings.

I'd like you to welcome them. (Standing ovation)

THE SPEAKER: Welcome to the House. Thank you for your service and all that you do to protect our communities.

PRESENTING REPORTS OF COMMITTEES**TABLING REPORTS, REGULATIONS AND OTHER PAPERS****STATEMENTS BY MINISTERS****GOVERNMENT NOTICES OF MOTION**

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Minister of Labour, Skills and Immigration.

HON. JILL BALSER: Speaker, before I read my notice of motion, I beg leave to make an introduction.

THE SPEAKER: Please do.

JILL BALSER: In the gallery today, we have representatives from the Chinese Benevolent Association of Nova Scotia. I ask them to rise when I introduce them: Eric Yeung, Yao Ming, Jinyu Sheng, Youyu Lu, Shuxue Zhang, and Joyce Liu.

I would ask that all members in the House join me in giving them a warm welcome for all that they do for the community. (Standing ovation)

THE SPEAKER: Welcome to the House.

The honourable Minister of Labour, Skills and Immigration.

RESOLUTION NO. 733

HON. JILL BALSER: Speaker, I hereby give notice that on a future day I shall move the adoption of the following resolution:

Whereas October 2, 2023, marked the start of the Halifax Chinese community's Full Moon Over Atlantic Mid-Autumn Festival Gala; and

Whereas the gala was an immersive theatrical and musical performance event that shared a range of artistic dance, vocal, and musical performances, including the celebrated dancer Sun Yue from the Ottawa Chinese community; and

Whereas the gala was co-organized by the Chinese Society of Nova Scotia, the Chinese Benevolent Association, and the Hong Kong-Canada Chamber of Commerce;

Therefore be it resolved that in recognition of the wonderful work of the Chinese Society of Nova Scotia, the Chinese Benevolent Association of Nova Scotia, and the Hong Kong-Canada Chamber of Commerce, on October 25, 2023, the Government of Nova

Scotia thanked the Halifax Chinese community for their ongoing contributions to the diversity of rich cultures in our communities and recognized October 2, 2023 as the start of the Full Moon Over Atlantic Mid-Autumn Festival.

Speaker, I request waiver of notice and passage without debate.

THE SPEAKER: There has been a request for waiver.

Is it agreed?

It is agreed.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

The honourable Minister of Community Services.

RESOLUTION NO. 734

HON. TREVOR BOUDREAU: Speaker, I hereby give notice that on a future day I shall move the adoption of the following resolution:

Whereas this Saturday, October 28th, friends and family will gather to celebrate the remarkable life of Jen Powley, who passed away on September 17th; and

Whereas Jen Powley was an indelible force who used her own voice to speak for those who couldn't and used her words to advocate for those she knew wanted more for themselves; and

Whereas Jen Powley's legacy will live on through her own words as an author and through her actions and tireless efforts to help young people live more independently;

Therefore be it resolved that all members of the House of Assembly join me in recognizing the impactful life of Jen Powley and thinking of her friends and family who gather on Saturday to celebrate her life.

Speaker, I request waiver of notice and passage without debate.

THE SPEAKER: There has been a request for waiver.

Is it agreed?

It is agreed.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

The honourable Minister of Acadian Affairs and Francophonie.

RESOLUTION NO. 735

HON. COLTON LEBLANC: Madame la présidente, à une date ultérieure je demanderai l'adoption de la résolution suivante :

Attendu que le peuple acadien fait partie intégrante de la Nouvelle-Écosse depuis plus de 400 ans, soit depuis l'établissement initial des Acadiens à Port Royal en 1605; et

Attendu que le peuple acadien forme une communauté fière, résiliente, et dynamique qui contribue toujours aux secteurs social, culturel, et économique de la Nouvelle-Écosse; et

Attendu que le mois d'août est d'une grande importance pour le peuple acadien, la Fête nationale des Acadiens et Acadiennes étant reconnue et célébrée le 15 août depuis 1881;

Par conséquent, qu'il soit résolu que tous les membres de l'Assemblée législative reconnaissent la proclamation fait à Pubnico-Oeust-le-Bas par le premier ministre le 15 août 2023 que chaque année le mois d'août, à compter de 2024, soit reconnu comme le Mois du patrimoine acadien en Nouvelle-Écosse et célèbrent les contributions historiques et continues du peuple acadien à notre province.

Madame la présidente, je demande l'adoption de cette résolution sans préavis et sans débat.

Speaker, I hereby give notice that on a future day I shall move the adoption of the following resolution:

Whereas the Acadian people have been an integral part of Nova Scotia for more than 400 years, beginning with the first settlement of Acadians at Port Royal in 1605; and

Whereas the Acadians are a proud, resilient, and vibrant community that continues to contribute to Nova Scotia's social, cultural, and economic sectors; and

Whereas the month of August is of great significance to Acadians, as August 15th has been recognized and celebrated as National Acadian Day since 1881;

Therefore be it resolved that all members of the House of Assembly recognize the proclamation made by the Premier in Lower West Pubnico on August 15, 2023 that the

month of August each year beginning in 2024 be recognized as Acadian Heritage Month in Nova Scotia and celebrate the historical and ongoing contributions of Acadians in our province.

Speaker, I request waiver of notice and passage without debate.

THE SPEAKER: There has been a request for waiver.

Is it agreed?

It is agreed.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

The honourable Minister of Environment and Climate Change.

HON. TIMOTHY HALMAN: Speaker, before I begin, could I ask permission to make an introduction? In the East Gallery, I'm thrilled to welcome Jennifer Green, the project lead of NSCAD University's Flaxmobile project.

She is a professor who is researching sustainable plant fibres and working to develop a sustainable fibre industry in Nova Scotia. This is encouraging the development of a local, sustainable fibre flax industry. Jennifer is joined by Andy Murdoch, who works in university relations at NSCAD University.

The Flaxmobile project will assist in reducing barriers to accessing local, sustainable textiles and materials, creating green jobs in agriculture, craft, and building, promoting local consumption, sharing knowledge for climate adaptation, and sequestering an estimated 68 tonnes of carbon by 2030 and 3,669 tonnes by 2050 to meet Nova Scotia's greenhouse gas reduction targets.

Thirty-five Nova Scotian farms and artists have benefited from the Flaxmobile project, and we know it will help even more in the future. The Flaxmobile is a fitting project for us to highlight on Sustainability Day. I thank Jennifer for joining us, and I ask colleagues to give her a warm welcome to the House of Assembly. (Applause)

THE CHAIR: The honourable Minister of Environment and Climate Change.

RESOLUTION NO. 736

HON. TIMOTHY HALMAN: Speaker, I hereby give notice that on a future day I shall move the adoption of the following resolution:

[1:15 p.m.]

Whereas October 25th is Sustainability Day, a day dedicated to raising awareness and fostering action in support of sustainable practices that protect our environment and ensure the well-being of future generations; and

Whereas Nova Scotia is home to organizations and businesses committed to reducing their environmental impact, such as NSCAD University's Flaxmobile Project, an innovative mobile facility that educates and assists communities in growing fibre flax, the plant source for linen, exemplifying the province's dedication to sustainability; and

Whereas the Province of Nova Scotia acknowledges the importance of collaboration among governments, industry, community organizations, and individuals in achieving our sustainability goals;

Therefore be it resolved that Nova Scotians join me in recognizing Sustainability Day and thanking Jennifer Green and the Flaxmobile team for their commitment to creating sustainable industries in our province.

Speaker, I request waiver of notice and passage without debate.

THE SPEAKER: There has been a request for waiver.

Is it agreed?

It is agreed.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

I just wanted to put on the record for the honourable member for Annapolis that we have identified your name on your petition, and everything is good. Thank you for your patience.

INTRODUCTION OF BILLS

Bill No. 373 - An Act to Amend Chapter 217 of the Revised Statutes of 1989, the Income Tax Act, Respecting the Affordable Living Tax Credit. (Lisa Lachance)

Bill No. 374 - An Act to Amend Chapter 293 of the Revised Statutes, 1989, the Motor Vehicle Act, and Chapter 504 of the Revised Statutes, 1989, the Wildlife Act. (Hon. Brendan Maguire)

Bill No. 375 - An Act to Amend Chapter 367 of the Revised Statutes, 1989, the Provincial Winter Parks Act, to Keep the Parks Open During the Winter. (Hon. Brendan Maguire)

Bill No. 376 - An Act to Amend Chapter 32 of the Acts of 2014, the Health Authorities Act. (Elizabeth Smith-McCrossin)

THE SPEAKER: Ordered that these bills be read a second time on a future day.

NOTICES OF MOTION

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Sydney-Membertou.

HON. DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: As per Rule No. 32.2 of the House of Assembly, I'm looking for unanimous consent to read this resolution on behalf of the Kiwanis Club of Sydney.

THE SPEAKER: There has been a request for unanimous consent for the member for Sydney-Membertou to read a notice of motion on behalf of the Kiwanis Club of Sydney.

Is it agreed?

It is agreed.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Sydney-Membertou.

RESOLUTION NO. 737

HON. DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: Speaker, I hereby give notice that on a future day I shall move the adoption of the following resolution:

Whereas the Kiwanis Club of Sydney was chartered in November of 1923, being one of the oldest Kiwanis Clubs in Canada, and has been an integral and active part in the community for 100 years; and

Whereas for many years, the Kiwanis motto "We Build," can be seen in every corner of Sydney, from funding and starting the first library; building the first seniors' housing; donating the first Handi-Trans bus; building and managing the Kiwanis pool; building the Wentworth Park bandshell and Ann Terry Memorial Gazebo; helping to fund

and organize the first little league baseball; and help fund the children's ward at the Cape Breton Regional Hospital; and

Whereas the Kiwanis Club of Sydney raises and donates tens of thousands of dollars every year to fund and run its projects, such as Squadron 29 Air Cadets, for over 60 years; Kiwanis Music Speech and Drama Festival, for over 65 years; Sydney Academy Kiwanis Educating Youth Club, for over 50 years; the quarterly pediatric cardiac clinic in conjunction with the IWK, for over 35 years; was one of the first sponsors of the Breakfast and Learning Program in the Cape Breton Regional Municipality, and still to this day sponsor it at Brooklyn Elementary;

Therefore be it resolved that this House of Assembly recognize the month of November, 2023 as Kiwanis Club of Sydney Month, to celebrate their 100th anniversary of building a better community and serving children in our community and around the world.

Speaker, I ask for waiver of notice and passage without debate.

THE SPEAKER: There has been a request for waiver.

Is it agreed?

It is agreed.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

The honourable member for Halifax Chebucto.

RESOLUTION NO. 738

GARY BURRILL: Speaker, I hereby give notice that on a future day I shall move the adoption of the following resolution:

Whereas there is a dramatic inconsistency in the regulation of open-net pen aquaculture between Canada's west and east coasts, with Fisheries and Oceans Canada federally exercising jurisdiction in British Columbia, and the provincial Department of Fisheries and Aquaculture exercising jurisdiction in Nova Scotia; and

Whereas the federal government is phasing out open-net pen fish farming in B.C. by 2025, following a 2019 election commitment from Prime Minister Trudeau, encapsulated in the federal minister's mandate letter; and

Whereas in British Columbia, federal policy has already led to significant recent closures of open-net pen fish farms in the Discovery Islands and the Broughton Archipelago, and the denial of license renewal applications elsewhere in the province, while the provincial government in Nova Scotia, by contrast, continues to promote the development and expansion of open-net pen aquaculture in this province;

Therefore be it resolved that this Assembly directs the Standing Committee on Natural Resources and Economic Development to summon witnesses, study, and make recommendations on the environmental and community impacts of the asymmetrical and differential modes of administration, regulation, and jurisdiction of open-net pen aquaculture on the west and east coasts of the country.

Speaker, I request waiver of notice and passage without debate.

THE SPEAKER: There has been a request for waiver.

Is it agreed?

I hear several Noes.

The notice is tabled.

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Kings West.

CHRIS PALMER: Thank you, Speaker. I beg leave to make an introduction.

THE SPEAKER: Please do.

CHRIS PALMER: Speaker, in the East Gallery I would like to draw the members' attention to two dynamic ladies who made the drive in from Kings West today - all the way from Kingston. I'm very pleased that they're here today. I would like to ask them to stand when I speak about them.

I'd like to welcome Lauren Avery to the House. Lauren is an educator and also a brainchild and driving force behind a new market in our community that I am going to speak about in my member's statement. Unfortunately, her partner, Sarah, who has been with her from the beginning of this, is not here, but I want to welcome Lauren to the House. I want to welcome Maggie Travis, who is here and leads the team of volunteers with Lauren and Sarah. I am really pleased you folks are here.

A year and a half ago they came to my office with a vision for a community project. In just under a year, they have created a wonderful, wonderful community initiative and

farm market, and I would like to speak about that now, if I could. Please give my guests a warm welcome in the House. (Applause)

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Kings West.

KINGSTON FARMERS MKT.: SUCCESS - CONGRATS.

CHRIS PALMER: Speaker, I rise today to acknowledge the efforts of two of my constituents, Lauren Avery and Sarah Naesmyth. These two Kingston women recognized the need to have a weekly farmers market that would encourage people to support local agriculture and businesses - and then they worked hard to make it happen.

The Kingston Farmers Market is located on the lawn of the Aurora Inn, located right on Main Street. Lauren and Sarah have secured over 40 local vendors, selling produce, meat, baked goods, handmade items, and much more. There are also prepared food vendors, so people can stop by to pick up some supper, enjoy the live music, and take part in workshops. The market has a festival feel and absolutely everyone is welcome. The first market opened on June 1st and ran every Thursday until it wrapped up on October 12th.

Lauren and Sarah have worked hard to build their vendor list, securing funding, arranging music, and building relationships with community partners. Kings West is very excited about this buy-local option in our community, and it has quickly become a popular market in the Valley.

Please join me in congratulating Lauren, Sarah and Maggie, and their team on a successful first year and in wishing them many more years of continued success. (Applause)

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Yarmouth.

PHARMACISTS: EXPANSION OF SERVS. - RECOG.

HON. ZACH CHURCHILL: Speaker, I rise today to recognize the hard work of pharmacists across this province who have stepped up in our health care crisis to deliver more and more services to patients in Nova Scotia. We are glad that the government continued the work of previous governments to continue to expand the scope of practice for pharmacists, including covering high-dose flu shots for seniors. I know folks in our communities have been happy to have access to these services when they need them the most.

Right now, pharmacists are offering flu and COVID vaccine shots to Nova Scotians across the province, and I know they are coming here to the House this week, so I encourage all members who have yet to get their flu shot and vaccine shot to join me in getting one this Thursday to protect ourselves and, of course, to protect others.

Thank you, Speaker, to pharmacists across the province for the important work they do to help us get access to health care and help keep us safe.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Chebucto.

[1:30 p.m.]

BOGLE, LLOYD.: FIDDLE HALL IND. - RECOG.

GARY BURRILL: The congratulations of the Nova Scotia Legislature are to be extended to Lloyd Bogle of Stewiacke on his induction into the Canadian Fiddle Hall of Honour at the Canadian Grand Masters Fiddling Championships on August 26th in Truro.

The citation accompanying the presentation pays tribute to Lloyd for making more contributions to old-time fiddle music than most fiddlers. For many decades, Lloyd Bogle has promoted fiddle contests and concerts across the province and devoted himself to the preservation and development of old-time music in Nova Scotia.

Lloyd's love for organizing parties, dances, and music events of all kinds is legendary, and over the years he has attended dances and house parties in most corners of central Nova Scotia. Lloyd celebrates his birthday each year at the time of the Grand Masters, and his induction into the Fiddle Hall of Honour took place three days after he turned 95.

Lloyd is watching the proceedings of the House this afternoon from the common room of Cedarstone Enhanced Care, where he lives now in Truro. I'd invite all members to join me in a round of applause to congratulate Lloyd Bogle on his great contributions. (Applause)

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Victoria-The Lakes.

CHAISSON, RODNEY: HIGHLAND VILLAGE WORK - THANKS

HON. KEITH BAIN: I rise today to recognize the dedication and accomplishments of Rodney Chaisson, former Executive Director of the Nova Scotia Highland Village in Iona. Rodney had been employed for more than 30 years with the Highland Village, with measurable accomplishments through many challenges during the development of the village. By building partnerships, resources, and financial stability, Rodney brought the Highland Village's status to one of the highlighted Nova Scotia museums. The most recent accomplishment was the official opening of the new 7,700-square-foot visitors' centre this past Summer. During his years at the village, Rodney also provided outreach support to the Gaelic community of Nova Scotia, contributing to the renewal of grassroots Gaelic history and culture.

I ask all members of the Nova Scotia Legislature to join me in thanking Rodney for his dedication to the Highland Village and to the rest of the Gaelic community. I'd also like to congratulate him on his new career adventure as Manager of Site Maintenance for the Nova Scotia Museum. (Applause)

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Cole Harbour-Dartmouth.

MIDDLETON, BILL: COM. SERV. - RECOG.

LORELEI NICOLL: Today I'd like to acknowledge the continuing volunteer efforts of Bill Middleton of Cole Harbour. Bill was a clinical therapist for 30 years and following his retirement in 2006, he moved to the Halifax area. Currently aged 77, he continues working as a part-time probation officer with the Province.

For the past 15 years, in his spare time, Bill volunteers at the food bank in Cole Harbour. He grocery shops every week, and arranges food pickup from local food drives, always ensuring to send out thank-you letters.

Bill served on the building committee that was successful in securing grant dollars for the construction of the food bank building. Bill and Brian Adams, along with other volunteers from the Cole Harbour Woodside United Church, erected the shed with Bill lending his painting skills to the project, which is now known as the Cole Harbour Community Fridge.

This past Fall, the food bank was supported by 100 families a month. I ask the House of Assembly to join me in thanking Bill Middleton for making a difference in our community. (Applause)

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Citadel-Sable Island.

LISA LACHANCE: Speaker, I beg leave to make an introduction relative to my member's statement.

THE SPEAKER: Please do.

LISA LACHANCE: In the gallery today is the family of Mia Ferguson, who are here to witness a memorial statement for her. Let's welcome them. (Applause)

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Citadel-Sable Island.

FERGUSON, MIA: DEATH OF - TRIBUTE

LISA LACHANCE: I rise today to honour the life and memory of an extraordinary young Nova Scotian, Mia Ferguson. Mia was a graduate of Sacred Heart School in Halifax,

where she received many awards, all recognizing her special gifts in leadership, community service, friendship, compassion, and empathy.

Mia also received the Youth and Philanthropic Initiative Award through the Province of Nova Scotia for her work with Phoenix Youth Programs and was presented the Good Sport Award from the Nova Scotia School Athletic Federation.

Mia was passionate about working with children. Following her experiences at Big Cove YMCA Camp, she spent two summers as a lifeguard at a YMCA camp in B.C. This past September, Mia started working at Sacred Heart School with the after-school program. She has a special connection with young children, and her work provided joy, happiness, and a great sense of purpose.

She graduated with a Bachelor of Art in Fine Arts and Psychology from Mount Allison University. She was an amazing person. She was fiercely loyal to those she loved and had a soul full of sunshine. She used many tools to cope with her hardships, including humour, creating an awareness of glioblastoma, and giving back to the community by fostering from the SPCA.

In closing and in honour of Mia's spirit, do something kind for someone less fortunate. Remember that life is precious and should be enjoyed.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Pictou Centre.

MACDONALD, RENATA: GOVT. SERVICE - RECOG.

HON. PAT DUNN: We have many administrative assistants within our departments who perform outstanding work. They are an indispensable asset to their department, responsible for a wide range of tasks, including scheduling meetings, managing and distributing correspondence, organizing files, and handling numerous phone calls.

During the past two years, I have had the privilege of working with one of the best, Renata Macdonald, at the Department of Communities, Culture, Tourism and Heritage. Renata's professional, positive, and enthusiastic attitude permeates throughout her office area. Her thoughtful attention to detail always impresses me.

She possesses an innate ability to manage and prioritize tasks with grace and precision. Whether she is dealing with confidential and time sensitive files or organizing someone's week, she does it with a smile while maintaining a genuine concern for everyone in the department.

Renata can look back over her three decades working in government circles with pride and accomplishment. Renata, you're a real gem.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Northside-Westmount.

MULLINS, PAUL: DEATH OF - TRIBUTE

FRED TILLEY: Today, I rise to give tribute to a really good friend of mine who was a son, a husband, a father, and most of all, a best friend. Paul was taken from us way too early at the age of 54 last week. He was a rock for everyone.

I first met Paul in Grade 5 when I started at a new school. Paul and Troy took me under their wing. He became a close friend. I'll never forget that. We've had a lifelong friendship, Paul, Troy, and I. It's a sad day for us.

Paul was a rock for everybody. When his dad passed at a young age, Paul took over as the rock of the family. I would just like to wish Carrienne, Riley, and Anna and his mom, Florence, his sister Monique, his brother Mark our condolences - and also to a special friend, Juanita.

Speaker, I ask for a moment of silence to celebrate Paul.

THE SPEAKER: There has been a request for a moment of silence. Please stand.

[A moment of silence was observed.]

THE SPEAKER: Please be seated.

The honourable member for Dartmouth North.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Speaker, I beg leave to make an introduction. Joining us today in the gallery opposite are two very well-known and accomplished artists in Nova Scotia: Eryn Foster and James MacSwain.

I've known Eryn forever. I don't know James as well, but I know of James's work. As a young artist starting out in the performance realm in Nova Scotia, when I started watching things made in Nova Scotia, James MacSwain was definitely part of those things I was watching - all the AFLOOP films, et cetera.

I'm very pleased they're here. I'm going to do a member statement about a collaboration they've done. Please offer them the warm welcome of the House.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Dartmouth North.

CELESTIAL QUEER: FILM DEBUT - RECOG.

SUSAN LEBLANC: Speaker, nearly 10 years in the making, *Celestial Queer* is a documentary film by Dartmouth North resident Eryn Foster and fellow artist, Sue Johnson, about the delightful and mischievous Halifax filmmaker and artist James MacSwain.

After years of fundraising, filming, and post-production, *Celestial Queer* debuted at this year's Atlantic International Film Festival on September 18th. The film was met both by a standing ovation for the filmmakers and its subject and received the honour of being voted the Best Atlantic Documentary of the festival.

Born in Amherst, Nova Scotia, but spending much of his adulthood in Halifax, James MacSwain is best known for his short, experimental collaged animations. As an early activist for gay liberation, many of Jim's films explore his gay identity. A pillar of the local arts scene and mentor to many, Jim has been involved in or worked for artist-run centres the Atlantic Filmmakers Cooperative and the Centre for Art Tapes and has taught animation at NSCAD.

While the documentary does, as advertised, feature Jim's life and work, above all, it captures his wonder. I ask the House to join me in congratulating Eryn, Sue, their team, and Jim MacSwain for this truly wonder-filled film.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Inverness.

MILLER, JACK & MARGUERITE: VEG. PROD. - RECOG.

HON. ALLAN MACMASTER: Let us acknowledge Jack and Marguerite Miller, who have been operating a market garden from their family farm in North East Margaree, selling produce for 29 years. Speaker, 2023 is the last year they will sell vegetables, jams, pickles, and fudge to the public.

As the third generation to produce vegetables on this farm, the Millers have carried on the family tradition for over 100 years. They demonstrated the value of local food production and gave people the enjoyment of healthy, real food.

If you have ever driven through the Margaree Valley along the Cabot Trail, you would have seen their large sunflower field, which has provided a backdrop for photos for many visitors.

The work of their hands and the nutrition they have given to so many will be missed by all who pulled in to make a purchase. May we wish the Millers well on their hard-earned and well-deserved retirement.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Clare.

LEBLANC, EDOUARD: BOOK LAUNCH - CONGRATS.

RONNIE LEBLANC: I rise today to celebrate the remarkable achievements of Édouard LeBlanc, who recently launched his book *Mon camino sur les chemins de Clare en pandémie*.

In the first part of the book, Mr. LeBlanc takes the reader on a journey through Clare during the pandemic, beginning with his walk from home to the Duffy Road and concluding 57 days later at Cape Saint Mary lighthouse. The second part recounts his 500-kilometre walk from Lisbon to Santiago de Compostela.

Just as in his previous work, Mr. LeBlanc shares stories of his community, this time focusing on the places along his daily route. What makes this accomplishment even more extraordinary is that Mr. LeBlanc authored this book at the age of 92, making it his fourth publication.

I invite all members to join me in congratulating Édouard LeBlanc on the launch of his latest book.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Needham.

SUZY HANSEN: Speaker, before I get started, I beg leave to make an introduction.

THE SPEAKER: Please do.

SUZY HANSEN: I would like to draw everyone's attention to the West Gallery. I would like to welcome Norrie Matthews, Kai's dad; Alex Ryan, Kai's friend; and Dalhousie students Emma Courtney, Neha Khanna, and Gizelle Francis. I would like for everyone in this House to give my guests a warm welcome. (Applause)

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Needham.

STUDENTS: BforKAI CAMPAIGN - CONGRATS.

SUZY HANSEN: There is no doubt that over the past few years, we have seen the wide-reaching impact of the BforKai campaign in Nova Scotia. So many more are educated on the dangers of meningitis B and the importance of getting vaccinated.

Today I want to recognize Emma Courtney, Neha Khanna, and Gizelle Francis of Dalhousie University. Emma, Neha, and Gizelle are students of the Dalhousie Faculty of Medicine and worked with Norrie Matthews for almost a year to continue the BforKai campaign. As of this Fall, BforKai will be an official Dalhousie student society, and the university is offering both public education and vaccine clinics to first-year students about meningitis B this Fall.

I ask that the House congratulate Emma, Neha, and Gizelle for their work with BforKai at Dalhousie, as well as Norrie for taking up the cause and starting so many conversations about the significance of meningitis B in Nova Scotia.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Argyle.

QUINAN: LABOUR DAY PICNIC - THANKS

HON. COLTON LEBLANC: This year, my home community of Quinan celebrated its 137th Annual Labour Day picnic, which is back after being cancelled three times due to the pandemic.

In 1883, the first picnic in Quinan was organized and held outdoors. At that time, it was the biggest community event of the year. There were games for all ages and dancing to local violin music. Young and old looked forward to it with much anticipation.

[1:45 p.m.]

Renowned for its delicious turkey supper, it remains a much-anticipated event where our community spirit is alive and well. Residents from near and far gather to reconnect and socialize.

Speaker, I would like all members of the Legislature to join me in thanking all those who helped make this year's annual Labour Day picnic a huge success. It's humbling to see our community come together to preserve this deep-rooted tradition.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Annapolis.

AMERO, ANGELA: VOL. AWD. RECIP. - CONGRATS.

CARMAN KERR: Speaker, we are fortunate in our constituency to have so many dedicated, compassionate volunteers who work to make their community an even better place to live, work, and play. Each year, a number of these amazing folks are celebrated at the Annapolis County Volunteer Expo.

One of those very deserving 2023 honourees was Angela Amero. Angela has been an active and engaged member of the Port Royal Legion Branch 21 for a decade. She has taken on a wide variety of roles, including helping with bingo, Cadet Natal Days, and the Poppy Campaign, and serving as food services officer and a member of the executive. She was also heavily involved with the Annapolis Royal Natal Days program for 14 years.

I invite all members of the House of Assembly to join me in congratulating Angela Amero on being recognized at the 2023 Annapolis County Volunteer Expo and in thanking her for all that she's done to improve the lives of those in our community.

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

VOLS.: LABOUR DAY PICNIC - THANKS

KENDRA COOMBES: I rise in congratulations to the Cape Breton District Labour Council on a successful Labour Day picnic. Thank you to the Cape Breton District Labour Council for a great event filled with music, a magic show, games, and of course a barbecue. It was a day of fun, family celebration, and solidarity.

Labour Day is a time to renew our vows to fight for important issues, such as workplace safety and affordability, and the fight against the privatization of government services.

Speaker, I thank the Cape Breton District Labour Council and its volunteers for continuing this Labour Day tradition of solidarity to all workers.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Hants East.

KNOCKWOOD, SARA-LYNNE: SPORTS IND. - RECOG

JOHN A. MACDONALD: Speaker, I would like to acknowledge Sara-Lynne Knockwood, who is being inducted into the Nova Scotia Sport Hall of Fame in November.

Sara-Lynne is a three-time North American Indigenous Games gold medalist as well as a 2006 World Open Taekwondo Champion. She worked as director of Sport and Venue for the North American Indigenous Games, which were held in this province this Summer. Sara-Lynne has been involved with youth sports in the community for many years, helping engage youth to keep a healthy lifestyle.

Sara-Lynne is an inspiration to all the athletes, not only in East Hants, but across our province and North America. I would like to congratulate her on making her mark in sports history and on being inducted into the Nova Scotia Sport Hall of Fame. Congratulations, Sara-Lynne, and thank you for all the time you have put into being a sports mentor in East Hants.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Bedford Basin.

BOYD FAMILY: HEART HEALTH SUPP. - RECOG.

HON. KELLY REGAN: Ten years ago this past August, a Bedford family lost their son after he collapsed on the ice at a training camp for the Titan d'Acadie-Bathurst; Jordan Boyd was just 16 years old. He passed away from cardiac arrest caused by a rare heart condition. His family and many other families were absolutely devastated by Jordan's

death, but in response to that tragedy, Jordan's family established a foundation to make an impact on heart health.

In August 2021, the QEII Health Sciences Centre Foundation announced the Jordan Boyd Foundation had raised over \$1 million toward inherited heart disease. Jordan's parents, Debbie and Stephen Boyd, and their family continue to support heart health through the funding of automated external defibrillators, AEDs, in public places: Halifax, Sydney, New Glasgow, Oxford, Berwick, and most recently on the waterfront at DeWolf Park in Bedford.

I would like to thank the Boyd family for working to ensure that other families do not experience the heartache they did and let them know we will never forget Jordan.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Chebucto.

ORGS. & PARTICS.: FIDDLING CH'SHIPS - RECOG.

GARY BURRILL: The congratulations of the Legislature are extended to all the organizers and participants of the Canadian Grand Masters Fiddling Competition, held the 25th and 26th of August at the Cobequid Educational Centre in Truro.

The Canadian Grand Masters Fiddling Competition has been held every year since 1990, but it's usually in Ottawa. This is the first time that the competition had been held in Nova Scotia. All the more fitting, then, that the 2023 Canadian Fiddle Champion is Kyle Charron of Halifax. Ethan Harty of Lougheed, Alberta and Alex Kusturok of Sherwood Park, Alberta were second and third runners-up, respectively.

A special word of congratulations and appreciation is due to the Canadian Grand Masters Truro Committee, consisting of Kimberley Holmes, chair; Sharon Moore; Jamie Durning; Valerie Brousseau; and Kim MacNeil, who, with the successful hosting of the 2023 Grand Masters, have made a major contribution to advancing the tradition of old-time music in Nova Scotia.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Guysborough-Tracadie.

MEMBERS: GUYS. PARKRUN GRP. - RECOG.

HON. GREG MORROW: Speaker, I rise today to recognize the Guysborough Nature Trail Parkrun group.

A little more than a year ago, Jimmy Ryves, Al Marsden, Adam Rodgers, and Michael Wilson started their efforts to start a parkrun group in their community. The parkrun is a free community event where you can walk, jog, run, volunteer, or spectate in the 5k, which takes place every Saturday morning.

Since they started, they've had about 40 people take part. Every Saturday, they have about seven to nine regular participants, and anyone else is welcome to join. They run, jog, and walk along the Guysborough Nature Trail and enjoy friendship, meeting new people who come from outside the community, and of course, the many physical and mental health benefits of being outside in nature participating at your own pace. Some parents bring their babies in strollers and, of course, their fur babies too.

This Summer they were joined by the Parkrun's North America territory manager from Vancouver, whom they were able to introduce to this beautiful part of the country.

These gentlemen and their volunteers have brought a free activity to their community and are promoting physical activity to anyone who wants to take part. Please join me in congratulating the Guysborough Nature Trail Parkrun group.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Cumberland North.

CUMB. ACAD. SOC.: HOSTING FESTIVAL - CONGRATS.

ELIZABETH SMITH-MCCROSSIN: Speaker, today I rise to congratulate the newly formed Cumberland Acadian Society for recently hosting its first very successful Acadian Festival in downtown Amherst this past Summer.

The society, formed earlier this year, has a vision of preserving and promoting our proud Acadian history in Cumberland County. The festival, held on August 17th, was celebrated with food, music, and fun for all members of the community, with a special focus on families with Acadian heritage such as my own and my husband's - Melanson and Robichaud. Special mention to Leon Landry, Morris Haugg, and Bill Casey, who have led this society. I would also like to thank our provincial government for providing funding for this special event.

In Cumberland North, we are fortunate to be living in an area to where so many Acadian families can trace their history and where many of those families still reside - specifically the former Acadian village of Beaubassin - and provides a sad but rich history of our Acadian people.

Please join me in congratulating the Cumberland Acadian Society and wishing them great success in future events as they work to protect our valuable history.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Sydney-Membertou.

LOAVES & FISHES: COM. SERV. - RECOG.

HON. DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: Speaker, I rise on my feet to recognize an important organization in our community, Loaves and Fishes in Sydney. For decades,

Loaves and Fishes has been a community-run organization of volunteers and some folks - Marco Amati being one of them - whom I work with as he manages the facility. Loaves and Fishes feeds hundreds of people a day in our community. They've been supporting families and individuals who need help the most. It's been such a beautiful part of our community, to see the volunteers come together with a great organization to help so many in the CBRM.

I rise in my place to recognize Marco, the staff, the board, and everyone involved with Loaves and Fishes in Sydney for supporting so many at home.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Citadel-Sable Island.

BURGESSON, ALFRED: TRIBE NETWORK - RECOG.

LISA LACHANCE: Speaker, today I rise to recognize a social entrepreneur and advocate who is making big waves in Halifax Citadel-Sable Island. Alfred Burgesson is the founder and CEO of the Tribe Network, which recently opened their doors just up the hill from this House. Alfred and his family immigrated from Accra, Ghana to Nova Scotia when he was six years old. He quickly became involved in the local community, eventually serving as the co-chair of Canada's first *State of Youth Report* and representing Nova Scotia on the Prime Minister's Youth Council from 2019 to 2021.

His latest venture is the Tribe Network, a collective made up of Black, Indigenous, and people of colour entrepreneurs pursuing innovation in Canada. Tribe will invest resources into racialized leaders and entrepreneurs to help them thrive as business owners, professionals, and students.

I ask my fellow members to join me in recognizing Alfred's new social enterprise and all of the work he has done to uplift entrepreneurship and business in BIPOC communities.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Truro-Bible Hill-Millbrook-Salmon River.

LAKE, BRUCE: WATER RESCUE - THANKS

DAVE RITCEY: I rise today to recognize the heroic and selfless act of Truro police officer Bruce Lake. Bruce Lake was off duty visiting Fundy National Park in New Brunswick when he spotted someone at the base of the small waterfall along Moosehorn Trail. She was clinging to rocks in the churning waters and onlookers stood by, unable to reach her, when she disappeared under the water.

It was clear that she was in serious trouble so without thought, Bruce jumped in. Although the water was deep and rough, he managed to grab her arm, pull her in and

started swimming for the surface. Fortunately, he was able to push her to the edge of the water, where her friend was able to grab her and pull her in to safety.

Bruce Lake risked his own life to save the life of a complete stranger. Speaker, I ask members of the House to join me in thanking Bruce for his incredible act of heroism.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Atlantic.

REYNO, BRANDY: COM. CTR. FUNDRAISING - RECOG.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: Speaker, I'd like to take a moment to recognize an individual whom I believe personifies community, Brandy Reyno.

The community of Sambro is in need of a community centre. While we wait for government to transfer the land to our community, Brandy, as she always does, stepped up and created fundraisers to help fund the community centre. This is not the first time Brandy has stepped up and it won't be the last. A great community spirit, fundraiser, friend, and poker player, thank you, Brandy, for all you do.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Dartmouth North.

CHIPMAN, DEBBY: DROP ZONE FUNDRAISER - THANKS

SUSAN LEBLANC: Speaker, this past September, Dartmouth North resident Debby Chipman rappelled down Halifax's tallest office tower, at 1801 Hollis Street. Debby made the drop to raise funds for Easter Seals Nova Scotia.

In addition to this being Debby's 12th - that's right, 12th - time participating in the Drop Zone event, she was this year's top individual fundraiser, raising over \$6,000. Over the dozen years that she has taken part in Drop Zone, Debby has raised a total of \$63,000 for Easter Seals.

Drop Zone is Easter Seals Nova Scotia's signature fundraising event. The money raised supports programs and services for Nova Scotians living with cognitive and/or physical disabilities, including mobility equipment and assistive devices, employment and skill-building programs, inclusive sport, recreational, and social opportunities. It is an essential organization for many Nova Scotians.

I ask all members of the Legislature to join me in thanking Debby Chipman for her bravery and commitment to such an important cause.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Colchester North.

ASKEW, BREA: NSCAD GRAD. - RECOG.

TOM TAGGART: Speaker, I rise today to recognize an aspiring young artist from Great Village in Colchester North. Brea Askew has recently graduated from NSCAD University with a Fine Arts degree. Brea has returned to Great Village to her grandfather's residence and has set up a home studio.

Brea is interested in the history of Great Village and has centred her focus on painting the historic buildings in that community. I proudly display one of Brea's paintings in my constituency office. It is so wonderful to see a young person who is passionate about her community and is able to express herself through her art.

I wish her great success as she pursues her dream of becoming a professional artist.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Kings South.

FIRST RESPONDERS: COM. PROTECTION - RECOG.

HON. KEITH IRVING: Speaker, I'd like to pay tribute today to the first responders in my riding of Kings South: the Wolfville Fire Department, the Greenwich Fire Department, the New Minas Volunteer Fire Department, the Kings County Search and Rescue Association and the paramedics who respond to life-threatening events day in and day out. I would like to thank you for your unwavering courage and selflessness. Your dedication to saving lives and protecting our communities is essential and important work. It is life-saving work.

I would also like to encourage young people in our communities to consider the important work of first responders as a career choice or in a volunteer role. Every community looks to develop a new generation of first responders for providing a foundation of fire and public safety.

On behalf of the citizens of Kings South, whom I hear from directly on their gratitude to first responders, I would like to extend my profound thanks for the work you do.

THE SPEAKER: Order. We will now begin the Orders of the Day with Oral Questions Put by Members to Ministers. The time is now 2:00 p.m. We will finish at 2:50 p.m.

ORDERS OF THE DAY**ORAL QUESTIONS PUT BY MEMBERS TO MINISTERS**

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Leader of the Official Opposition.

[2:00 p.m.]

PREM.: HOUSING STRATEGY DELAY - EXPLAIN

HON. ZACH CHURCHILL: Speaker, the Premier promised to release his housing strategy this past Spring. The Premier did release it this week. Clearly, that's the longest Spring on record here in Nova Scotia.

This is also a week after the Premier said he wouldn't release the strategy. He said specifically, "I'm not interested in studies, panels, and strategies" - which I think has become very clear. It's also a week after the Premier said, "We won't flip-flop in the wind depending on what we think might sell in the media that day." I'll table that.

My question to the Premier is: Why did he wait so long to release this housing strategy? If it wasn't to get in the media, then what was the intention of doing it?

HON. TIM HOUSTON (THE PREMIER): I believe my comments were that we're not waiting for a strategy. We're getting to work. We're getting things done on behalf of Nova Scotians.

I think the strategy is out there now. I think the member, taking the time to look through that strategy, would see a lot of it is done. There's a lot to do. There's no question. I'm very proud of the work the minister is doing on several files on housing.

As for the announcements this week on the apprentice program, I've heard from people all over the province who are just thrilled with those announcements. We'll keep going with those things. The strategy is out there. The member can focus on the strategy. We'll focus on action.

ZACH CHURCHILL: We have taken time to go through the strategy and the plan. I do believe the Premier didn't release it previously because it's not that great. I think he released it this week because of the political pressure that we're exerting on this issue and because of the media pressure.

I do want to point out some glaring issues that show that this was put together last minute. It shows the numbers. On Monday, the department said that this was going to be a \$1 million plan. The next day they said that it was going to be a \$1.7 million plan. That's Bermuda accounting if I've ever seen it.

How can Nova Scotians trust this plan when the government can't even keep their story straight on it?

THE PREMIER: The member may not be impressed with the strategy, but I wonder if the member is impressed by 222 affordable housing units. The first affordable housing in 30 years in this province.

I wonder if the member is impressed with the improvements to the Down Payment Assistance Program that are helping so many Nova Scotians. I wonder if the member is impressed with the changes to short-term rentals. I wonder if the member is impressed with the fact that over 7,000 Nova Scotians are receiving a rental supplement.

I don't know what impresses the member, but maybe one of those things do.

ZACH CHURCHILL: I must be honest with you, Speaker. I'm not impressed with that. These are initiatives that the government has been taking for over two years now that haven't resulted in more housing for Nova Scotians.

In fact, housing starts are down 50 per cent year over year. There are fewer affordable units on the market. We've got a waitlist of 5,000 people for public housing, and the Premier brags about trying to put another 220 on in the next seven years. I don't think that's going to count at all. It's a drop in the bucket.

Ninety per cent of this plan they've brought forward has just been a regurgitation of previously failed initiatives. Eighty per cent of the investments the government is now bragging about have nothing to do with new affordable housing on the market.

How can the Premier look Nova Scotians in the eye and say this is a serious plan that's going to help them get into more affordable housing more quickly?

THE PREMIER: It's entertaining, it really is. The member can complain that we're not doing enough, but it's a lot more than that government did for eight years.

There's no question that interest rates are affecting housing starts. We don't really control that here in Nova Scotia, as much as I would like to. There's no question that the labour issues are creating an issue. That's why it would be nice if the Opposition would get behind the MOST Program. It's an innovative program. It's not time to be negative. Get behind something positive.

The changes to the apprenticeship program will have a positive impact. I agree that we are starting with an empty bucket, and it takes one drop at a time. We will continue to put drop after drop after drop because it was empty for a long time.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Leader of the NDP.

PREM.: EMERG. ALERT DELAYS - ADDRESS

CLAUDIA CHENDER: This Summer, Nova Scotians saw first-hand the danger and chaos that can result from the failure of our Emergency Alert System. During the Tantallon fires, an alert wasn't sent until over an hour after the evacuations began. During the West Hants flooding, alerts weren't sent for over two hours after being urgently requested by first responders on the scene.

The government has promised to address these delays, but nothing has changed, and the results of these delays have had real impacts on the outcome of rescue and evacuation efforts. Another major storm could arrive tomorrow. Speaker, can the Premier tell Nova Scotians how they can trust that they'll receive an alert in time next time?

THE PREMIER: This is a very serious issue, of course. The Mass Casualty Commission raised this very issue. We're working with municipalities, first responders to talk about the best way to do this. I will say that I believe that those closest to the incident should have the authority to issue those emergency alerts.

I will tell the member that from discussions with various groups of first responders, they're not always in agreement. Some might say to shelter in place; the person beside him might say, I think we should all get out of here. Well, who makes those - these are difficult discussions that require some training and thoughtful consideration with the first responders. We're working with our first responder community and our municipalities to find the best way forward. We want to keep all Nova Scotians safe. Public safety is the number one concern here, for sure.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: We hope to see action on that soon. Much of our coast also remains vulnerable to this government's stunning inaction. Four years ago, all three parties in this Chamber voted in favour of a bill that would regulate construction in coastal and flood-prone areas, and protect coastlines from the impact of climate change, which we all see.

Proclamation of the Coastal Protection Act has been continuously stalled by this government, creating a dangerous rush to build in vulnerable areas in its absence, leaving people and coastlines at risk. I want to ask the Premier why he's more concerned with allowing reckless coastal development than protecting Nova Scotians - I'll rephrase. I'll rephrase. I'll rephrase. Why isn't the Premier acting to protect our coastlines?

THE SPEAKER: We'll have to rule that question out of order due to - it's a different topic and... I'd ask that you be a little more specific. We could indicate that being this broad could be everything about government, but if we could just be a little more specific. We will have to rule that question out of order, and we will move on to your final supplementary, please.

CLAUDIA CHENDER: Hopefully the Premier will have the opportunity to answer a question about coastal protection soon. We're talking about the ways in which this government is responding to our changing climate and protecting Nova Scotians in the process. Nova Scotians' homes and properties have been devastated by the storms of the past year. The July flooding alone has been estimated to have caused over \$170 million in insured damages, and certainly much more that was uninsured.

Last year, Hurricane Fiona caused over \$385 million in damage, just in Nova Scotia. What used to be a once in a lifetime storm simply isn't any more. There is some relief after a disaster happens, but communities and families are stuck with the cost of preparing for the next storm with virtually no help - no environmental protection, a weak emergency alert system, and not enough support. Why is the Premier leaving people vulnerable by refusing to prepare for the next big disaster?

THE PREMIER: Obviously this past year has been a difficult one. We had flooding, and then we had Hurricane Fiona, and then we had the fires, and then we had the July flooding. All of these had a financial cost for sure, but my memory from all of those is the incredible loss of life from the July flooding and the pain that Nova Scotians felt from that. When these things come, our climate is changing. There's no question about that. As we run through these natural disasters, we have tried to be responsive, come out with innovative programs in the aftermath, tried to help people be prepared. There's no question, Speaker, that this is unprecedented times for our province. Certainly the government recognizes that and will do what it can.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Leader of the Official Opposition.

MAH: HOUSING PLAN - IMPROVE

HON. ZACH CHURCHILL: Again, Speaker, just to point how the government's plans are not working on housing: the Premier brags about the MOST program. A fraction of the money dedicated towards that has been used because there's no uptake. That program is not producing more skilled workers in our workforce. The Premier's plan is totally contingent on the private sector doing its job and building more housing. Here's the facts: housing starts are down 50 per cent. We have less units than we need. The plan says that they're going to build 41,000 units on top of private builds.

When we have private builds going down, when we have no real new money announced in this plan, Speaker, how can the Premier say this is actually going to have an impact on the housing market in Nova Scotia?

HON. JOHN LOHR: Speaker, I have to say that I'm extraordinarily proud of the incredible work that our department has done. We prepared this strategy, and there have been numerous documents, numerous reports. We have been listened to, and I know that the Opposition members might not want to hear it, but we listened to the federal

government, too, when they went and removed the tax on multi-unit apartment builds. We estimate that is going to be a \$500 million impact on our bottom line as a government - a \$500 million investment in private industry. Government doesn't put hammers in our own hands, but we need private industry to step up. They are stepping up. They will step up. We're enabling that. I'm incredibly proud of this plan.

ZACH CHURCHILL: The fact that the Premier cannot answer more than two questions every QP, I think, tells this House he wants all of the power and none of the responsibility when it comes to governing this province.

The minister made a good point there. They're following the lead of the federal government. They're following pressure of media and Opposition parties on housing. They're being reactive on housing. They are not being proactive. That's why we are seeing housing starts down. That's why we're seeing the highest increases in rent in the country on top of the highest inflation. That's why people are falling behind, whether they're a young family, a senior, or a young person trying to come up and find a place to live. It's absolutely appalling. For the minister and the Premier to brag about failed initiatives, I do not think is acceptable.

When it comes to the government's plan, they say they need 8,000 new units in the plan. They have only committed to actually building 1,000 new a year. How is that going to keep up with demands that we know we have in this province? They're only meeting a fraction of it.

JOHN LOHR: I do not accept any characterization that the Opposition would like to make about our government. The fact is, we're leading the nation. We have national attention for our Community Housing Acquisition Program. We have national attention for an executive panel on housing. We have national attention, Speaker, for other programs that we have done. I'm very proud of all the activity we've done. We'll continue to do more. That member says that in his government, they had a housing strategy. I haven't seen it. It was a do-nothing strategy. We stepped into a vacuum, and we have worked steadily for two years. We put forward a plan of saying what we will do, and we will do those things.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Leader of the Official Opposition on a new question.

MAH: HOUSING IMPROVEMENTS - CORRECT

HON. ZACH CHURCHILL: Nova Scotia is leading the country in highest inflation in the whole country, in the highest increase in rents, the only province to have a failure with government's intervention on poverty. Congratulations to the government for being leaders in this country on all the wrong indicators. This plan has serious holes in it. They're patting themselves on the back for making improvements to 48,000 units, when I have to

point out that for 35,000 of those unit improvements, they're listing the Seniors Care Grant, a \$750 grant, which isn't going to be used for housing. It's there for grocery delivery, phone bills, medications.

How can the minister actually stand up and stand behind this plan and tell us that we're going to fix 35,000 units with \$750 that is intended to help seniors with their medication?

[2:15 p.m.]

HON. JOHN LOHR: What I will say is I reject absolutely the only plan I heard from this member in the House earlier in this session to curtail immigration. We absolutely reject that. We want Nova Scotia to grow. We will enable that. That means that it will be more . . .

THE SPEAKER: Order. The Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing has the floor.

JOHN LOHR: It's going to be more than just government. We need every level of government to step in: municipal and federal. We need help. We need all Nova Scotians to step up and help us to meet this challenge. We need it because we're getting older, and we need people in our province who are going to step up.

Our new neighbours who move in are going to be the health care workers who look after us and the mechanics who fix our cars. All the incredible things we need to get done and all the job vacancies - we see an unparalleled time. Since we've come to government, this province has grown and continues to grow.

ZACH CHURCHILL: Let's be clear. We've been pro-growth in this province, but if you say you're going to double the population, you need a plan to accommodate it. The fact is this government doesn't. They say they're going to double the population, with more and more people homeless on the streets and with more and more people who can't find an affordable place to live, whether they're young, old, or anywhere in between. That is not a plan for growth. That is a cheap headline just to get some press, and I think the minister should take responsibility for it.

Let's get back to the issue at hand with this housing bill. The minister insists that the \$750 payment that they're going to give out to seniors is going to help with unit improvements and housing. This is a major pillar of their housing plan. How can this be a major pillar of their housing plan when this money can't even be used for rent, when we have the highest rent in the country, or for mortgages?

HON. BARBARA ADAMS: I'm a little puzzled why the Opposition would be critical of a grant of \$750 that they never thought to do. That money can be used for

whatever they need to do to provide services in their home. If they need to bring a home renovator into their home, they can do that. I would like to point out something else that is a housing strategy. In my mandate letter, the Premier asked me to count the number of single and double long-term care beds we had in the province, because the former Minister of Health didn't know how many we had.

We are building 3,500 homes in the province of Nova Scotia. That's what this government is doing. That's part of the housing strategy, and we know how many we have in the sector because we counted them. (Applause)

THE SPEAKER: Order. The honourable member for Bedford South.

MAH: HOUSING POLICY - IMPROVE

BRAEDON CLARK: Let's just set the stage here on this housing plan. It was announced with great fanfare in March. It arrived in October. Last week, the Premier said, We don't like plans. We don't like reports. We're a government of action. Then three days later, conveniently, there was a plan ready to go.

On Monday, I was at the media briefing with the minister where they said, We're investing \$1 billion over five years in housing. Then 24 hours later they said, Wait, we forgot, there's \$700 million more that just magically appeared overnight to make us feel better about ourselves.

The only conclusion we can draw here - and I wonder if the minister would agree - is that they are making up housing policy on the fly.

HON. JOHN LOHR: What I will say is that we stepped into a vacuum. There was no plan when I got into this portfolio. There was no concrete plan. The Opposition says they have a plan. They operated on no plan. I will say - in an unprecedented event in 174 years of democratic history here - last night we had the Opposition not even show up for a recorded vote. (Interruptions)

THE SPEAKER: Order. Order, please. I would ask the honourable Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing to retract that, as I would hope that most people in this Chamber who have been here for a while know that you cannot address whether someone's present or absent in this Chamber. Thank you.

The honourable Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing.

JOHN LOHR: Speaker, I understand that we cannot refer to individuals, but this is referring to the whole caucus, and not to... (Interruption)

THE SPEAKER: No.

I would kindly ask the honourable Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing to just retract that statement.

JOHN LOHR: I retract that statement.

THE SPEAKER: And we will move on.

We will move on to the honourable member...(Interruption)

Would everyone like to move on? Okay.

The honourable member for Bedford South.

BRAEDON CLARK: Thank you, Speaker. I would say, to the minister's point, that I would say with a pretty high degree of confidence that Nova Scotians don't really care about who may or may not be here in the Legislature. What they do care about...(Interruption)

What they do care about is having a roof over their heads, an apartment they can afford, a home they might be able to buy at some point. What they do not want to hear is politicians sniping back and forth about this, that, and the other thing, and trying to give themselves credit for a plan that is old news and old ideas. That is not working.

I would like to ask the minister: When will he come forward with new ideas to make a difference in housing in Nova Scotia?

JOHN LOHR: Speaker, as the member says, we will let Nova Scotians judge our actions. In terms of what we are doing, I do want to point out that, just a week or two ago, we announced the Secondary and Backyard Suite Incentive Program. I just want to say that the interest in that program has been unprecedented. Nova Scotians are responding. They see something they can do and they think, Yes, I can get a secondary suite in my home, I want to do that. Nova Scotians see our actions, Speaker, and they are responding.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Citadel-Sable Island.

ECC: COASTAL PROTECTION ACT DELAYS - EXPLAIN

LISA LACHANCE: Speaker, my question is for the Premier. Yesterday, dozens of Nova Scotians joined the Ecology Action Centre to call on the government to bring the Coastal Protection Act into force. They describe the government's delays as recklessly irresponsible, and I'll table that. This act was passed with all-party support, including by the Conservatives, who have inexplicably held the act into its fourth year of delay.

I would like to ask the Premier: Can the Premier see that his irresponsible delays are leaving people and communities at risk in the face of increasing extreme weather?

HON. TIMOTHY HALMAN: Look, I do not see this as being irresponsible in any way. Listening and getting the authentic feedback of individuals who are most impacted by coastal erosion - that input is absolutely critical, and that's why we were undergoing a targeted consultation to 40,000 coastal property owners. Speaker, I look forward to the feedback that we receive.

LISA LACHANCE: Documents released under Freedom of Information show the regulations were complete, waiting for Cabinet approval, when the minister ordered more consultations, and I'll table that.

The majority of the submissions to these consultations, as well as hundreds of people who write to all of our offices, urge the government to enact the act, except for a few, and I quote: "The handful of most vocal concerns contained in the documents came from people working for real estate companies or looking to buy or sell land."

I would like to ask the minister: Will the minister come clean about the real interests he is trying to protect in delaying the Coastal Protection Act?

TIMOTHY HALMAN: Look, the interests we're trying to protect is Nova Scotians, and in previous rounds of consultations we got feedback from municipalities and specialists and engineers. Great feedback - feedback we appreciate - but we didn't get a response. We didn't get clarity from coastal property owners. The Opposition may choose not to listen. On this side of the House, Speaker, the government listens.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Bedford South.

MAH: HOUSING STRATEGY DATA - RELEASE

BRAEDON CLARK: Speaker, another key part of the housing strategy that was announced on Monday was the housing needs assessment, which was quite interesting. If you look at it you would know, as you read through this assessment, that it was complete, and all the data was collected as of January this year. As we heard from the Premier, and as we heard from the minister, this is allegedly a government of action.

Why did they sit on this data for 10 months before releasing it?

HON. JOHN LOHR: What I can say is that we recognize the importance of that report, which we call the Turner Drake Report. What we did do was offer to the municipalities - all 49 municipalities - their own data. We offered that months and months ago because we realized that would be important in the Housing Accelerator Fund application process when they were applying for that and for other things.

We've given to the municipalities all the data that was generated. In fact, we had unprecedented support from the municipalities in that process of them working with the consultant that we hired to get that information. That was the important thing. To say that we held on to the information is not accurate at all. We wanted to release it with the housing strategy.

BRAEDON CLARK: Again, I want to point out the critical importance of transparency and accountability on these issues. The minister said - and the media made note of this on Monday - that the housing needs assessment has been shared with all 49 municipalities. I agree that is very, very important data.

I would ask the minister: Why did the government not proactively release all of that data to the public, so that we have an accurate understanding of the shortfall here in the province, and we can judge this government on their actions and whether they succeed or fail on housing?

JOHN LOHR: What I can say is that we did release the high-level report. In terms of the granular nature of 49 municipalities, we made a decision, rightly or wrongly, that we would give them that information. In terms of the release of that information, that was up to them. The reason we did that was because of the amount of work and effort all our municipalities put into this study in respect of the fact that this is essentially - we paid for the study but we're sharing that. This is their data, we wanted them to have that option, not us.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Bedford South on a new question.

MAH: HOUSING PLAN - CLARIFY

BRAEDON CLARK: With respect, this is a provincial issue, a province-wide issue. I would expect the government to release that data province-wide so we can at least assess the actions of this government.

The final point I want to make is about Special Planning Areas, which is another key pillar, I would say, of the government's housing plan. As the minister announced to great fanfare about 18 months ago, about 22,000 or 23,000 units of housing are supposed to be built in these Special Planning Areas.

I ask the minister: As of today, how many units of those 22,000 have been built and are occupied?

HON. JOHN LOHR: If you were to ask me when the best time was to have started to build it, I would have said three, four years ago. All of this takes time. It took a year to get this going. We've had shovels in the ground, that's for sure. This is getting built out, but things take time.

We were very clear that, in the Special Planning Areas, we would respect the MPS, and we would respect the permitting processes, which we have done with the Special Planning Areas. We certainly have taken time off that it took. We know there was one development that was seven, eight years in the pipeline. There are actually people I have heard of who, when they first heard it, sold their home, like 10 years ago, because they thought that it would be built in a year, and they'd move in. It is still under construction.

We've shaved time off, but it still takes time.

BRAEDON CLARK: The minister can correct me on this, but I assume the answer is zero, based on what we just heard. If we can assume that zero units have been built in 18 months, why on Earth should Nova Scotians believe that this government can build 41,000 units over five years if they can build zero in 18 months?

[2:30 p.m.]

JOHN LOHR: I would agree with the member that it is a generational challenge. It will be a challenge for every Nova Scotian, for all of our builders out there, all of our communities, all our levels of government - our level, the municipal level, the federal level. This is an immense challenge for all of us, but it's a challenge we need to meet. The reality is that for the first time in 102 years, last year we actually lowered our median age. It's so incredibly important for us to open up the doors for people to come here, to get younger, to meet this challenge.

I would put that challenge out to every Nova Scotian. If there are things that you can do, then please do them. We need to meet this challenge. We recognize the daunting nature of it, but we are looking for support from all Nova Scotians.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Fairview-Clayton Park.

MAH: NON-PROFIT HOUSING - SUPPORT

HON. PATRICIA ARAB: Speaker, we know that this government has relied heavily on non-profits for addressing the homelessness and housing crisis. Non-profits across the province continue to step up and help Nova Scotians to the best of their ability. This government took away the ability to receive density bonuses from the HRM, which has gone to fund affordable housing through 10 organizations for over \$1.7 million, and the Parkland at the Common seniors complex development for about \$1.1 million, which I'll table.

While we agree that we need to reduce barriers to develop more housing, we also need to support non-profits that have been working incredibly hard to create and support affordable housing. Since this government is taking over housing as their sole

responsibility, my question is: Will the government ensure that these non-profits continue to receive funding, since they axed this funding stream?

HON. JOHN LOHR: I'd like to thank the member for the question. The reality is that one of the key recommendations in the May 2021 Affordable Housing Commission report was to lift the boat of community housing, of not-for-profit housing. That report made that recommendation. We heard it. The Community Housing Acquisition Program, which I referenced earlier, has gotten national attention for lifting the boat of non-for-profits like the Housing Trust of Nova Scotia.

We have the Community Housing Growth Fund. We've lifted the boat of community housing in Nova Scotia in an unprecedented way. I'm incredibly proud of what we've done. We've invested millions and millions and millions of dollars - upwards of \$25 million to \$30 million - in that process.

PATRICIA ARAB: It's interesting that the plan that the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing criticized in a previous answer was what he was complimenting in this last answer.

The ED of the Housing Trust of Nova Scotia called this plan a "restatement of commitments," but this plan is "not fast enough and not as great an impact as we need." I can table that. She also stated that there needs to be more work with the non-profit sector. The density bonus did give more money to non-profits in the HRM. We know that our constituents rely heavily on the service that non-profits give to the people in this province, and it's troubling that many may not receive the hundreds of thousands of dollars from the HRM anymore.

My question to the minister is: Will the government commit to matching those funds for the next two fiscal years for non-profits so that more affordable housing needs are addressed?

JOHN LOHR: I will say don't forget I was here in 2019, 2020, 2021, and I remember very well - and this is a standard government move. If you don't want to do anything, if you're paralyzed, then commission a report. For a year and a half prior to the Affordable Housing Commission report, when we asked questions about housing, it was, We've got a commission, we're doing a study, this is a standard government thing to do.

We're not doing that. We're acting. We're taking action. We've made unprecedented investments in community housing, which have gotten national attention.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Needham.

EECD: CHILD CARE CTR. REG. FEES - BAN

SUZY HANSEN: Speaker, my question is for the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development. Recent statements from the minister do not match the facts. Last week, the minister said she is not in support of wait-list fees that are plaguing parents searching for child care. She also said that she's not aware of any centres that are doing this. I'll table that.

We received an email from a parent in Dartmouth who was directed by a daycare this past weekend to pay a \$200 non-refundable deposit in order to be added to their wait-list, with no guarantee of a space. I will note that the minister and her colleague, the member for Dartmouth East, were copied on this email.

There's no more denying that this is an issue. If the minister is not in support of child care centres issuing registration fees, as she said recently, why won't she ban them?

HON. BECKY DRUHAN: I thank the member opposite for forwarding that email, and I did see it. I can say, Speaker, that the practice of requiring parents to provide deposits for child care is not consistent with the work we are doing to provide affordable child care to Nova Scotians - in line with the reduction of fees that we have already provided to Nova Scotians, reducing fees by half. I'm happy to let the member know that I have directed the department to look into this practice and provide options for what we can do to prevent it.

SUZY HANSEN: It was sent to the minister directly, and I received it because there was no response. There is a way we can legislate things. That's what we do here.

We have also recently heard from a teacher in Eastern Passage who reported that this government only provides her school a daily amount of 37 cents per child for the provision of food - 37 cents. As the teacher stated, there's no way that government funding is sufficient, and that breakfast programs themselves are logistically impossible with limited volunteers and time as a teacher volunteer.

Does the minister maintain that any child who needs food in school gets school food, as she said earlier this year?

BECKY DRUHAN: I want to be really clear: Our government spends millions of dollars to support our educators, volunteers, and organizations across the province to ensure that there is food available in schools for children who need it. Can we do more? Absolutely. We are working to do more. That is why we have introduced pilot programs across the province to introduce additional food into schools on top of the breakfast programs that are provided and on top of the other programs that are provided.

I would also call upon the members opposite to join with our voices to the federal government to encourage them to stand up and support their promise - to follow through on

their promise - to provide us with funding and support to create universal lunch programs in schools.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Bedford Basin.

DCS: WOMEN FLEEING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE - SUPPORT

HON. KELLY REGAN: Residents of a shelter for women fleeing domestic abuse in Dartmouth were shocked when they recently received a letter indicating that they had two months to find permanent housing and leave Bryony House. Bryony House is the largest shelter in the province, housing up to 36 women and children. Its executive director, Monika Hintz, says 40 women and 20 children are currently on the wait-list. Another advocate notes that women and children fleeing domestic violence are being turned away on a daily basis.

My question to the Minister of Community Services and the minister responsible for homelessness is: Where does he expect these women fleeing domestic violence go?

HON. TREVOR BOUDREAU: We recognize challenges with homelessness, with people trying to find a place to live, and especially for people who are experiencing domestic violence. It's certainly an issue. Our department has worked hard with our service providers to make sure they provide the supports that our individuals need. With respect to this situation, what I would say is that there is a challenge that the government and the department are looking into. I will continue to look at it in the future.

KELLY REGAN: One woman at Bryony House said: "I had been looking for at least a year prior to even having to leave my ex-partner's home. I have probably looked at at least 150 to 200 places just in the last couple of months."

The shelters are over capacity and have wait-lists, and now women fleeing domestic violence cannot find a safe place to go. The Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing has said that women fleeing domestic violence are a priority, but they literally cannot find housing.

My question to the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing is: When will his department make women fleeing domestic violence a top priority and support them with the housing they so desperately need?

HON. JOHN LOHR: What I can say is that this is absolutely a top priority for our government. We have part of the rent supplement program for victims of domestic violence. In public housing, we have a priority list for those fleeing violence. We realize that's still wait-listed. I know that's a problem. They are an absolute priority.

One of the things we're doing in public housing is - often, the families fleeing domestic violence need three- or four-bedroom homes. We don't have a lot. The reality is that most of our units in public housing are not three- or four-bedroom, they're one-bedroom. That's why one of the things we're doing in public housing, which is part of the major overhaul of public housing that is in progress right now, is we're working on overhousing.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Cole Harbour-Dartmouth.

DAE: STUDENT HOUSING - ANNOUNCE

LORELI NICOLL: Nova Scotia is leading the nation on being the most unaffordable province, and that is no different when it comes to our students. Tuition for students has once again gone up this year, and I'll table that. Yet we have not seen action from this government on housing for university students. While supporting students at our NSCC campuses is a great thing, students at other post-secondary institutions are still waiting for support from this government.

They said they are a government of action, but what we have seen is inaction when it comes to housing for university students. Will the Minister of Advanced Education now follow his colleague's lead and announce the promised and overdue student housing strategy?

HON. BRIAN WONG: Students are always at the forefront of everything that we do. I've had the pleasure of visiting every university, every NSCC across the province, to speak with students. I do realize that students need appropriate housing, that students need to find a place where they can be safe and comfortable and concentrate on their studies.

We acted very early. We acted with three announcements for Nova Scotia Community College student housing projects. We continue to invest. We invested \$5 million into the Tartan Downs project in Cape Breton, \$3 million at the Atlantic School of Theology. We are a government of action, not of making plans.

LORELEI NICOLL: When talking about what they've done for students, this government tends to forget to mention the multiple university campuses across the province. CBU students can't find housing, Dal and SMU students can't find housing, Acadia and StFX students can't find housing, and the list goes on. The minister said they are working on a strategy still - I'll table this - which is, again, a different tune from what was said by this government just a week ago.

My question to the minister: Can he once and for all tell us when students will be getting this housing strategy? A date would be very helpful.

BRIAN WONG: We continue to look for ways to ensure that students and all Nova Scotians have an affordable place to live, and we are in tune. Minister Lohr and I sing together all the time. We are in tune. We created a program through Happipad, where Happipad is working with housing, working with the Ministry of Seniors and Long-term Care, where buildings are already there. It takes time to build, but we already have - Speaker, I can't even hear myself.

THE SPEAKER: Order. The honourable Minister of Advanced Education.

[2:45p.m.]

BRIAN WONG: We have vacancies right across this province from one end to the next. Happipad is one of the solutions that we've introduced that is going to make a difference for students.

THE SPEAKER: Order. Just to remind members not to use first names in the House, as well as for everyone to realize - and I know you all know this - this is the Progressive Conservative Party of Nova Scotia, not the Conservative. This is the Liberal Party of Nova Scotia, and this over here is the NDP Party of Nova Scotia - New Democratic Party, whichever you prefer. Let's get it straight, and let's stick to what the proper names are. (Applause)

The honourable member for Cumberland North.

MAH: SENIORS RENT SUBSIDY - COMMIT

ELIZABETH SMITH-MCCROSSIN: My question is for the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing. Seniors deserve to live with dignity and respect. Many of them are struggling to make ends meet due to the ever-increasing cost of rent and food. The federal government gave modest increases in OAS and GIS. However, we have found - at least in our area - that what the feds giveth, the Province taketh away.

Recently, seniors have been coming to my office asking why their rental subsidy was decreased. Upon investigation of one case in particular, it determined the following: A gentleman's total income went up by \$108 annually, but his rent subsidy decreased and totalled over \$1,260, so he actually lost over \$400. My question to the minister is: Will he make a commitment to this senior in particular, Gerald Carter, his rent subsidy, and reinstate his previous rental subsidy?

HON. JOHN LOHR: I can't comment on a specific case. I really don't know any of the details. I would certainly invite the member to give me the details later so I can have my staff look into that specific case.

What I can say is we have made changes. The rent supplement program was a federal, cost-shared program. When we started that program, we were working with the federal parameters. We are now into it. The feds are putting about \$10 million in, we are putting about \$42 million in.

It's our program now. We are committed to it. We made changes to the federal guidelines for seniors. Not only that, we are working hard, Speaker. We put in another, for instance - and I haven't had a lot of opportunities to talk about it, but for seniors who own their own homes we've made massive investments in - increases in the homeowner repair program as well.

ELIZABETH SMITH-MCCROSSIN: I will table consent forms from Mr. Gerald Carter, as well as Henry Pellerin, who are two fine, older gentlemen who came to see me, were very concerned and thought there must have been a mistake, so I will table those documents.

It would be great if the minister would contact them and reinstate the money. When the federal government gives an increase in the GIS and the OAS, the Province should not be taking that money from them. The seniors in this province should not be losing money because the federal government is willing to give them a modest increase.

In Cumberland County, we have the highest number of seniors. We also have the highest level of poverty in seniors and people are hurting. People are literally calling me on the phone and crying.

Will the minister commit to making changes in the rental subsidy so our seniors in Cumberland and throughout Nova Scotia will stop losing money from the money that the feds giveth and the Province taketh away?

JOHN LOHR: What I can say is these rent supplement programs are predicated on income levels. The amount of assistance is - this is a standard thing we do. If income levels change, then the calculation changes. This is part of the program we simply have to do.

I will say that I know that the vast number of seniors in your area would own their own homes. That is why I was referencing the home repair program. We topped that up by almost \$13 million to \$31 million simply because we saw the incredible demand. That's the program that seniors can use to get roofs done and furnaces fixed, as well as ...

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

DCS: FOOD BANK FUNDING - HELP

KENDRA COOMBES: My question is for the Minister of Community Services. The former minister told this Chamber: "There has not been one organization that has

come to DCS looking for help that has been denied ... If you need help to provide food at a non-profit organization ... we will be there for you.” I will table.

The Colchester Community Support Society, like many other food banks, is struggling to keep up with unprecedented demand; 29 per cent of those are children. However, when they turned to the department for assistance earlier this year, they were told there would be no more funding.

Why is this government refusing to help Nova Scotians? Does the minister stand behind this funding decision?

HON. TREVOR BOUDREAU: We know that the cost of living and affordability are certainly challenging, and it is impacting a lot of Nova Scotians. We have seen an increase in food insecurity in the province. Our government has provided supports in a number of different ways. In December 2022, we provided \$3 million to over 250 agencies.

THE SPEAKER: Order, please. The time allotted for Oral Questions Put by Members to Ministers has expired.

The honourable Leader of the Official Opposition on a point of order.

HON. ZACH CHURCHILL: The Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing misquoted me and did not even table a document to substantiate it. I would ask that you make a ruling: As usual, when a member is quoted, there has to be a document that is tabled to substantiate that.

THE SPEAKER: If I recall correctly, it was paraphrasing, but I will certainly have a look at that and get back to you. I am pretty sure it was paraphrasing, but I will certainly look into it.

OPPOSITION MEMBERS' BUSINESS

THE SPEAKER: The honourable House Leader for the Official Opposition.

HON. DEREK MOMBOURQUETTE: We are going to start Opposition Business today with Bill No. 326.

PRIVATE MEMBERS' PUBLIC BILLS FOR SECOND READING

Bill No. 326 - The Residential Tenancies Act (amended).

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Bedford South.

BRAEDON CLARK: I am happy to rise today to speak to this very important bill, Bill No. 326, which was introduced earlier in this session by the Leader of the Official Opposition, and a very similar bill that I introduced about a year ago in our Fall session in 2022.

As we heard about just a few minutes ago in Question Period, we all know the housing crisis is ongoing. It is severe. It impacts everyone in Nova Scotia no matter where you live. As we've heard from the minister responsible and others, there are about 300,000 Nova Scotians who are renters. About 30 per cent of the population is renters, and this piece of legislation would help all those people directly, whether they actively use the system or not.

What this bill does is establish what we would call a compliance and enforcement division within the Residential Tenancies Program. The current situation, as I think all three parties generally agree, is that the enforcement system - if I can call it that - within residential tenancies is ineffective, slow, convoluted, expensive, intimidating at times for landlords, and just not functional would be the overall approach. This bill would follow the lead of other provinces that have taken this issue on: Ontario, for example, has a very effective and fairly simple compliance and enforcement division for residential tenancies.

I am assuming that all of us at one point in time in our lives, if not currently, have been renters. I am sure, as well, that many of us have come into conflict with our landlord from time to time. Perhaps we have a dispute about return of a security deposit. I know that's happened to me. Perhaps there is an issue with damage or repairs. Perhaps, in a worst-case scenario, you might be fighting what you perceive to be an unlawful eviction. That can be extremely stressful and scary, especially when we are dealing with a situation, as we all know, where the vacancy rate in Nova Scotia is hovering around 1 per cent, and in parts of HRM, less than that.

It is not like 10 or 20 years ago when, if you ran into a dispute with a landlord, you could say, "Okay, this is not a good relationship. This is not working. Let's find an apartment down the street for the same price." You could move fairly quickly and fairly easily. That is certainly no longer the case, and I think we need to recognize that circumstances have changed and times have changed when it comes to disputes between landlords and tenants.

What really confuses me about this debate is that there seems to be a pretty high degree of consensus between all three parties. I don't want to speak for the Independent member, but perhaps the Independent member as well, that there needs to be something done here. The minister has acknowledged that in the House as well. He said, when we introduced this bill a year ago, that this is certainly something that was on his department's radar.

Our understanding through media reports on this issue as well is that there has been a report commissioned and produced, as far as we know, outlining what a compliance and enforcement unit in Nova Scotia would look like. I have the CBC article here from October 19, 2023 - very, very relevant here. We see the opening comments: "The Nova Scotia government will not introduce legislation this Fall to create a residential tenancy compliance and enforcement unit, meaning it will miss the timeline recommended in a report it commissioned on the issue."

So the government commissions a report on this issue. Again, we haven't seen it, unfortunately. I would urge the government to release this report as soon as possible. We have a report sitting here somewhere - on the minister's desk, I assume - saying, Go ahead and create this enforcement division within a set time period, and this will lead to resolutions much faster between tenants and landlords, and give people peace of mind, and allow people to stay where they're living. That is really important when we're dealing with huge rental increases.

We know that although we do have a rent cap in Nova Scotia, if you're moving from unit to unit, that rent cap will no longer apply. It's to be expected that if you were to move from one apartment to another because of a dispute with your landlord, you could easily see your rent going up, 20 to 50 per cent or more. The need for tenants to stay in their existing units is probably more important than it ever has been.

The minister's response on this has been a bit confusing. In this CBC article here - which I will table at the conclusion of my remarks - the minister says that creating the unit is "on the radar" of his department, but right now the focus is on an awareness and education campaign about the rights and responsibilities of tenants and landlords." To be honest, that's fine, of course - an education campaign is useful - but that doesn't by any means replace the real teeth and the real impact that a tenancies enforcement division would have.

Then the minister says again, "It is complex" - meaning enforcement. "It impacts many, many Nova Scotians." We agree. As I said at the beginning, 300,000 Nova Scotians, at least, are renters. "And we want to make sure that we're getting it right." Again, for a government that talks about action, speed, and doing things as quickly as they possibly can, there are lots of circumstances where we don't see that, and this is one. This is a very good example.

I introduced legislation on this topic about a year ago - almost exactly a year ago - October 2022. The Leader of the Opposition has introduced this piece of legislation in this session - so we're talking about a year here. We're not talking about a brand new system, the first of its kind in Canada, that would cost hundreds of millions of dollars to operate and administer. No, we're not talking about that. We're talking about a system that exists in other provinces that we could essentially copy and paste, bring to Nova Scotia, and bring a lot of clarity and peace of mind for tenants and landlords alike.

I think that is a really important point that I would like to highlight as well. In my experience being the housing critic here for the Liberal Party, as you might expect, tenants and landlords don't always agree on issues. They're coming at it from different perspectives. We understand that, and it's not surprising. But this issue of enforcement is actually one of the few issues I've come across where there is broad consensus - not just within political parties, apparently, but also within the tenants' rights groups and the landlords' advocacy groups.

[3:00 p.m.]

Again, we have another CBC article here that I'll table at the conclusion as well. We have some comments here from Kevin Russell, whom I'm sure many of us have interacted with. He's the executive director of the Investment Property Owners Association of Nova Scotia, or IPOANS, as many of us would know them. Mr. Russell is quoted as saying, "We were hoping that the compliance and enforcement unit would move forward." He says, "It is sorely needed to solve landlord-tenant issues, particularly with issues of serial repeat offenders of the Residential Tenancies Act."

That's an important point. I think we all recognize that the vast majority of tenants and the vast majority of landlords are doing the right thing. They're trying to find a place to live, or if they're a landlord, they're trying to provide a place for people to live that they can afford. But as with any situation or any system where you're dealing with hundreds of thousands of people, there are going to be people who abuse and break the rules. Unfortunately, in a tenant-landlord relationship, there can often be an imbalance of power. The person who has less power in the situation can often be the tenant. When you're presented with issues, it can be very confusing and overwhelming to figure out how to deal with that.

I just see a lack of urgency on this particular issue from this government, and again, a lack of transparency. We know, again, from August of this year, CBC has obtained the report from the consultant recommending that the new compliance and enforcement division should be in place by March 2024. Of course, that timeline, as I mentioned earlier, would require that legislation on this topic be introduced now, in this session. It appears very likely that the government is done with legislation. We can always hold out hope for more, particularly this piece, but it seems unlikely as the days go by. It seems almost certain that we will miss the deadline to meet what the consultant said would be required.

As we have heard today, and in previous days, from the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing and from the Premier, there are massive ongoing structural issues in the housing sphere. It's not solved overnight. It takes a huge amount of resources and money to build housing. We understand that. But one thing that doesn't take a massive amount of resources or money is to create this compliance and enforcement division.

Again, we're not reinventing the wheel here. There are lots of activities in Nova Scotia that are enforced quite strictly - hunting as an example. There are compliance officers within the Department of Natural Resources and Renewables who make sure that Nova Scotians follow the rules when it comes to hunting seasons. Fishing is another one. I know the Minister of Environment and Climate Change would know. There's a major enforcement division within that department that does really important and critical work. I wouldn't dispute that. We have enforcement for hunting and fishing and environmental protection, motor vehicles - another good example.

All of those are important spheres in life. I wouldn't dispute that. Where you live has got to be way up there in terms of the most important spheres of activity. Yet for some reason in Nova Scotia, we have created a system where this incredibly important part of life - where you live - is really not regulated or enforced in any meaningful way.

There have been many news reports that I have read where people, tenants in some cases, are being bounced back and forth between the residential tenancies division. They're waiting weeks for hearings. Maybe somebody might not show up. Maybe things need to be rescheduled. If they do get a judgment, there can be an appeal to Small Claims Court. Sometimes they're going to police or sheriffs as a first point, and everybody is pointing at everybody else, saying it's your responsibility, no, it's your responsibility. That leads to delays. That leads to confusion. That leads to stress. We hear from all of those different actors in the system saying to us - pleading with us really - to do something about it.

In this Chamber, I recognize that often we have sharp disagreements of policy, and that's great. That's the point of us being here in a lot of ways. We should also recognize where there are areas of agreement. Again, I'm confused on this because this certainly does seem to be an area of agreement between the Opposition, the third party, and, at least rhetorically speaking, the government because the government has said some nice, positive things about wanting to do this. They've spent money - I don't know how much, but I assume thousands and thousands of dollars - to have a consultant do up a great report on this issue. Yet that sits behind closed doors, and we do not hear anything further - other than that they will not move on this issue this sitting.

I think this is one issue that on the housing file, we will continue to push for, advocate for, and make sure that the 300,000 Nova Scotians who are renters - and all 55 of us in this Chamber would have hundreds and hundreds, and in some cases, thousands. I know in my case, for sure in Bedford South, the majority of my constituents are renters. I'm sure that's the case in many other constituencies here. These people deserve protection. They deserve certainty. They deserve the comfort of knowing that if, on an off chance, they get into a dispute with their landlord, they have means to have easy and quick redress.

With that, I will move second reading of Bill No. 326.

THE SPEAKER: Before we move on, I just want to recognize a friend from Pictou West who's sitting in the West Gallery. Ben MacLean, if you would stand and take a warm welcome from the House. (Applause)

The honourable member for Dartmouth North.

SUSAN LEBLANC: I'm happy to rise and speak to Bill No. 326, and happy that the Liberals have called this bill today to be debated.

In the current discussion around housing, this idea of an enforcement branch of the Residential Tenancies Office is a really important one. We know that it's being called for by all sides of the situation - by landlord groups and tenant groups - because both will benefit and it will help everyone. It's one of the biggest puzzles of the government's approach to the housing crisis of late. It's a simple, straightforward idea that is in place in lots of other jurisdictions, as my colleague has said, and both landlord and tenant organizations are calling for it.

For example, the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives recently recommended in the report *Keys to a Housing Secure Future for All Nova Scotians* that government "set up a Compliance and Enforcement Division for the Residential Tenancy Act by providing funding for enforcement and compliance officers to ensure that rent control is enforced, as well as health and safety standards, and accessibility standards for housing. These officers need to be distributed to ensure coverage in each county, ensuring there are minimum provincial standards and no contravening municipal regulations."

Tenants in British Columbia and Ontario have protection of these enforcement mechanisms. There are dedicated units unique to the residential tenancies programs, and of course, in each province, the residential tenancies program is going to be a little different from each one. The response with these individual branches is homemade for each province. They work in tandem with the respective boards. They create a fairer system for everyone in regions like ours, where the housing market is competitive and tight. They can levy fines, and much like the minister is, they are focused on education around the rules. This makes a lot of sense for our minister and for the situation in general. Yes, let's begin with education, but in times when education does not necessarily do the trick, there are also fine-levying abilities and enforcement abilities. This is what we're saying.

Our minister loves to insist that the system is working perfectly, and that people should simply apply to the board if they have an issue with their landlord. That is all well and good, except that the system is not working perfectly, and there is an inherent imbalance in the relationship between landlord and tenant and the Residential Tenancies Program.

In a perfect world, yes, someone could go and make a complaint against their landlord. A landlord could go and make a complaint against a tenant. It would be

investigated, and then a decision would be made, and that decision would be lived out, enforced, whether that means someone gets evicted for some reason, or whether that means a landlord has to fix a broken sink or broken floor or get a window replaced.

We know that in this tight housing market - and we don't need to reiterate this, but I will, because we're talking about it - vacancy rates in Nova Scotia are some of the lowest in the country, and in HRM, the lowest in the country. The vacancy rates are off-the-charts low in certain areas of the HRM. Landlords - and of course I will say to everyone, not all landlords, but goodness me, quite a lot of landlords - are using the low vacancy rate to their advantage.

I know that in a week in my office I will have a couple of situations where people are afraid to go after something that they are legally allowed to have according to their lease. For instance, working taps. Not too much to ask for, but I have had people come into my office who say, My landlord says I have to call a plumber and pay for those working taps. So they don't, because they don't have any money, or they do and it's going to be hundreds of dollars that the landlord won't pay.

Bedbugs - I could use that as another example: I've got bedbugs, the landlord says that I have to pay for the exterminator. That's actually not true, in the case of your lease. It goes on and on. Landlords can do this because there is nowhere to go, so people will not complain, and if people do complain, they find themselves targeted.

I have a friend who makes good money, who rents, who pays \$30 a month for a pet fee. I said, That's not allowed, and they said, Well, we do it because we don't want our landlord to think that we're complaining and then kick us out for some other reason. Honestly, this is the situation we are in.

The minister says that everything's working perfectly. It is not working perfectly, but if we had an enforcement branch at Residential Tenancies, it would work a heck of a lot better.

The minister's idea that things are working perfectly ignores a few major facts: One, that the law is not fair; two, that this is why we have attempted to put forward simple changes, like closing the fixed-term lease loophole. The minister will say, Oh, well, the fixed-term leases are really important for certain people, for certain reasons. Yes, and every landlord who has a new tenant come in now almost exclusively will use a fixed-term lease, which is not the intended use of a fixed-term lease. They do it anyway, because then they can control the rents and they can control who is in their apartments, getting around the Residential Tenancies Act.

In other cases, people are deliberately not following the law. As I've already said, for example, withdrawing maintenance as a way to pressure a tenant into leaving, or just - well, basically, yes, making it less fun or less good to live in that situation. Often, landlords

will lie about needing a unit for themselves or a family member in order to evict a tenant. In those cases, it's virtually impossible to enforce a penalty on that.

Enforcement is badly needed in this system, along with strict penalties for abuse. That goes both ways, strict penalties both ways. The minister wants people to use the existing process, but let's go over how that's supposed to go. Currently, if a landlord and a tenant can't resolve a dispute on their own, they make an application to the director. Then that leads to mediation, and if that doesn't work, a Residential Tenancies hearing is called for. Evidence is submitted to the Residential Tenancies officer assigned to the case, who then makes a decision called an Order of the Director within two weeks of the hearing.

Then the parties have 10 days to appeal the decision, which would move the dispute from Residential Tenancies to the Nova Scotia Small Claims Court. If the appeal window passes, the order can be enforced through the Small Claims Court.

[3:15 p.m.]

Many people don't understand this process if they have no help to get them through the process, but that is the process. It can take months and can cost hundreds of dollars and still be ineffective.

There's also a fine built into the Residential Tenancies Act meant to punish a party for disobeying an Order of the Director, but get this, Speaker: It's never been levied. What is the point? The bottom line is that it is often very difficult to enforce rulings from the board, which is why virtually everyone except the government seems to support a better enforcement system as a solution to many residential tenancies issues.

Getting back to the thinking about enforcement, there was a report. The government issued a tender, prepared a consultant report on the idea, but now we don't know what's going on with the report or they won't move on the issue. We do know that the report said that this needs to be in place by March of next year, meaning it would need to be passed this sitting, because by March of next year, we'll be into a different sitting - who knows when exactly - and there will be not enough time. Mind you, we could be called back for an emergency session. That's happened before. We could come back later in December to pass this kind of legislation. I would suggest that that is actually a good use of an emergency session. I would be happy to come back if we were going to bring in this kind of legislation.

From that document, complainants and other interested parties feel that there are no consequences for repeated or egregious violations of the Residential Tenancies Act, and the Orders of the Director can be difficult or impossible to enforce. The Investment Property Owners Association of Nova Scotia, who, by the way, love to vilify the New Democratic Party, which hasn't, by the way, made housing policy in 10 years - we haven't done anything in 10 years because we haven't been in government - but still it's our fault,

everything is our fault that's happening in Residential Tenancies right now. Anyway, that's beside the point. The Investment Property Owners Association of Nova Scotia and tenant advocate groups like Dalhousie Legal Aid Service agree on it.

That makes this basically the unicorn of policy ideas, a sure win for the government. Joanne Hussey says - she was a Dalhousie Legal Aid Service worker - "I think we know there are repeat offenders in the system, whether they're tenants or landlords, and so having a proactive body that's looking at that to be able to actually enforce the rules that already exist in the Residential Tenancies Act is really important."

Kevin Russell, executive director at the Investment Property Owners Association of Nova Scotia: "We were hoping that the compliance and enforcement unit would move forward. It is sorely needed to resolve landlord-tenant issues, particularly with issues of serial repeat offenders of the Residential Tenancies Act."

In closing, this is a win-win-win situation. It is a great mystery why the government is extra-slow and secretive about what is happening with this idea. Why are we not seeing legislation in this session about getting a Residential Tenancies enforcement branch? We are here. God knows we're here until midnight every night. We could actually pass some very useful legislation. I urge this government to stop delaying and act on this now. It's a vote-getter, it will get them many supporters from all sides of the renting spectrum. Let's do it. We're here anyway. I call on the minister to table some legislation tomorrow and get it passed by next Friday.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Chester-St. Margaret's.

DANIELLE BARKHOUSE: I would love for the member opposite to table where the minister has always spoken constantly that everything is perfect, because every time I hear the minister stand up to speak, it's always on how the Residential Tenancies Program works, to share the system with them. I find it hard to understand why it was explained so perfectly there.

We are always working to ensure the Residential Tenancies Program supports the needs of both the tenants and the landlords. The rental environment is always changing. With that comes new challenges, and yes, sometimes new opportunities. It is clear that our government has been evaluating the creation of a compliance and enforcement unit for the Residential Tenancies Program. Governments meet regularly with both tenant and landlord organizations, and they have told us this is something they would like to see implemented in Nova Scotia. We also know it's something that only a few other provinces have done, and we are evaluating whether that is the best step for Nova Scotia to take.

We also know that just because something exists in another province doesn't mean it works well or that it will work well for Nova Scotians. We are focused on a made-in-Nova Scotia solution for Nova Scotians. Creating a new enforcement system is

complicated. I have heard here earlier that it wasn't, but it is. It is complicated. We need to take the time to do it right, but the housing crisis we - and other provinces and other countries - are currently facing won't be solved by creating an enforcement unit.

We wish that were the case. With a 1 per cent average vacancy rate throughout the province, we need more housing, period. We need more housing. We need more affordable housing. We need more shelter supports for those who are unhoused. For those who are renting, we need to make sure they know what their rights are so they are prepared to stand up for themselves if they need to.

Under the leadership of this Premier and this government - the ministers - we are a government of action, and we are taking decisive actions on every one of those things. For example, the first new public housing units to be built in over 30 years, resulting in over 220 units in communities throughout Nova Scotia; a brand new tiny home community in Lower Sackville - a first of its kind in Nova Scotia; a free pilot program to incent building new, secondary, and backyard suites and eliminating the provincial portion of HST from new multi-unit apartment construction; accelerating growth within Nova Scotia's skilled trades sector; cutting red tape to get housing built within Halifax Regional Municipality; supports for home-sharing programs that make it easier for people to rent out their space, their spare bedrooms, making it easier for newcomers, students, and health care professionals to find immediate housing; changing the rules for short-term rentals to encourage transition back to long-term housing markets, adding more long-term care spaces - I can't help it, you're smiling at me. I've got to smile back at you, Speaker - 200 module shelters to support people who need a place to live; and more funding for three new overnight shelters in Amherst, Bridgewater, and HRM. All part of the strategic plan that this Premier and this government are doing, and I am going to go on.

More support for 11 service providers that help Nova Scotians in need. These are just a few examples of the strategic plan that we are doing. It is all part of our new housing strategy Our Homes, Actions for Housing. We are investing over \$1 billion over five years to increase housing supply, grow and sustain affordable housing, and deliver housing programs Nova Scotians need. Our government is taking action on all fronts to address the housing crisis.

We have changed the Residential Tenancies Act to offer stronger protections for tenants against renovations, and we have extended the rent cap, which we know is offering existing tenants protection against large rent increases. This bill asks us to educate landlords and tenants about their rights and responsibilities, but we already do that. Our website has a great deal of useful information, including our renting guidelines, which are available in five different languages.

We launched an education and awareness campaign earlier this year and have continued in this Fall. We are looking for ways to improve our Residential Tenancies Program; ensuring that it is supporting the needs of both tenants and landlords remains an

important issue for our government. On its own, creating a compliance and enforcement division will not solve the housing crisis. It's coordinated action, targeted investments, and bold, quick action that will make a difference to Nova Scotians who need a safe place to call home. That's what our government is doing.

With all the initiatives I've mentioned today, with the number of meetings we've had with both landlords and tenants, tackling these challenges head-on, and delivering more and faster for Nova Scotians - that's what we're trying to do. That's what we are doing. You can see this repeatedly. There is no easy button for this issue. This is all the prongs that I have said here today - that the ministers, that the Premier, that other MLAs have said - it's working together to make this happen. It's not just jumping. With that, Speaker, I will sit down. I thank you all for your time.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Bedford Basin.

HON. KELLY REGAN: I would expect that probably every single member of this House has at some point - even those who have been elected on their first term - had someone in their constituency come into their office and speak to them about an issue they had either with a landlord or with a tenant. It's not an isolated incident. It happens all the time.

This is not the first time that this issue has come to the attention of the House. It's not the first time in this Legislature that the issue has come to the attention of this House. In fact, we did have a debate on this issue last Fall, when several things were said, and I'm going to talk about some of those things.

One of the things we keep hearing about Nova Scotia's residential tenancy system is that it's ineffective. We hear this over and over again. Whether you're a landlord or a tenant, it's ineffective. I would say that it's broken, because the fact of the matter is, if you have an issue with a landlord or with a tenant, good luck on getting a resolution. Any redress takes forever.

Some people don't have forever with some of these. I was thinking about some articles that I had read in recent years - on both sides of the issue, whether you're concerned about what landlords are doing or what tenants are doing - and I remembered one from 2019. A landlord was owed thousands from one tenant, and this tenant didn't just do it to him. He did it over and over again to different landlords. He would pay one month, and then he'd stop paying. If you're a landlord, and you have a bad tenant, you can't get your money out of them.

We often see articles in either the paper or online, or we hear it on radio or see it on television, about people who are having difficulty getting their landlords to live up to their end of the bargain. We've heard some of those comments here today: people being told they must pay an extra fee to have a pet, that you must fix your own taps, or you must pay

for bedbugs to be removed. That is not the role of the tenant - it is the role of the landlord. There are continuing issues.

Not having access to water when you're in any kind of home is an issue. I looked at some of what was said last Fall, and I'm going to talk to that. One of the things we keep hearing from this government is that they are a government of action. How many times did we hear it today in Question Period? We just heard it from the honourable member from Chester-St. Margaret's, but this is a file that we're not seeing a great amount of action on.

I will just say that I saw a quote the other day: Laws without consequences are merely suggestions. That's what we have here right now in Nova Scotia. We have a system of a lot of suggestions because there's no way to enforce a lot of the rulings that come out from the Residential Tenancies Program. If you should actually get through that process, they have a backlog of about a year for those particular complaints, so good luck on that.

[3:30 p.m.]

I see the minister squinting at me, as if to say that can't be right. I have it here in the document, so I will table that.

What I will . . .

THE SPEAKER: Order, please. The honourable Minister of Service Nova Scotia.

HON. COLTON LEBLANC: As much as I really enjoy my opportunity and my seat, I feel it's unparliamentary to point out the absence or presence of a member.

THE SPEAKER: Sustained. I will remind members that they cannot address in this House whether a member is present or not present, even by saying "I see that their hair is blue today." We must hold our remarks to ourselves regarding comments about one another.

The honourable member for Bedford Basin.

KELLY REGAN: For the benefit of the minister - should he choose to read the article - I will table the article that indicates the Residential Tenancies Program's backlog is a year. I think that does not flout those rules, which I do not in any way intend to do.

If we look at this whole business of "we're a government of action" - we keep hearing that repeatedly. On this file, they're not a government of action. I would say they are not a government of action on several files. I would say that, in this case, actions do speak louder than words.

From a debate last Fall on a similar bill, we heard several statements from the minister. He said things like:

“On this matter, I want to reassure the members of this House and all Nova Scotians that the work has already begun on a compliance and enforcement unit for the Residential Tenancies program. Conversations have been ongoing for months now at the department. As I indicated previously to the media, staff have done their internal work looking at what's being done across the country.”

Then he went on to say that "how we deliver this has to be timely" - timely, I would note – “effective, and sustainable.” He noted, “a couple weeks ago, we posted a request for an external consultant to support my department in looking at the creation, design, and implementation of a residential tenancies compliance and enforcement unit.”

Then he went on to say:

“It’s imperative that we understand the entirety of the potential impacts on Nova Scotians. That's why - to recognize that we do not want to further delay this years down the road - within a few months, the department is expected to have a report in hand to further guide the decision-making that will be made at the department and within our government to best position Nova Scotia to have a compliance and enforcement division that meets the needs of both tenants and landlords.”

I just want to point out that we have had this conversation before. Where is it? Where is the legislation? Where is this compliance unit? It is not here. There is no action.

There has been a consultant’s report. It has been in government hands for months - months - not released to the public. I’ll table that first document that I was reading from.

A CBC report from August 30th says: “A report commissioned by the provincial government is recommending the creation of a residential tenancy compliance and enforcement unit” - surprise, surprise - and they’ve had the report for months, but they have so far refused to release it.

Documents obtained by the CBC said that this compliance unit should be in place by March of next year. Then it goes on to note “a timeline that would almost certainly require government to introduce legislation during the upcoming Fall sitting of the Legislature.” Well, we’re here, folks, and what is it this time? Six bills, seven bills - a handful of bills - are making their way through, and there is no bill from the government.

Now they could take our bill. They don’t want to take our bill, but they could take our bill and pass that bill.

If this government were truly concerned about this issue - if they were truly a government of action - we would see action, but we are left with one conclusion, because we do not see action. We see talk, we hear talk, but we do not see action.

Then, indeed, the minister did confirm that the Nova Scotia government is not moving ahead with a residential tenancy enforcement unit this year. I guess that is some kind of action, to confirm that you're not going to take any action. After saying it was on the radar, after saying that they're aware, they decided not to do anything.

We do have a commitment from the minister that he will bring forward legislation to create a unit "at a future date," but we all know what that means. That means maybe later or maybe never - but it is not action, it is not now, and it is not what the consultants suggested. Then, predictably, the folks involved in the housing industry had comments about that, and they're not happy, I have to say. I should table that.

Another article from the CBC, "Advocates Disappointed Nova Scotia Won't Legislate Tenancy Enforcement Unit This Year." The head of the Investment Property Owners Association of Nova Scotia said: "We were hoping the compliance and enforcement unit would move forward. It is sorely needed to resolve landlord-tenant issues."

Over at Dalhousie Legal Aid, we heard from another person involved in the housing issue, Katie Brousseau, a community legal worker. She said, "We've seen the province choose to prioritize increasing its powers over the municipality, as opposed to providing targeted and enforceable protections that Nova Scotians desperately need." She said it was incredibly disappointing. "In her view, she said, the decision means further increasing the backlog of the residential tenancies process, which has complainants waiting up to a year for a hearing as it is." There is that particular line in the story, and I can table that, too.

Here we are, having another discussion about having an enforcement unit, but again, there is no enforcement unit, there is no legislation from the government. Again, we'd be happy to have you use ours. I would say that actions speak louder than words. You can say over and over again that you're a government of action, but if you don't take action - I sure hope nobody was playing a drinking game at home today while they were watching Question Period, because every time somebody said "government of action," somebody would be like lying on the floor right now, they said it so many times.

Just saying something over and over again doesn't make it so. This government has not been a government of action on this file. Nova Scotians are having difficulty finding housing. We often hear the government say, "Well, we're going to do an education component instead, we're going to start that right now." An education component is no substitute for an enforcement unit.

The reason is this: You have to do education all the time around landlord-tenant issues. You have new renters coming into the market all the time. There are people who are selling their houses, and they're renting if they can find a place to rent, but they have to do that. They have to know what their rights are. You have new people coming into the market. You have young people who are moving out of their parents' homes, and they're moving into the market. They need to know what to do with their landlord as well. They need to know what their rights are. It should be a given that we are educating renters and landlords every year. It is not a substitute for enforcement.

We all have so many cases. I had a case of seniors not in my riding. It was a whole little development there. They would not complain that their landlord was demanding bigger increases than the cap allowed because they were afraid that they would lose their housing. That's the kind of thing that happens over and over again, and that is the reason why we need an enforcement unit. With that, Speaker, I will take my seat.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Deputy House Leader for the Official Opposition.

HON. PATRICIA ARAB: Speaker, I move to adjourn debate on Bill No. 326.

THE SPEAKER: The motion is to adjourn debate on Bill No. 326.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

The honourable Deputy House Leader for the Official Opposition.

PATRICIA ARAB: Speaker, would you please call Bill No. 349.

Bill No. 349 - An Act to Expand the Heating Rebate Program.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Northside-Westmount.

FRED TILLEY: It's a great pleasure of mine to get up and speak to this very important bill that we're putting before the House for discussion. Bill No. 349 reinstates the Heating Assistance Rebate Program as it was last year.

When we look at last year's implementation of the Heating Assistance Rebate Program, it was expanded from an original amount of \$200 to \$1,000, which I know was a very welcome rebate program in my community. We filled out hundreds of these applications in our office alone, and I know other MLA offices probably did the same thing. People really needed this at that particular time, as the cost of living in Nova Scotia had gone through the roof. We looked at implementing the Seniors Care Grant and helping

people fill that out, then the Heating Assistance Rebate. People got \$200, and then they got another \$800 to bring them up to \$1,000.

The beauty of this program was that the income limit was expanded to \$85,000. I know at the time, the government indicated that this was a one-time increase to the income limit and to the rebate amount. Today, I would argue that, as a province, we're in a worse position than we were this time last year. It's just beginning to get cold. Furnaces are just beginning to be turned on. People are in my office wondering how they're going to heat their homes this year. There's true, honest worry. It's not just from seniors, but seniors are a big part of it - seniors, young families, working families. They're struggling to make ends meet. The fact that this heating rebate has been reduced by 40 per cent over last year - and we're going to hear the government say, But we increased it, we tripled it from its original amount of \$200.

[3:45 p.m.]

True, you did triple it from its original amount of \$200, but it's not enough. It's a reduction. People were counting on this income to heat their homes. It's not even a full tank of oil at \$1,000. People were counting on this. Why would they expect that anything would change over the previous year, when the economy has not changed? The cost of living has not changed. As a matter of fact, it's probably gotten worse. The highest inflation, the highest rents, and now those who need it the most, we're reducing the amount they can receive from \$1,000 down to \$600. Not only that, but we're decreasing the eligibility by \$10,000. It absolutely makes no sense.

I would ask, last year, did we overspend the amount that was budgeted for this heating rebate? If memory serves me correctly, we came in with an over \$100 million surplus. Maybe this year we want a \$200 million surplus. I don't know. But this money in the hands of Nova Scotians who need it the most is absolutely necessary for them to survive this Winter season.

If you think about a senior who, because of a modest increase in their CPP, their OAS, or their Guaranteed Income Supplement that put them slightly over the Seniors Care Grant amount - and some of the cases that we have seen, very slightly over - and they've been denied. Let's be honest. Anybody who's receiving the Guaranteed Income Supplement is living in poverty, Speaker. They are not making ends meet. They're trying to stay in their homes in a time when we have an unprecedented housing crisis.

Now that senior - we've taken \$1,100-plus out of their hands: \$750 for the Seniors Care Grant, which they're no longer eligible for, and \$400 that they were counting on from the Heating Assistance Rebate Program. We've essentially taken out a month's worth of income for some of these folks, which is really - it really hurts. Anybody who has aging parents, or anybody who has young families in their family who are just starting out, trying to get through from one week to the next - you're just one problem with your car or one

problem with your home that you're stretched to try to pay for from financial disaster, and this government takes it out of their hands.

I heard the member for Cumberland North during Question Period say with regard to rent supplements that the government giveth and the government taketh. This is a prime example of taketh, Speaker - taketh so bad that people are crying in our offices. I wish we could help everybody. But when someone comes in at \$38,000, and the threshold is \$37,500, you just want to cry with them because you know they can't afford to live on what they have. This bill simply rectifies that issue.

When I look at the casework in the office, the majority of our casework is around the Heating Assistance Rebate Program and Seniors Care Grant. Right now, over this next month or month and a half - yesterday morning before I headed up here, I was in at the office. Our waiting room was full, and people were lined up the hallway waiting to see my CA, who does an amazing job in the community helping people with these forms.

What we're seeing is that, whereas last year we were able to help, this year we're not able to help. It's a very simple request, and it's not asking very much. What this bill is asking is to please just do what you did last year. That's it. We're not asking for more. Opposition parties always ask for more. We're just asking for status quo from last year. What we should be asking for is to take the \$85,000 and increase that, because we should be indexing it - the same thing we should be doing with income tax brackets. We should be indexing these income limits to inflation. It's the only way.

At the end of the day, because somebody is getting a slight increase - whether it be from CPP or whether it be from their employer - everything else is going up by inflation as well. They're actually falling further behind because they're not able to make ends meet. This bill would allow them an extra \$400, and it would allow that many more people to qualify. From \$75,000 to \$85,000, it's not a lot to ask. You did it last year. We're asking the government to do it again.

The two clauses in this bill that we're putting forward - the Heating Rebate Program Expansion Act - the first one is to raise the income level to \$85,000. The second is to reinstate it back to \$1,000. It's not too late to do that. We're still in session. We can move this through pretty quickly and simply. The applications are already in the system. It would be just a matter of sending the extra \$400 to all those who have applied. Those who have been denied, we can have a second look at their application. Why have they been denied? Have they been denied because they're between \$75,000 and \$85,000? We can simply factor in those folks as well.

What this bill will do is help seniors, help young families, and help the working people of the province who are making modest income of \$85,000 as a family. We don't do enough in this province to help those who are struggling on a day-to-day basis, who are working hard and struggling to make ends meet. I hear this all the time in my office: But,

Fred, what's out there for me? I don't qualify for anything. I just make over the limit. There's nothing there for me. I pay my taxes, I pay my property taxes, and it's very unfortunate that we can't, as a bunch of legislators elected by the people, come together and just do what we did last year. I'm even saying "we" did last year.

What this government did last year was a good thing, putting this in the hands of people when they needed it most. Why in the name of heaven would you do that to yourself as a government, do it Year 1 and then pull it back the next year? It makes absolutely zero sense to me. I just hope that we're hearing - I hope everybody is hearing from individuals in their offices that this is unfair, because hopefully you can bring this to your ministers to make the right choice and the right decision to reinstate it to last year's numbers.

With that, Speaker, I move second reading of Bill No. 349.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Chebucto.

GARY BURRILL: The Liberals' proposal here - that the Heating Assistance Rebate Program should be reinstated to its level prior to the government's October 16th cutback to the program - this proposal provides us this afternoon with an opportunity to consider and weigh the justifications and the defence and the arguments that the government has put forward in support of the HARP cutbacks in the 10 days since those cutbacks were announced. The facts of the situation are straightforward, as my colleague from Northside-Westmount has explained them. The rebate was \$1,000 and is now cut 40 per cent to \$600. The program's eligibility income threshold is also being cut to \$75,000 from \$85,000. That is straightforward.

What is less straightforward, however, is the case that the government has made in defending this \$400 cutback. The government's justification, case, and defence for this has been put forward by the Minister of Service Nova Scotia, largely in response to a series of questions that he has answered here in the House from the member for Cape Breton Centre-Whitney Pier, as well as from myself, as well as from the Liberals. In response to this series of questions over the last three days, the minister has put forward three different justifications, three defences - arguments - three points in the case for this \$400 program cut. I think that each of these three defences and justifications bears our considering for a moment. I will table the Hansard of the total of these exchanges.

Justification, defence, argument Number 1 that has been put forward in favour of reducing the HARP by \$400, as the minister has expressed it - members will remember from the exchanges in Question Period - is that the minister thinks the Conservative record on the Heating Assistance Rebate Program is better than the NDP government's record was when it was in power. We've heard this point made more than once. It is plainly quite a central point in the minister's thinking on this subject.

I want to suggest, Speaker, that the best that could be said for this, as a point, is that it has less to do with public policy and more to do with history. I suppose there would be things that the Minister of Service Nova Scotia would disagree with about governments of Angus L. Macdonald or the government of W.S. Fielding and they would be about as relevant to the current situation as it is for him to take his bearing to form his defence about these cuts from his opinion of a government which was elected, let's consider it, 14 years ago.

[4:00 p.m.]

No, I think rather that what we have here is the kind of juvenile deflecting that we sometimes have with children as in, oh, yeah, well he did something worse than I did, et cetera. I think it's not really worthy of engagement, beyond saying this: that we have a right to expect something more from a minister who is charged with making the case for defending taking \$400 from people who can't afford it.

Now that brings me to justification argument defence No. 2 that the government has put forward for cutting the Heating Assistance Rebate Program from \$1,000 to \$600, namely that, as the minister has put it, people ought not to be concerned about this because the government - if I can summarize - is doing other stuff. This is also a point that figures prominently in the minister's answers to questions about why the government is taking this \$400 away.

The minister often refers, when he makes this point, for example, to the Seniors Care Grant. Now I want to say about this that first, it would be a darn strange thing if a government with a budget of \$14 billion was not doing other stuff. Of course they are doing other stuff, but that in itself is not a justification for taking \$400 away from people's budgets, particularly when you consider the real situation with some of that stuff. For example, the Seniors Care Grant, as the minister has raised it, is hardly the fountain of beneficence the government makes it out to be. It's a reimbursement program for \$750 for which one must have receipts.

THE SPEAKER: Order. I don't think we're talking about the Seniors Care Grant. I'd just remind the member to get back to the bill at hand.

The honourable member for Halifax Chebucto.

GARY BURRILL: With respect, Speaker, the point about the Seniors Care Grant has been repeated by the minister in defences of the \$400 cuts. That's the only reason I raise it. Might it be in order for me to say a couple more sentences about it?

THE SPEAKER: If you are going to tie this in and wrap it back around.

The honourable member for Halifax Chebucto.

GARY BURRILL: I'm sorry, I didn't understand, Speaker.

THE SPEAKER: If you are tying this to the bill at hand which we're speaking on, Bill No. 349, okay.

The honourable member for Halifax Chebucto.

GARY BURRILL: Thank you. We can contrast that program, for example, with the parallel seniors supplement program in B.C. or the parallel seniors supplement program in Ontario, which pay \$1,000 or over \$1,000 to low-income seniors. These are just automatically deposited in your account.

My point here, Speaker, is that the Seniors Care Grant is, in fact, miserly by comparison to most other such provincial programs, as one might expect of a government that has frozen income assistance throughout its mandate and has refused to index assistance to inflation. I think that we ought to be spared much excitement about all the other stuff.

This brings me to the minister's third defence and third justification and third argument in favour of the \$400 cut. This is an argument that I must say, Speaker, I find a little bit bizarre, namely his repeated view that the government has not, in fact, cut this program at all, that despite the reduction from \$1,000 to \$600, what they have done is, in fact, increase it: "We've increased the rebate"; "We've increased the thresholds"; "We've tripled the rebate." All these are comments, words for word, which is the base on the \$400 cut the minister has made.

Now I know what the minister thinks he is saying here. He is comparing the \$600 remaining of the rebate to what the rebate was in earlier versions of the program. This is, if I may say so, deeply rude on the minister's part - to answer the person who is in dismay about having \$400 taken away from them in a way that obscures and diminishes and seeks to deny the reality of their experience and their now much-more-difficult situation.

It is insulting to people to say, as the minister has said, No, no, you haven't actually received a cutback. Your cheque may be \$600 instead of \$1,000, but really, if you understood it better, you'd understand that actually the program has increased. Now, if this isn't gaslighting, Speaker, I don't now what is.

Now, as every communications specialist and every lawyer will tell you, one function when you're making a defence or an argument or a case for something is to bring some factors into the light and to obscure some other factors from view. There are several things in the minister's justification for reducing the rebate by \$400 that I think are troublingly being removed from view.

One is, as the previous speaker has said, the context of inflation. This is kind of a Kenny Rogers “fine time to leave me” cutback. What a terrible time, Lucille, to cut 40 per cent out of the heating rebate: A time when \$200 spent at the grocery store won’t get you any more groceries than you can put away in three or four minutes; a time when, as the full impact of the fixed term lease loophole in the rent cap is increasingly being felt, rent is eating up bigger and bigger portions of people’s incomes; a time when, as the member for Cape Breton Centre-Whitney Pier pointed out in her questioning of the minister on this subject, Nova Scotia’s year-over-year increase in the cost of living is the largest of any province. A year ago, the Conservatives were right when they said the heating rebate had to be increased to \$1,000 because the need was so great. Nothing - nothing has diminished that need by \$400.

Now what the minister obscures and passes over, and elides additionally, is the fundamental reality of the economics of the oil tank. A tank of oil is about \$1,500. It’s pretty common that it needs to be filled up three times a year. What we had in the heating rebate, prior to this cutback, was a pretty sizable lion’s-share part of one of those tanks looked after. What we have now with the \$600 program is considerably less than half a tank, and in fact the minimum amount for which many oil companies will come at all.

What the minister obscures and does not mention is the reality of household budgets. There are many, many homes in our province that have counted on the \$1,000 of the heating rebate to get through the more expensive months of Winter, and for whom this \$400 cut is going to make the difference between the household budget being a little in the black or dug deeper into the hole, the Visa, or the line of credit. These are the things that a government of quality would grapple with, and speak about squarely, and address.

They’re not things to be obscured. They’re not things to be denied. They’re not things to be diverted from in any way. The government has made a mistake in its \$400 cut to the heating rebate program, and it has attempted to justify it in a disrespectful, unworthy and superficial way.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Colchester North.

TOM TAGGART: Speaker, I’m really not sure where to start here, because everybody’s been handing me notes about all the things that I should say about what’s been said here this afternoon. I have to start by saying I have never really experienced this kind of what I’ll call hypocrisy. Wait, wait. Is that unparliamentary? If it is, I’ll withdraw it. Is that unparliamentary?

AN HON. MEMBER: Depends on the context.

TOM TAGGART: Yes. Anyway, so I just - we listened to 15 minutes of the member from ...

AN HON. MEMBER: Halifax Chebucto.

TOM TAGGART: No, no, no, no, no.

AN HON. MEMBER: Northside-Westmount.

TOM TAGGART: Northside-Westmount.

THE SPEAKER: Order. I would ask the member to retract the word that he said. It actually is unparliamentary.

The honourable member for Colchester North.

TOM TAGGART: I'll get to the point here. I'm sorry. I retract it, I really do. The idea that the member from Northside-Westmount would scold us here for 15 minutes on what we supposedly - all the things that we've done to hurt the seniors and low-income and the less fortunate in our community with respect to a slight reduction over last year in the home heating rebate, but the same people, less than a year ago we asked them - we pleaded with them - to support us against the carbon tax. I make no apologies for the 17 cents a litre every time you... (Interruption)

THE SPEAKER: Order. There's lots of chatter from all sides here.

The honourable member for Colchester North.

TOM TAGGART: I have a new one for you. We pleaded with the people across the aisle to support us in asking that they didn't pass a Liberal-NDP carbon tax, and they passed it anyway. The member from Halifax Chebucto talked about 3 tanks of oil - 3,000 litres at 17 cents. Even I can do the math on that. I think it's kind of rich that we're being scolded for what we've done to help people with the home heating tax.

We certainly know that many Nova Scotians are struggling to pay their bills as the cost of everything goes up. The rising cost of living is a challenge right across the country. Despite this, our government is working hard every single day to respond with targeted solutions - targeted solutions - that will be there to support Nova Scotians. The Heating Assistance Rebate Program, or HARP for short, has been in place since 2008. We did talk about history, and I wanted to mention that the carbon tax is not that far in our history. It's not back there 14 years, or even back when whoever - Sir John A. Macdonald was here.

HARP has been in place since 2008, offering rebates to Nova Scotians at a certain income level who pay for their own heat. It was a PC government - history again - that introduced HARP. In its first year, the program offered rebates of \$450. When the NDP government was formed in 2009 - and the member from Halifax Chebucto was part of that government - they slashed that rebate.

For 13 years, from 2009 until 2022, the program was based on a \$200 rebate, and it was available to single people earning \$29,000 and families earning \$44,000. I point that out because all three parties had been in power during that time, but of all of these three parties, it is only the PC government that put their money where their mouth is. They took action to put more money in the pockets of Nova Scotians. Our government recognized that the \$200 rebate, and the income threshold as it was, were not enough.

In 2022 we topped up the HARP rebate to \$350 to all eligible Nova Scotians, and last January we poured another \$100 million into the budget, allowing us to offer rebates of \$1,000 and expand the income threshold to \$85,000. Now for single people - that was for single people and families. We knew that Nova Scotians were struggling and they needed help, and we used this program to offer it.

[4:15 p.m.]

We know Nova Scotians are still struggling, and we know we couldn't go back to the previous NDP rebate of \$200 or the previous income amounts, especially with the devastating effects of the Liberal carbon - there it is again - the Liberal-NDP carbon tax on heating fuels. Seventeen cents a litre. We looked at the uptake of the program last year. We had nearly 156,000 Nova Scotian households receive the rebate last year, compared to just over 45,000 the previous year. We knew we had a great deal of new applications. So far this year, I think we've got 84,000 applications already. We knew we had a great deal of new applicants, and that made sense, but around the \$75,000 income threshold we started to see fewer people applying.

We wanted to make sure the rebate was meaningful and going to those who needed it most. This year's rebate is \$600, three times more than the rebate has been traditionally, and the income threshold was set at \$55,000 for singles and \$75,000 for a household. We felt this helped to support more people who needed it. At \$600, the HARP is the largest government-run program for heating costs in Atlantic Canada. Newfoundland offers \$500, New Brunswick offers \$550 for people in emergency heating situations.

It's important to point out that HARP isn't the only program that we help with for Nova Scotians who need it. Some members in this House have rightly pointed out that seniors are often struggling with increased costs on a fixed income. No doubt about that. I won't mention the carbon tax on that. It has no impact. Our Property Tax Rebate for Seniors program offers seniors a rebate of 50 per cent of the property taxes up to \$800.

Our government also created the Seniors Care Grant and expanded it to \$750 this year. This is a separate program that helps seniors with the cost of household services. Home health care services, new this year - home heating - and I hope all the members will remind the seniors in their communities to apply for this program. Then there's the long-running Your Energy Rebate Program, which gives every Nova Scotian, no matter

what their income is, a point-of-sale rebate on the provincial portion of the HST on home heating. Last year, the average household received an additional \$285 in energy rebates.

There are also other investments in energy efficiency programs. Low-income Nova Scotian homeowners who qualify can get free energy audits and energy efficiency upgrades, including heat pumps. That's a great program, because it saves them money on heating costs every Winter they stay in their home. We will continue to examine HARP, as we do all our programs, to ensure that it's helping the people who need it the most. I know that government staff are working hard to help Nova Scotians who applied for HARP receive it quicker. So far, we have had over 84,000 applicants. We expect more than 130,000 households to receive this rebate this year.

Our government will continue to take action and invest in programs that support Nova Scotians when they need it the most. With that, I'll take my seat.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Halifax Atlantic.

HON. BRENDAN MAGUIRE: First of all, I want to apologize to anyone who's watching this online, on TV, or in person. Where is the reality? They talk about increasing HARP to the largest it's ever been, but you also decreased it - the largest decrease in the history of HARP. You cut HARP by 40 per cent at a time when electricity has gone up 14 per cent, after they said they had that under control. Inflation is at an all-time high. We received an F as a province - the only place in Canada to receive an F - on food sustainability and affordability.

We had the largest increase of rent in the country, the largest increase in housing costs in the country, yet they talk about how great they are because they cut a home heating rebate which is needed by the lowest-income and working-class Nova Scotians. It's not needed by anyone in this Chamber, because everyone in this chamber makes \$100,000 and more - \$80,000, \$90,000, \$100,000. You're making double the amount, bare minimum, of the average Nova Scotian.

Not a single person here applied for a home heating rebate, and they talk about, "Hey, you know what? It's okay that we cut it 40 per cent. It's okay, because there are heat pumps." Well, I challenge that member to go through every single person who applied for the heating rebate and see if they can afford a heat pump, see if they own their own house, see if they have the ability to get one installed and paid for. If they did, they probably wouldn't be applying for a home heating rebate, or they'd be less likely to.

I wasn't going to get up, and I certainly wasn't going to be angry. But I have a list of people out the door who are looking for this rebate, who are depending on this rebate, and we have to say to them, "You're only getting \$600 this time." It is absolutely cruel to give somebody \$1,000 one year, knowing they need it, and then everything goes up and say,

“No, you’re not getting it this year. You don’t deserve it.” That’s what they’re telling Nova Scotians: You don’t deserve it.

We saw in Public Accounts Committee how much this was costing, and that’s what this is about. It was over \$100 million that this program was costing, so they’re cutting it now. They’re deciding to cut it, because they want to save money on the backs of the most vulnerable Nova Scotians and working-class and middle-class Nova Scotians. That’s exactly what they’re doing. And anyone who has the audacity on that side of the aisle to defend this, send the money my way, because the people in Spryfield, the people in the North End of Halifax, the people in the North End of Dartmouth, the people on every single side of this aisle will take your money that you don’t want and don’t think your constituents deserve.

This is a government that has frozen income assistance. There are more homeless people now in the last two years than ever before. It’s a government that said, “We will spend no matter what for health.” Heat is health. Warmth is health. If you don’t believe me, how about one of you spend the Winter outside in a tent? How about somebody in this Chamber actually spend time without heat? How about you do that? Then you’ll know what it’s like. This is an absolutely cruel decision. I don’t get how people don’t see that.

Four hundred dollars may not seem like a lot to an MLA, because of how much you’re making and how much you’re taking home. For the people who rely on the home heating rebate, this is the difference between making a car payment - if they own a car - feeding their children, having their children play hockey, maybe a Winter jacket for their children. This isn’t just money. This is actual objects.

This is seniors, who already are worse off than just about anywhere else in Canada, who can’t pay for their prescriptions now, because \$400 was snatched out of their pocket. Guess what’s going to happen? There are going to be long-term impacts on our health care system because those individuals can’t pay for their medication.

Just to stand there and pat yourself on the back over this, over cutting a vital program, by saying the NDP cut it too - I teach my children that if someone does something bad, or somebody does something that’s hurtful, don’t repeat it. Be better. Instead, what they’re saying is, “Well, you did it, so we’re going to do it a little bit worse. You hurt the public, we’re going to sting you a little bit more.” Instead of decreasing it - I don’t even know how much, if they did, actually - but instead of not increasing it, we’re going to take \$400 out of your pocket. I just don’t think people - I think we’ve lost reality, that we think \$400 is not a lot of money.

To the vast majority of Nova Scotians, \$400 is a lot of money. It’s a lot of money. It may be just a night out for you and your friends, for people in this Chamber maybe, or they might be blowing it on a trip, going here, or doing that, but that’s the difference between groceries. When’s the last time, Speaker, that you went to the grocery store and didn’t

spend at least \$300? We're the lucky ones who can afford it. Now you're saying to people, You know what? You don't need to eat. Who needs to eat? You don't need to eat healthy - certainly not.

That \$400 is going to come out of things like paying rent. Nobody here is afraid, struggles, or panics toward the end of the month because they can't pay their rent or their mortgage. Again, that's where people's touch on reality has been lost in this Chamber, is that we sit here, we joke, we laugh, and we heckle back and forth about serious issues. We say, Well, look what you - I've just heard it so much.

Yes, we did it. Yes, the NDP did it. Now you guys are - they're doing it. The government's doing it. Instead of taking responsibility for the now and your actions, you say, The previous government. The previous government on the HARP. It's everything. It's housing. It's health. Wouldn't it be nice if you just said, We don't care what the previous government did. We're just going to do what's right? Instead, there's this built-in excuse that comes with political parties, where they say, We can get away with it.

There's an arrogance. I see it every day. I see arrogance from members who think they're unbeatable, that they will never lose. I see the arrogance in them when they deny, they laugh, and they pretend like this stuff doesn't matter. I see it all the time, and it drives me nuts. Maybe they'll never lose, but they should have some humanity about it. Maybe you won the lottery, you're set for life, and you'll never, ever not be an MLA. You'll have that cheque rolling in, day after day, week after week, and you'll never have to worry about paying your power bill. You'll never have to worry about your heat not being paid. You need a dose of reality.

You do not represent a political party in here. You're supposed to represent the people who elected you. We've all been guilty of it. Everybody has been guilty of putting - of acting like they represent the political party. Everybody's been guilty of it, but enough is enough. We are in a time in my life when, financially, it's never been worse. It's never been more difficult. We have governments saying to people whom they're supposed to represent, You don't know how to spend your own hard-earned money. You don't know what's best for you. We do, so we're going to take more from you at a time when you need it the most.

It's like insanity. I think we can all agree that we know what's best for our families. We know how to spend money to support our families. We know what our family needs. When I go home, I know what my children need. When I go home, I know what my house needs, my family needs, my pets need. I know all of that. You, government, do not know. You may think you know.

I'll tell you one thing you should know is they need heat. They need the ability to pay their bills. Every time you reach into their pocket, you take something from them. We act like that: This is government's money. It's not. It's taxpayers' dollars. You're actually

taking money from them. You create a program, you give some back, and then you take more. It's not your money. It's the people of Nova Scotia's money.

[4:30 p.m.]

This is a cruel thing that's being done here. You're taking it from the most vulnerable, the hard-working Nova Scotians, the middle-class Nova Scotians, and the only thing you can do is point fingers at previous governments and say, Look what they did. Instead of saying, We're going to set the bar higher. We're going to set the standard higher. Wouldn't that be nice?

Wouldn't it be nice to have a political party for the people instead of for the politics? Wouldn't it be nice to have parties that represent people instead of partisanship? Wouldn't it be nice to have a party that reacts to the needs of the people, and says, We know you're struggling - instead of sitting there and creating a false narrative in this House. In the past, Speaker, it would have been called out - the false narrative around the carbon tax that that member continues to push, and members across continue to push.

It is in Hansard, and it continues to be in Hansard. I have personally said it. This party has personally said it, that we voted against it. We put in a cap and trade system. Get it through your head.

THE SPEAKER: Order. Order.

AN HON. MEMBER: Why is he allowed to talk like that?

THE SPEAKER: I'm just asking everyone, everyone's - we're heated today and everyone's all excited that we're here. I just want to remind everybody that using the word "you" - we could be using "the member." We should be looking at talking to people in the third person here, to keep some of it down.

The honourable member for Halifax Atlantic.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: This is literally the only job that I've ever had in my life, and I've had lots, where you can stand and lie, and it's applauded, and it's approved, and everybody loves it, because you're protected when you're in here. Those members know how the vote went. Those members know where the party stands.

THE SPEAKER: Order. Order.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: I didn't call anyone a liar.

THE SPEAKER: I would ask the member to retract the unparliamentary word that he used, insinuating that . . .

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: Thank you, Speaker. I'll retract it, but I will say that I feel like a lot of members when they make those statements, I feel like it's misleading, and it's misleading the public, and they're doing it on purpose. They have nothing else to hang their hat on . . .

THE SPEAKER: Order.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: . . . except for misleading and untrue statements.

THE SPEAKER: I would ask that the member retract the other unparliamentary word. He used the word "misleading."

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: I would ask that the member retract the statements that he made that are misleading, that are not true. There's a record in Hansard...

THE SPEAKER: Order. Order.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: I have a right to stand in this House. When things are said about me that are not true, I have a right to defend myself, and I will continue to defend myself.

THE SPEAKER: Order. (Interruption) The honourable member for Halifax Atlantic to retract the unparliamentary word.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: I will retract it when the member stands up and retracts the false statement that was made about myself. I have a right within this House, in the 11 years I've stood here, to defend myself. The rules have not changed but they've started to in the last two years.

THE SPEAKER: Order. Order. I'll ask the member one last time to retract the unparliamentary word.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: Can I get some clarification?

THE SPEAKER: The word "misleading" is unparliamentary.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: No, I meant some clarification on the request. I want to ask you a question about it. Under the Rules of this House, when a statement is made that is untrue, against a member, do I have a right to defend myself and call that out? If not, then what are we doing here?

THE SPEAKER: Order, order. The Speaker's ruling is final. Order. One last time, before I ask the member to leave, retract the unparliamentary word.

BRENDAN MAGUIRE: I'm struggling with it. Just give me a second here. I'm struggling with it because I need to know if something is said that is not true, against a member, if we have a right to call it for what it is. If we do not have a right . . .

THE SPEAKER: I'd ask the member for Halifax Atlantic to leave the Chamber.

The honourable Deputy House Leader for the Official Opposition.

HON. PATRICIA ARAB: Thank you, Speaker. I move to adjourn debate on Bill No. 349.

THE SPEAKER: The motion on the floor is to adjourn debate on Bill No. 349, the Heating Rebate Program Expansion Act.

All those in favour? Contrary minded? Thank you.

The motion is carried.

The honourable Deputy House Leader for the Official Opposition.

HON. PATRICIA ARAB: Speaker, I move that you call Bill No. 357, the Highway Cellular Coverage Act.

Bill No. 357 - Highway Cellular Coverage Act.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Leader of the Official Opposition.

HON. ZACH CHURCHILL: Speaker, I'd like to move second reading of Bill No. 357, An Act Respecting Cellular Coverage on Highways.

This is a very important bill. What this bill would do would be to create a fund that would be directed by Executive Council to be distributed to ensure that there is infrastructure in place to expand cellular coverage from one end of the province to the other.

The purpose of this Act is to ensure that cellular telephone coverage is particularly on every single highway in our provincial highway network. The Minister of Public Works would establish a highway cellular coverage fund and that fund would be used to finance projects prescribed by regulations that carry out the purpose of the Act.

The reason for this is pretty simple, Speaker. We have seen degradation of our cellular coverage in the province. I have travelled from one end of the province to the other. We all do it every single week when we go back to our communities. We all experience, even on our 100-Series highways, major gaps in cell coverage. I experience it in Cape

Breton, when I drive through beautiful Cape Breton. I experience it in Antigonish, in Guysborough County, in the Pictou, in Colchester, in the Cumberlands; we experience it in HRM. We all just came out of a by-election. There are places over in Preston, which is in HRM, where you can't get cellular coverage. You drive down the South Shore - big gaps as you head into Bridgewater, between Chester and Bridgewater, as you pass Mahone Bay, and of course big gaps when you get into Shelburne and Yarmouth County and even when you come back up through Digby County and the Valley. This is a really, really important issue, not just because it's so critical for our economy, for navigation. It's critical for safety and emergency management.

We have just come through a year of horrendous and catastrophic extreme weather events, from Hurricane Fiona - I believe one of the largest hurricanes or lower pressure systems that's come through on record - to the largest wildfires by far in our province's history, which you yourself, Speaker, experienced very directly in your riding of Shelburne, to the catastrophic floods that actually took lives. We saw issues with it with Portapique, where people couldn't get emergency messages and couldn't call 911. We see it when people don't get emergency alerts when these events are going on. This is a major, major safety issue. When people can't get alerts when there's a fire, when there's a flood, during a hurricane, those folks are in jeopardy.

It goes beyond major weather events, too. We all drive the highways. There are some dangerous parts of our highways still, even after all the twinning that the previous government invested in. People have accidents on highways. There are stretches of our highway system where you can't call somebody for help. If you're travelling at night or on one of our highways that are not travelled regularly or there's not high traffic, you can find yourself in trouble.

We've actually got a road that connects our ridings, the tin mine road in Yarmouth. That was the only access road during the wildfires for people in Yarmouth County to connect them to Highway No. 103, and to get to the South Shore, Shelburne, the South Shore, Halifax and beyond. That is a very treacherous road. We have a petition circulating right now to do some work on that road because there are terrible potholes. There's a lot of wildlife on that road. That road goes right through wild country - very remote, dense forest. There are potholes on that road . . .

THE SPEAKER: Order, please. I would ask the member to stick to the bill at hand.

The honourable Leader of the Official Opposition.

ZACH CHURCHILL: We're talking about safety on highways. This is about cellular coverage on our road networks. When we talk about the danger on some of our roads, it's very applicable here because if you're driving on the tin mine road and hit one of the degraded areas, you can't even call this a pothole because there are areas of the road that are totally disintegrated. You can't see at night. You go off the road, you can't call for

help. There's no cellular coverage there. If you get in an accident on a stretch of Highway No. 103 at night where people aren't driving by, you can't call for help. This is a major, major safety issue in our province.

There are highways in Cape Breton that can be treacherous during Wintertime. We have messy Winters here in Nova Scotia. We hear about the accidents that happen. If you can't call for help, you're in trouble.

[4:45 p.m.]

We also don't have a vulnerable persons registry. That is another piece of legislation that our party has tried to bring forward so that we know where people who are not mobile are located, where they're living, and if we need emergency responders or community members to follow up with them in the case of a blackout or a loss of coverage. The folks who are either living in areas where there's bad cell phone coverage or whose family live in areas where there's bad cell phone coverage - because we don't know where they are, they can also be in jeopardy without cellular coverage.

This is something that I do think we have to take very seriously. To date, we have not seen any action by the provincial government on this file. In fact, as usual, we have seen the government just lay this at another order of government's feet. We're talking about serious issues here. We're talking about people being lost and stranded - either by accident, extreme weather, or a medical event on the highway: heart attack, stroke. These things can happen when people are driving. They do happen. They take lives when people can't call for an ambulance or for help. Despite the increasing risk to safety, with cellular coverage, again we see the Progressive Conservative government pointing fingers and saying it's totally just a federal issue.

The Minister of the Emergency Management Office - the Minister of the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing - said this. He told reporters - and I'll table this - that telecom service is a federal responsibility, that as far as the Province goes, it's very difficult for us to change anything on this.

When asked if the Province is doing anything to ensure that people in remote areas have adequate service during storms, he said, "We're asking people to prepare. For individuals in rural parts of the province, that means being prepared to have back-up power for their cell phone charging." If they don't have cell phone coverage, I think the minister is missing the point on this.

There's been a high level of flippancy when it comes to this issue. Again, as we've seen with major issues that bring pressure on the government, there is a tendency - as the honourable member for Halifax Chebucto rightly pointed out - to go after either past governments, as in the case of the last debate when they pointed out an NDP government

from 14 or 15 years ago, or other orders of government, instead of taking responsibility themselves like other provinces have done.

While our minister has said this is a federal issue that they can't do anything about, we've seen B.C. step up and take leadership on this. Given B.C. is a much larger province with very remote areas, they've stepped up with major funding initiatives to ensure there's coverage on their highways.

This began in B.C. in 2021 with the Cellular Service Expansion Plan, as part of B.C.'s Economic Recovery Plan, where funding was brought in to ensure there was cell coverage on B.C. highways. I'll quote the Minister of Citizens' Services:

“People need to be able to communicate during an emergency, whether it's by phone for roadside assistance, or report a wildfire or flooding. The availability of a cellular signal can make all the difference for people and their families.”

They recognize this in B.C. as a safety issue, yet our provincial government won't.

“Investments like this, combined with improved safety and access to services that cellular and wi-fi provide will help our regional economies also recover and thrive in a post pandemic world. Cellular technology can reduce the time it takes to locate and rescue lost adventurers. For search and rescue, cellphone towers allow us to stay better connected and access real-time mapping to support situational awareness. These new cell towers bring important connectivity to stretches of highway that previously lacked coverage, enhancing the safety of travel across British Columbia and bringing local residents more peace of mind knowing that help is only a phone call away when they're on the road.”

I couldn't have said it better myself.

In March 2023, there was an expansion to this fund. This was through the Connecting British Columbia program. They plan to extend cellular coverage to at least 550 kilometres of highway by 2027 because they see the urgency of this. Of course, they're doing this so that people will have more confidence, be safer, and can call for help when they need it. I'll table these.

With the impacts of climate change increasing the ferocity of our storms, the risk of wildfires, and the risk of flooding and washouts, we still do have an aging population. People are still going to experience major health events on our highways. If our folks are going to be safer and be able to call for help, then they need to have cell phone coverage to do that.

The Liberal Party is standing firmly behind this bill. We believe this is a worthwhile investment, not just to ensure we all have access to technologies that should be available in every single community - like we do wi-fi now in most parts of Nova Scotia - but also so we can have safety, have peace of mind, and know we can call for help when we need it.

I urge the government to support this bill. This would establish a fund to invest in increasing cellular coverage, particularly on our roads. Again, the government is the one who said money doesn't matter. The Premier said, Money doesn't matter. They come up with \$700 million in a day - don't know where it came from. Clearly, an investment in cellular coverage with all the extra money - they've had a windfall with the federal government - with all the extra money they seem to find in all their couch cushions would be a very good, reasonable investment for Nova Scotians.

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

KENDRA COOMBES: I'm glad to rise and speak to this bill, and for the opportunity to discuss the impact that limited cell coverage has on many Nova Scotian communities, and why this coverage - having cell service coverage across the province - is critical.

A report prepared for Build Nova Scotia last year found that over 1,000 kilometres of primary roads in this province have no cell phone coverage, confirming what many of us know and experience every day. In Cape Breton, it was found that one third of the Cabot Trail has no cell phone coverage. In Guysborough County, almost half of all the primary roads have no coverage. This is unsafe and it's unacceptable. When you think of how many people go through the Cabot Trail - and not just in the Summer, but right now, with Celtic Colours, and the changing of the colours of our trees, and how much it attracts tourism - to not have cell phone coverage on the Cabot Trail is very dangerous.

If something were to happen on the Cabot Trail to somebody driving, travelling, they may not be able to call for help. They may be waiting a bit before another car passes by and notices them. It's the same for the people who live along the Cabot Trail. In a storm such as Fiona, to lose your land line and not have any cell service, you are basically cut off. That is a very dangerous situation if 911 needs to be called for family members to communicate with each other to make sure everybody is safe.

We need coverage that is reliable, but even in areas where there is coverage, it's reported that this coverage can be poor and unreliable. Take my riding, for instance, of Cape Breton Centre-Whitney Pier. There are parts of my riding when I'm driving where I just lose cell service. I don't live in Louisbourg. I don't live in Main-à-Dieu. I don't live in Inverness County or Richmond County. I live in Cape Breton Regional Municipality. There are parts of my area where just driving, I will lose complete service.

Sometimes it's unpredictable where, because sometimes the place where I lost service last time is not the same place I'm going to lose service this time. It's also unpredictable when I'm driving and I'm talking to people. I don't know how many times I had a family member or my CA in a panic, because all of a sudden the car is silent and my phone call drops. I'll call them five minutes later, and it's like, Oh my God, I thought something might have happened to you, thank you for calling. Poor cell service leads to situations where people are cut off from each other, they're cut off from emergency services, and also the person who was on the line is now panicked about where you are.

On the roadways, it's a very real thing. It's worrying in its impacts. Some of us who travel a lot know this. In a recent news article, the story of Sue Amberg, whose car went off the road in one of the many dead zones on the province's Eastern Shore, and she wasn't able to call for any help. This is a real example here. I will table this after I'm done. She was off the road, and she had no cell service. It says:

“Amberg has heard from many local residents that many of the visitors to Nova Scotia are fed up with the lack of services in communities and on roads. ‘They have no issues where they live, and then suddenly they come to the Eastern Shore, and they cannot believe they’re not getting cell service,’ she said.”

Then she was describing her incident, and she said: “There was one truck driver who came by me, and he just happened to see me, and he felt compelled to stop. He was running around with a phone in his hand trying to get a signal to try and phone someone to report the accident, but he couldn't get hold of anybody.”

Imagine how terrifying that must be in that situation. Whether you are Sue, or whether you are the truck driver, of trying to get help, and there's no service. This is why we really need to take this situation very seriously. I'm going to table that now.

On this side of the aisle, within our caucus, we're encouraged by the conversations being generated by this bill and see work in addressing cell coverage on our highways as a positive first step. The issue is broader, as we know. That same report found that over 21,000 homes and businesses had no cell coverage as well. Having adequate cellphone coverage and at work is vital to personal and economic well-being, and also for safety reasons.

Cellphone coverage is essential for receiving time-sensitive emergency alerts. This becomes all too clear to Nova Scotians in our recent years. To miss an emergency alert, and not get it because you are in a dead zone, could mean life or death. It could mean you could be going into a flash flood, and you don't know about it. For a lot of us who drive - myself included - that is very real.

I rely on the news, and I rely on my emergency alerts every time I'm driving up here. My colleagues can attest to the fact that I am the weather reporter on road conditions. Because I want to get home safely. I want to get to Halifax safely to represent my constituents. I want Nova Scotians to get to the places where they need to go safely. That cellphone is a lifeline for many of us who are driving.

Those working in emergency management have also expressed their concern that residents won't receive these alerts. That's very concerning, too, when emergency management is acknowledging this fact. Phone coverage also plays a vital role in the issuing of these alerts. It's reported that following the July floods, inadequate cell coverage played a role in the two-hour delay to send out an emergency alert.

We know that extreme weather events, floods, hurricanes, and fires are going to become more frequent and severe with climate change. Nova Scotians need to know that emergency alerts will be issued and received in time. During these kinds of weather events, cellphones are oftentimes a last remaining - and I said this prior, a lifeline for people. Charging your cellphone now is a key reminder in emergency preparedness. How many times have you heard that? Make sure your cellphone is fully charged. Make sure you have something to charge your cellphone with should you lose power.

When landlines and power lines are impacted, it's often only the cellphone that people are left to rely on. This became clear to many communities following Hurricane Fiona last year. In Ecum Secum, for example, some residents went 30 days without any phone service after landline phone lines were impacted. Without cellphone coverage in the community, many had no means of communication and couldn't even make calls to 911.

I have that here, where they discuss this issue. One individual wrote that - Darrell MacDonald said, "It's very frustrating and if we had cellphone service, it would open up communication that we just don't have here now. We've been having lots of issues with our home phone lines with storms and power outages, so that's why cellphone coverage would be ideal to have here." I'll table that.

This is not an if or a when. This is what's been happening. I know in my own riding, after Fiona, in Reserve Mines - and I mean quite literally - there was one spot outside the fire department where I could stand and get cellphone service. This is not something very far off. This is a place that should get cellphone service, and I could not get cellphone service except to stand right outside the door in this particular spot. It was basically a foot of a spot, and I had to stand there to get cellphone service in that community for a few days.

I've heard stories of people who could not get hold of their mothers or fathers in Cape Breton - and they lived elsewhere here in the province - after Fiona, and they drove to Cape Breton so they could communicate with their family, because they could not get hold of them.

The lack of cell service has a human impact. We've become reliant on our cellphones to get in touch with people. We've become reliant on our cellphones for emergency alerts. To not have cellphone coverage in every part of this province - reliable cell service - could and has caused people to be in harm's way.

[5:00 p.m.]

I thank the members for bringing this forward, as well as for the debate. With that, I'll take my seat.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Hants West.

MELISSA SHEEHY-RICHARD: I'm grateful to rise on this opportunity to speak to Bill No. 357 in the Legislature today on this really critical issue.

I, too, drive the roads every day and highways frequently, and appreciate the importance of having reliable cell coverage in our province. It is frustrating trying to make a call when you're travelling back and forth to Halifax, in particular on the highways. I know that Nova Scotians feel this, too. It's not a luxury. It's very important. It's a necessity.

It becomes a matter of safety. We depend on our phones for alert systems as well. We need reliable coverage. We need cellular coverage that we can count on in Nova Scotia. We need our phones for lots of reasons - to call for help if we're in an accident, if we have car trouble. We need them to check in on our loved ones, our children, our family members. We need them a lot of times for work.

Beyond that, we depend on our phones constantly just to improve our quality of life. They're very important in the ways that we work, the ways that we move together in the future. Cell coverage and cellphones are very important. It's how we connect. It's how we shop. It's how we meet new friends. It's how we stay in touch with our families - social media, in particular.

Improving cell coverage for all Nova Scotians is something that the government does take very seriously, and we are taking action on this file. In fact, I am proud to say that we are the first government in the province to ever address this issue. We commissioned a study that does show us where we have gaps in coverage. This study was important so that we knew where to put the added areas that are most impacted. We know that more than 21,000 homes and businesses and about 1,000 kilometres of our roads have little or no cell coverage.

It is unacceptable, and our government acknowledges this. Through Build Nova Scotia, we are working on a strategy to provide this service to underrepresented areas as quickly as we possibly can.

This strategy will also strengthen our network throughout the province, not just in the areas of gaps, but throughout our entire province. This strategy will consider all technologies and look to partner with industry and other levels of government. It is important to remember that the solution for this problem will inevitably require many partnerships, many conversations, and working together.

The Province does not regulate the telecommunication sector. That is the role of the CRTC; nor does the Province own telecommunications infrastructure that provides cellular service. It belongs to privately owned corporations. We know that this sector - we are new to the sector, but we know that we are fast learners and I am happy to share today that conversations with industry and other levels of government are progressing well, and expect that we will have more to say on this file very soon.

For now, I want to say that we do understand how frustrating it is for Nova Scotians with poor to no cell coverage. I personally know the impacts that it can have and how important it is for this file to move forward, and I am proud of the work that's being done. I am proud of taking the steps and the strategy to work together.

Nova Scotians shouldn't have to deal with this stuff in 2023. We should have been looking into this all along. There shouldn't be a risk in emergency situations, and I know that solutions cannot be found fast enough, but we are going to move as fast and as quickly as possible because it is very important to not just my community but to the entire province.

We are confident of the capabilities of Build Nova Scotia - their ability to replicate the success that they had in bringing the high-speed internet to rural communities. My community particularly benefited from the investments in Build Nova Scotia, and I am happy to say that we have had big improvements, but not enough, and that's why we are continuing to work with cell coverage.

We are determined to close these gaps and ensure that Nova Scotians will receive the service that they need and the service that they can rely on. It impacts all of us. We are going to continue to work with our partners and I know that Council back home has made motions pleading to the federal government to work on this and address this. We are going to work together with our municipal governments and our federal government and bring the reliable coverage that we need.

I know that I was really late to get a cellphone and I, too, became so dependent on it, and it is so frustrating for these upgrades not to be made by these telecommunication companies. The infrastructure needs improvement. Travelling on our highways, we do need this. The strategy will work together.

I know that families back home have called on this and I am proud to say that we are listening. I know that the minister will work diligently and not leave this at the feet, as

maybe was indicated that's been done. This work has already started. I don't believe that introducing Bill No. 357 is necessary because the work has already started.

I feel at a loss for what I want to say to come through here today, but I know that the work of strengthening these networks is really critical and key.

I think at this point I'm just going to take my seat.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Annapolis.

CARMAN KERR: I would say to the member for West Hants that the reason we are asking or tabling this bill is we've asked several times over a number of years for information on the cell gap study, on information and action that has been taken, and we've been given absolutely zero information on that. That's the reason for doing so.

I'm eager to stand up and speak to Bill No. 357, the Highway Cellular Coverage Act. At my constituency, at events in Annapolis, on doorsteps and driveways, I would argue that the lack of cell service probably rivals the lack of emergent care and the lack of affordable housing in Annapolis.

I've raised this issue, as I said, a number of times in our committee, on the Legislature floor, in Estimates. I can table some of the times I've raised it, on several different occasions. I know that MLAs in this room realize how critical cell service is. The question is it hasn't been urgent as far as action. We haven't seen any information on it, and we thought we'd create a bill that hopefully reminds the government of how urgent it is.

The Minister of Economic Development has said, and I quote, "this absolutely remains a barrier to economic and social development and a safety concern," so I'm assuming that she is in support of this bill. On November 22, 2022, so a year ago, in the Committee on Natural Resources and Economic Development, I raised this issue. I asked for a copy of the already-completed cell gap study. I was told no. I was told our team couldn't have it, and I was told that Nova Scotians aren't permitted to look at it.

However, senior staff at Develop Nova Scotia and Public Works have acknowledged, and I quote: "There's no question that cell service in a great part of Nova Scotia is inadequate. One of the enabling pieces to feed those towers is the fibre network that is being built out through the internet project."

It was raised again on May 23, 2023 in the Committee on Natural Resources and Economic Development. I met with the Department of Agriculture, and I quote from senior staff at Agriculture: "Yes, the coverage of cell service in rural Nova Scotia in particular is a critically important subject for us. We recognize that producers need that capacity to do their business, and not only in agriculture. We hear the same comments for seafood and aquaculture as well." All to say we've had several staff, several ministers, and several

MLAs acknowledge that the lack of cell service adversely affects the constituents they represent.

In health care in Annapolis, and I would argue in rural Nova Scotia, cell service is a lifeline, and maybe the only lifeline that many residents have. I know that the member for Kings West can acknowledge this, that our emergency room in Middleton has been severely reduced. We've lost our emergency service in Annapolis, and for most of the day there is no emergency department open in the entire County of Annapolis.

Any delay in making that 911 call is extremely detrimental and unsafe to the people I serve, and to other Nova Scotians. I have too many emails I was looking through today from constituents who have witnessed or have been part of an accident, and they're not able to make that call. They have to drive or walk to get a sufficient signal to call paramedics in or make alternative plans.

As acknowledged before, we're having increased flooding, we have increased wildfires, we have a much higher crime rate in Annapolis than across the province. That's been acknowledged by the Minister of Justice. I would argue that in all these cases, reliable cell service is crucial and life saving.

I'll give you an example in the Valley. We had a constituent recently who tried to call 911 during a home invasion. As windows are being smashed and the door's being broken down, this gentleman tried to call 911. Now he couldn't get through on the first couple of calls. He did get through for a few seconds, and he was put in touch with New Brunswick, because he's on the Bay of Fundy and that's where it was patched through to. All to say his jaw was broken. He couldn't reach paramedics. He drove to the VG in Halifax. What I'm arguing is that this bill will ensure that Nova Scotians are safe.

In the Valley, we've got the North Mountain and the South Mountain. We've got the Valley, and our major highway is running down the middle of it. This bill will not only help keep Nova Scotians safer but we're hoping through an economic development lens as well. Reliable cell service is essential for businesses, for individuals and for communities alike. It facilitates seamless communication. It empowers access to information. It certainly fosters innovation.

The lack of reliable cell service restricts these business owners' ability to connect with customers and to connect with suppliers. It hinders their potential for expansion and to be competitive. This bill will support economic development.

I grew up on a farm. Far too many times, family members and friends have been injured on the farm and on other farms - serious injuries, even death. If they don't have an emergency room close by, they rely on that cell service for their safety. There are farmers now just off Highway No. 101 who can't connect with their staff on their farms, so they're spending more money on fuel. They're driving to orchards and fields to connect with staff.

Often there's a language barrier, where a text or an email may not work. Certainly, this bill will look to address those issues as well.

[5:15 p.m.]

I could go on and on. In tourism - I have a background in tourism - how many times did I hear that a tourism operator couldn't do their business or couldn't operate their business the way they envisioned because of lack of cell service. We've got too many travellers travelling down Highway No. 101. They're waiting another hour to make that call or make that booking or make that reservation. They continue on, and we're such a small province that only a few hours later they're out of province.

This bill, I'm hoping, will ensure small business owners and our tourism community feel better supported.

I could go on about daily life as a dad of two young kids, calling our school, ordering food, getting clarification on a prescription. There are lots of issues where even by going to a different room in the house or running to the end of the driveway or taking the car to the top of the mountain we still can't get cell service.

I want to thank our leader for raising this issue and treating this as a priority for our team. I want to thank him for introducing this bill. I want to thank our media partners for also raising this concern.

I couldn't get any information from the cell gap study, from multiple different departments. Media, our leader, and others were able to pull out redacted information from that study. As other members have said, it shows that 21,000 households live in cellular dead zones in the province. It shows the total number and a breakdown of civic addresses with no cell coverage, by county, through the province. Annapolis is certainly on that list.

That report also poses two potential solutions. It talks about building 25 new tower sites. It talks about identifying 73 sites that would cover two-thirds of uncovered civic addresses and unserved primary roads in the province.

In conclusion, I would say that the government has the cell gap study. They've had it for a couple of years now. They certainly came up with \$700 million over a 48-hour period or less; I'm sure they could come up with a couple hundred million on this file.

This bill ensures that no Nova Scotian is left behind and that our province remains resilient and connected and prepared for the future. My hope and ask is that the government supports this bill. My hope is that they don't blame others. I have a funny feeling the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission or the federal government or some other unit will be blamed for this inaction. My hope is that this

government, which calls itself a government of action, will take action. They've been the government of slow motion on this file, and Nova Scotians want that to change.

THE SPEAKER: The honourable member for Cumberland North.

ELIZABETH SMITH-MCCROSSIN: Speaker, I would like to stand in support of this bill and thank my colleague from Annapolis for everything that he has shared. On behalf of the constituents whom I represent in Cumberland North, I do want to share some comments that I do hear from the people that I represent.

I'm going to just table some of the communications that I have sent through to government ministers. One was actually to the previous minister, and it was from back in April 2020. It was a letter to the former Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing, Minister Porter, identifying the need to improve cellphone service because sometimes calls go to a neighbouring province when there are 911 calls made.

In the letter, it says there was a call from someone's cellphone that went to the 911 dispatch centre in Prince Edward Island. P.E.I. forwarded this call to a 911 centre in New Brunswick, mistakenly, and then New Brunswick forwarded the call to Nova Scotia 911. This estimated delay was 10 to 12 minutes, and caused additional stress in a dangerous situation of a fire.

This situation has not been fixed yet, and this letter was sent back in April of 2020. We still have this problem along the Northumberland Strait where people will call 911 in emergency situations, whether it's fire or medical, and the calls are going to 911 in another province, causing delays.

Back on January 21, 2022, I also communicated with the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing, who's responsible for the Emergency Management Office for the Province, Minister Lohr. In that letter, I included:

"911 service is not available to all residents in Cumberland County due to a lack of cell phone service. There are also some areas along the Northumberland Shore where 911 calls go to PEI or NB instead of NS. This happened again just this past week and caused a delay in a fire service being contacted for a fire. Can someone from your department please work on a solution for this problem? Also, improvements are needed in cell tower coverage to ensure all Nova Scotians have access to 911 service."

I'll table that letter.

Keep in mind that every person who has a cellphone in this province, or a phone line, is paying for 911 service, but the people who live on the Northumberland Shore are

missing it, even though they're paying for that 911 service. They often don't have access to it.

Another letter that was sent January 21, 2022 to Minister Jill Balser, talking about bringing immigrants . . . (Interruption)

THE SPEAKER: Order, order. Just to remind the member that you cannot use names in the House.

ELIZABETH SMITH-MCCROSSIN: Thank you, Speaker, for that reminder. To the Minister of Labour, Skills and Immigration, reminding the minister that:

“attracting immigrants to Nova Scotia is important, and also that improvements in access to internet and cellphone coverage must be made a priority. There have been many persons considering moving to the Gulf Shore area, for example, in Cumberland, and chose not to, as they would not be able to work from home due to the lack of internet and cellphone coverage. I am requesting that improvements to internet and cellphone coverage be made a priority, in conjunction with attracting immigrants.”

Second last, I sent a communication through to the Minister of Economic Development and spoke to the issue that:

“economic development is being thwarted due to a lack of cellphone and internet coverage along the Northumberland Strait. The areas I hear the most concern about are stretches from Tidnish to Malagash, which is pretty much the whole Northumberland Strait in my constituency. Many people have moved along the shore to ‘work from home,’ and are having great difficulty due to the lack of internet. It would be in this government's best interest to uphold their platform promises and immediately act to bring internet coverage and cellphone coverage to fruition.”

In a submission that I made to the Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, I also brought up the issue of the lack of cellphone coverage in asking his government to make improvements specifically in Cumberland North. I will table that as well.

Cellphone coverage can be a matter of life and death. As many members here in the House have already identified, the areas without cellphone coverage in rural Nova Scotia mean that when someone is having a medical emergency, they cannot call 911. This is certainly an issue in Cumberland North. There are many, many areas throughout the constituency where there is literally zero cellphone coverage.

Now I know the government's member, when she spoke, did say that Build Nova Scotia is working on a plan. That is very encouraging to hear. I will table, once I receive copies from the library, two articles that have recently been in *The Globe and Mail* that talk about the report that the government has yet to release - even though *The Globe and Mail* was able to get it through a Freedom of Information Act request - and the fact that there are over 21,000 Nova Scotians without access to safe and reliable cell phone services.

Something else that hasn't come up that I wanted to mention is that we are pushing consumers towards electric vehicles. One of the downsides of not having cell phone coverage when you have an electric vehicle - if you are stranded and you don't have cell phone coverage, that means you cannot activate your electric vehicle charger, leaving drivers stranded on the side of the road. That is something else to consider as we are moving people towards electrification of vehicles - that we are looking also at the importance of people having safe, reliable access to cell phone coverage.

When it comes to medical care, our government is pushing people towards virtual care. The fact is that if people do not have internet and/or cell phone coverage, they cannot access these virtual care services either.

I do look forward to hearing what the government's plan is, through Build Nova Scotia, to ensure that all Nova Scotians do have improved access to cell phone coverage. I certainly hope that the people of Cumberland North will be included in that plan so they can be assured to have access to 911 service, as well as so our economy can truly meet its potential. Having cell phone coverage and internet access - there is direct correlation with economic development, and we certainly want to realize our fullest potential in our area. With those few words, I will take my seat.

THE SPEAKER: I've made a decision with regard to Rule 5 proceedings after a moment of interruption. It is by the rules that if the member who submitted Late Debate is not present, Late Debate does not happen. I was just notified a little while ago, when I was out for a break, that the member of Halifax Atlantic is not present. Again, if anybody would like to confirm my ruling, you can go to Page 6 of your little green book.

There will not be any Late Debate. We will take our recess for a moment and decide how we will proceed.

[5:28 p.m. The House recessed.]

[5:30 p.m. The House reconvened.]

THE SPEAKER: Order. The time allotted for Opposition Business and for Bill No. 357 has expired.

GOVERNMENT BUSINESS

THE SPEAKER: The honourable Government House Leader.

HON. KIM MASLAND: Thank you, Speaker. Before we get into Committee of the Whole House on Bills, pursuant to Rule 5(c), I move that the hours on Thursday, October 26th - that the time of adjournment be not 5:30 p.m. but be 11:59 p.m.

THE SPEAKER: There is a motion to extend the hours.

All those in favour?

There has been a request for a recorded vote.

Ring the bells. Call in the members.

[4:31 p.m.]

The Division bells were rung.

THE SPEAKER: Are the Whips satisfied?

We will now have the Clerk conduct a recorded vote. A reminder that we are to remain silent until the recorded vote is taken. Thank you.

[The Clerk calls the roll.]

[6:31 p.m.]

YEAS

Hon. Brad Johns
Hon. Tory Rushton
Hon. Barbara Adams
Hon. Kim Masland
Hon. Allan MacMaster
Hon. Twila Grosse
Hon. Michelle Thompson
Hon. John Lohr
Hon. Trevor Boudreau
Hon. Timothy Halman
Hon. Kent Smith
Dave Ritcey
Hon. Brian Wong
Hon. Susan Corkum-Greek
Hon. Brian Comer

NAYS

Hon. Patricia Arab
Hon. Keith Irving
Hon. Derek Mombourquette
Hon. Kelly Regan
Susan Leblanc
Claudia Chender
Suzy Hansen
Gary Burrill
Lisa Lachance
Lorelei Nicoll
Hon. Ben Jessome
Braedon Clark
Carman Kerr
Ronnie LeBlanc
Ali Duale

Hon. Colton LeBlanc
Hon. Jill Balsler
Hon. Pat Dunn
Hon. Greg Morrow
Hon. Becky Druhan
Larry Harrison
John White
Hon. Keith Bain
Chris Palmer
Melissa Sheehy-Richard
Danielle Barkhouse
Nolan Young
Hon. Steve Craig

THE CLERK: For, 28. Against, 15.

THE SPEAKER: The motion is carried.

The honourable Government House Leader.

HON. KIM MASLAND: Speaker, I move that you do now leave the Chair and that the House resolve itself into a Committee of the Whole House on Bills.

THE SPEAKER: The Committee of the Whole House on Bills will now begin and I will leave the Chair.

[6:34 p.m. The House resolved into a CWH on Bills with Lisa Lachance in the Chair.]

[11:59 p.m. The CWH on Bills rose and the House reconvened. Deputy Speaker Nolan Young resumed the Chair.]

THE SPEAKER: Order. The Committee of the Whole House on Bills has met and will now report. The Chair of the Committee of the Whole House on Bills reports:

THE CLERK: That the committee has met and considered the following bill:

Bill No. 322 - Opioid Damages and Health-care Costs Recovery Act (amended).

without amendments and the Chair has been instructed to recommend this bill to the favourable consideration of the House.

THE SPEAKER: Ordered that this bill be read for a third time on a future day.

We have now reached the hour of adjournment. The House will now rise and meet again tomorrow between the hours of 1:00 p.m. and 11:59 p.m. We stand adjourned.

[The House rose at 12:00 a.m.]