

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions



December 12, 2019

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HOMELESSNESS

Mr. D. Landry (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, in 2018, the Liberal government was pleased to reach an agreement to solve the housing crisis in New Brunswick. It was a 10-year agreement to provide long-term funding for affordable housing. This agreement included funds for new social and community housing, as well as for repairs and new construction, among other things. The agreement was worth \$300 million over 10 years.

This week, the minister stated on CBC that she was planning on spending around \$250 000 per year over the next three years for new units, and about \$4 million per year for repairs. A lot more money is available, and we are facing a housing crisis here in New Brunswick. Why are we not using all this money for vulnerable New Brunswickers who do not have a roof over their heads?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Social Development, Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, PC): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the question from the Leader of the Opposition. Might I say that, yes, they completed part of the journey toward finishing a 10-year plan with the federal government, but then there were additional negotiations that took place. New Brunswick led the way. We were the first government in Canada to sign a 10-year deal with the federal government, so there were still many, many details to complete on that journey. We did the work. We did complete those negotiations with the federal government.

Indeed, we were the first provincial government in Canada to sign that deal with the federal government, and we have completed the first three-year action plan. It is a partnership with the federal government. It put in money, and we put in equal money. There is more money available at the end of this 10-year plan than there is at the beginning of this 10-year plan. We have increased the amount for our first three years. We are building more units than the members opposite did.

[*Translation*]

Mr. D. Landry (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Interim Opposition Leader, L): The agreement we had signed with Ottawa provided \$30 million per year for people who need a decent place to live. We are talking about parents and children who do not have a home or who live in unacceptable conditions. This means there is \$26 million per year for people who need help, which this government is not using.

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The Premier likes to say that he is the new sheriff in town, and he claims to focus on the future. What do you think the future will hold for these homeless children? When will you finally decide to invest this money before it is too late for these children? What about families who need housing right now?

[Original]

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Social Development, Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, PC): The member across, the Leader of the Opposition, is right. This is a \$300-million deal, but it is an agreement between the federal government and the provincial government for equal dollars. The federal government has put an amount of money on the table for the first three years of the action plan. This 10-year plan is back-end-loaded. There is more money available in the later years than in the earlier years.

But, Mr. Speaker, we have included 151 units in the first three years of new development. That averages out to 50 per year—10 more per year than the previous government put on the table—so we are progressing. We want to continue to progress on what the previous government built, and we are going to do that. This is a 10-year plan, which is important to remember, and New Brunswick led the way. We were the first to sign and to get our money. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Translation]

Mr. D. Landry (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, regarding the answer the minister just gave me, I am still wondering if this could have been done the other way around, since it is a federal-provincial agreement. More funds should perhaps have been spent now, because the need is being felt right now. There are 500 homeless people in the province and about 5 000 households on the waiting list for affordable housing.

There are housing units in the province that remain empty awaiting repairs that could be done now if we invested the money under the agreement with Ottawa. Instead, the minister is cutting rental assistance. She served us up some key messages, saying that we must live within our means. We agree with this statement, but this housing agreement provides the means to do more with regard to housing. Thanks to this agreement, we can afford to do more. Why are we not doing more with regard to housing, given that funds are available?

[Original]

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Social Development, Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, PC): I am not sure where the member thinks we have the extra money. Let me say this, and let me qualify a few things. First of all, we are the largest landlord in the province, and it would be no secret to

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many of the members on the opposite side who served in the Department of Social Development that we have 14 200 units between private-sector and public-sector housing units and they are mostly public-sector units. We need to look after them, as we are going to do, and we are going to renovate. We need to build more, and we are going to build more: 50 units per year in the first three years, which is 10 more than the previous plan had.

We understand the need. It is in my face every single day, and I do not turn away from it. I understand it, and I acknowledge that it is there. We are going to do everything we can to add to the 14 200 units that we are subsidizing or owning at this point. We are going to continue to grow that plan as best we can and as quickly as we can, and to do so, we will partner with the private sector, NGOs, and everyone.

Ms. Rogers (Moncton South, L): Housing is a real issue in Moncton. Even though Moncton is a growing city, we have less than a 1% vacancy rate, and what is vacant is higher-market rent. The minister promised that 150 new units would be made available for the first two years of her mandate—I think that on CBC, this was three years—and promised to reinstate 70 subsidies that were lost.

I am not sure how this can be done, because, for example, in Moncton, when there is a delay, those are filled because of the low vacancy rate. All we are seeing are overdue shelter beds. I am wondering when there will be the addition of housing units, because the shelter is meant for two days or two weeks. We need transitional and pretransitional housing for people to move out of shelters instead of putting them back onto the streets. Could we hear from the minister on this?

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Social Development, Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, PC): Mr. Speaker, I am glad that they acknowledge that they need homeless shelters because they did not provide them and we did. In the last year, we have spent \$2 million helping Fredericton and Moncton. In Moncton particularly, it has been a long journey this year, but we are there. There was \$2 million for homelessness. We picked up what they did not do.

I could not agree more that we need more units, and in prosperous cities like Moncton, it becomes equally difficult. We have approved projects in Moncton and in Saint John and in Fredericton for more units. It is an ongoing partnership with the public sector, and we are working them as much as possible.

With our rent subsidies, we made it very clear that \$2 million for the homeless shelters had to come from somewhere, and we had to temporarily delay 70 rent subsidies until next year. We will get them back, but we did not just drop them. We have not stopped providing for the people of our cities. Thank you.

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Ms. Rogers (Moncton South, L): I do acknowledge that there were new shelter beds built, and we appreciate that. They were supposed to open in August. They opened only recently. It has been very difficult for everybody in Moncton who is working to house people and working around the clock. It is heartbreaking.

I am still concerned with how we can get those rent subsidies replaced when the vacancy is not there. I agree with the minister. You know, rent subsidies are the best way to house more people. I do not think that government needs to be a bigger landlord. I think we need to work with the private sector and get more rent subsidies. These are urgently needed, and we cannot afford the delay. I would like to know when these will be replaced and when the new ones will be added in Moncton.

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Social Development, Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, PC): Mr. Speaker, I have made it very clear that this will be progressive. We understand the need. The shelter was the first key to trying to be strategic about how we address homelessness in the Moncton area. There are many reasons for homelessness, and the members across understand some of that complexity. I know they do. They have sat in this chair. The fact of the matter is that we need to stabilize those who are homeless. Then, we need to move them out.

The regions of Moncton, Fredericton, and Saint John and also our rural areas have all had a key focus on homelessness. They are a priority, so they actually rank at the top of the list for homes and subsidies. We will provide what we need to provide, but the members opposite need to know that in a prosperous province, it is much easier. They turned away prosperity for this province for four years, and we had to pick up the mess as a result. We will continue.

[*Translation*]

COLLECTIVE BARGAINING

Mr. LePage (Restigouche West, L): It is December 12, and this government is still in disagreement with the union representing nursing home workers. Also, a bill has been tabled in the House to help the government deal with its own incompetence in this regard.

If the government had negotiated in good faith—in good faith—with workers who take care of the most fragile and oldest people in our province, we think that we would not have reached this point.

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[Original]

My question for the minister or the Premier is this: Has the government made any attempt to bargain in good faith with nursing home workers since the latest set of talks failed?

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Social Development, Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, PC): Mr. Speaker, I have stated publicly time and time again that we want a negotiated settlement. We are open to joining the table at any time. The previous government, again, left this undone. One more thing that we have picked up on is that 24 out of 26 unions were able to sign on with what the previous government offered. We are not shy to take up the challenge, but we have made it very, very clear that we think that the best settlement will come from negotiation. We are willing to return to the table at any time. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. LePage (Restigouche West, L): Mr. Speaker, I do not understand her negotiation tactic. How can you negotiate when you lock your office doors and you cannot let the workers in? Consultation means both ways. You can hear and listen and then talk. Unfortunately, this government has not proven that so far.

[Translation]

Bill 17, with its current wording, establishes a process to decide who is an essential worker in nursing homes. It requires that this be done one retirement home at a time. The government claims that it could be done quickly. However, since these are independent negotiations for 51 homes—51 homes, Mr. Speaker—and given how the government continues to treat nursing home workers, we are told this process could take years.

[Original]

Mr. Speaker, my question for the minister is this: Would workers remain without a contract until the...

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Guitard): Member. Member. Member.

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Social Development, Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am not sure where to begin. There was a lot of rhetoric in that before the question was posed in an untimely fashion, I am afraid.

Let me just speak to the fact that we are willing to sit down at the negotiating table, and that is where this must be now. There has been lots of talk—lots of talk up to it—and I think we have a good perspective of the union's position on this. I think it has a good perspective of our position on this. It can be resolved. We think that negotiating this out is the very best resolution for everyone. It is always my hope to bargain forward. We want to

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resolve this contract for these first four years. Going forward, we know that we can, with the union members' help, achieve what they want to achieve. It is a negotiation, and I am very willing to sit down and negotiate with them—as soon as they are ready, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. LePage (Restigouche West, L): Of course, we saw the minister stand up and say that she has consulted, but again, has she consulted with the nurses? We did not see that in our report or in our talks with them. Again, the perspective of this minister about... Forgot to listen to the bargaining process with the conditions that are proposed in this bill...

[*Translation*]

We think that binding arbitration should be nothing more, just unrestricted binding arbitration. The proposed legislation sets conditions, including a poorly defined ability-to-pay clause. What does that mean? I remind you that this government raised more than \$9 billion in revenue—and is bragging about it—and is responsible for the choices it makes with this money. We do not think that the ability-to-pay clause is sufficiently well-defined...

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Guitard): You are up to one minute and three seconds.

[*Original*]

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Social Development, Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation, PC): Mr. Speaker, we project a small surplus. That is what we have. In the billions of dollars of our budget, we have, right at the moment, a small surplus. But if the wage increases that the unions have requested are achieved, then, unfortunately, not only would that disappear, but also we would be back into deficit spending as the other government chose to do for four years. In fact, it received \$1 billion more in taxes, yet it still had deficit spending.

We have to be more prudent for the future of our children. We need to have fair negotiations, and that is what we want. We want to have fair negotiations with the union, and we are willing to sit down at any time. Mr. Speaker, we are just cleaning up what they left behind.

AGRICULTURE

Mr. K. Arseneau (Kent North, G): Mr. Speaker, recently, during the public accounts committee, the Department of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries admitted to not having followed through on two key elements of the Local Food and Beverages Strategy. The first one was to develop a brand image to make local food and beverages more easily recognizable. The department backed down because of grocery stores who, with misleading marketing, like to fool customers into thinking that their products are local. The

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second one is even more outrageous. The department has not yet defined what “local product” is. I asked in committee whether a banana cut in New Brunswick would be considered a local product because it was processed locally. Based on the answer, it could be.

Will the minister commit to defining “local product” with small and medium-scale farmers while keeping the middlemen, lobbyists, and marketers out of it?

Hon. Mr. Wetmore (Gagetown-Petitcodiac, Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries, PC): I would like to thank the member for Kent North for the question. It is certainly a good question, and it seems the opposition, as a rule, does not want to ask agriculture questions.

Certainly, this is very important, and small farmers are important to the economy and rural communities in New Brunswick. We will be working with a number of stakeholders, doing multiple consultation and engagement sessions with key players. That includes the National Farmers Union, the Agricultural Alliance of New Brunswick, and all stakeholders. So it is certainly something that we are working on, and I know that my department has offered the member across the way to come in and sit and have discussions with him. We are getting ready to make that happen. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

LOBSTER

Mr. K. Arseneau (Kent North, G): A sit-down that keeps being put back and put back and put back. The disrespect for the questions is really, really frustrating.

[Translation]

Fisheries are very important for our coastal areas. On the docks and in the communities, I often hear about two issues that jeopardize the lobster fishery as an economic driver for our communities. The first issue relates to fishing licences being bought back by Prince Edward Island fishermen who then take these licences back to their province, which undermines fisheries in our communities. The second issue I hear about is the difficulty a significant number of young fishermen have in financing the purchase of licences.

Can the minister commit to meeting the Canadian Minister of Fisheries and Oceans in the very near future in order to find timely and lasting solutions to ensure the sustainability of lobster fisheries in our rural areas?

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[Original]

Hon. Mr. Wetmore (Gagetown-Petitcodiac, Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries, PC): Well again, I would like to thank the member for the question. Certainly, I am committed to meeting with the Minister of Fisheries and DFO. The Canadian Council of Fisheries and Aquaculture Ministers (CCFAM) is scheduled for January, and if not January, shortly after. That is certainly something that we bring forward all the time. It is very important that the catches get landed here in New Brunswick. New Brunswick is the largest processor of seafood in Atlantic Canada, and we want to make sure that it stays that way.

We are also bringing forward new loan agreements, I guess you would call them. It will give the opportunity for fishers to take part in the new entrance program. We also have to look at... Because of the success of the industry, the lobster licenses are a little more expensive. But we will certainly be...

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Guitard): Time, minister.

PARAMEDICS

Mr. Austin (Fredericton-Grand Lake, Leader, PA): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Over the past year, we have had many meetings with the Minister of Health as well as the Premier regarding paramedics and their reclassification. We have fought for reclassification for well over a year, since the election. Right now, paramedics' morale is at rock bottom, and ultimately, that directly affects the service that is provided by them in their jobs on a daily basis.

Mr. Speaker, there is a letter that was sent to the Minister of Health from the Paramedic Association, which clearly says... One of the recommendations that the paramedics make is: "The Government ensures the examination of all issues regarding retention related to the classification of paramedics, compensation and representation." The letter goes on to say that the Paramedic Association supports any steps that the government can take, such as reclassification.

I am going to ask a very direct question to the Minister of Health. I am hoping he will give a very direct answer, as he has always done. Will this minister commit one hundred percent to the reclassification of our paramedics?

Hon. Mr. Flemming (Rothesay, Minister of Health, PC): Well, Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the member for the question. I also want to say that the issue with respect to reclassification is very much at the fore of many of my duties as Minister of Health. I want to point out as well that I received yesterday the identical letter. Actually, it is addressed to me, so of course, it is the same letter.

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I have met with the paramedics. I have met with the reclassification committee. But there is a process that needs to be followed. The government is looking at it carefully. I personally am supportive of the initiative. I believe that many of my colleagues are. But you have to realize that there is a process that needs to go through and that we are working to that extent. It is very simple for someone to be pulled up on the carpet and be told: Commit to doing this right now. Well, I am not able to do that. What I am able to say...

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Guitard): Time, minister.

Mr. Austin (Fredericton-Grand Lake, Leader, PA): Mr. Speaker, this Minister of Health as well as his Premier has been “supportive” of the reclassification of paramedics for a year. We have had many meetings on this. The Minister of Health has the authority to reclassify these paramedics. So I am going to ask him again: Will he give a direct answer and reclassify the paramedics?

Hon. Mr. Flemming (Rothesay, Minister of Health, PC): Well, the Minister of Health does not. It is a bargaining issue. It is an HR issue, so it is Treasury Board, Finance Department, and things like that. The Minister of Health, certainly, and the department are instrumental in, hopefully, influencing that decision. But, as I say, as much as I support the initiative and believe that it is the right move, I am not going to be boxed in in the Legislature when someone gets up and says: I demand that you do this. Say you are going to do it now.

Is it a question of policy that we are in favour of? Yes. Is there a procedure to go through? Yes. Do I want further meetings with the Paramedic Association to make sure that we know exactly what the word “reclassification” means? Reclassification to what? To what union, to what bargaining group, to what everything?

Just to say: Do it, and do it now. We are in the business of doing it and doing...

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Guitard): Time, minister.

[*Translation*]

SNOW REMOVAL

Mrs. F. Landry (Madawaska Les Lacs-Edmundston, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Several members have received correspondence from local employees of the Department of Transportation and Infrastructure that suggests that this Conservative government still has a lot more nasty surprises in store for rural New Brunswickers.

Considering what is now happening in nursing homes, this government clearly has little interest in a fair bargaining process. Now, we are told that snowplow operators could be

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about to strike. In the event of a strike, it seems that people who live in rural areas—which we call low-volume areas—will not have their roads plowed when a storm hits. Can the minister confirm this and explain what the emergency plans are, in the event of a strike?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Oliver (Kings Centre, Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Certainly, we are very much aware of what is going on with the negotiations, and we are making plans. We are preparing for the time when and if that does occur, but at this point in time, I am not able to give you our total plan. I could bring that message back to you individually. If you would like to come to the department, we would certainly sit down and meet with you and explain exactly what we are doing. To do that at this point in time would be a little premature, until we know exactly what the unions are doing. We want to continue an open dialogue with them, and that is what our plans are at this present time. Thank you.

[Translation]

Mrs. F. Landry (Madawaska Les Lacs-Edmundston, L): Thank you for this answer. In fact, all members need an answer.

[Original]

What is even more concerning is that it appears that this government would be okay with not plowing these roads during a storm, strike or no strike. The correspondence the MLAs received notes that the question around whether these low-volume roads provide value for money has been brought up and that, as a consequence, discussion on whether these could be extended beyond a strike has been held. That is not reassuring. I am not sure with whom these discussions have been held, but it sounds as though Mr. Higgs' handpicked deputy minister is planning to cut back on plowing our rural roads. What about the people who live in rural areas?

Hon. Mr. Oliver (Kings Centre, Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure, PC): Certainly, if the member has information that she would like to share with us, I would ask her to table the information—to table the letter that she has. It is certainly not the intention of DTI to stop plowing roads when we have a full complement of staff available. If there are other issues that arise as a result of our negotiations, we will have to deal with those on a day-by-day basis. Certainly, our intent is to continue to supply services to all New Brunswickers to make sure that the roads are safe, and we will look at each situation as it arises. Thank you.



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[*Translation*]

Mrs. F. Landry (Madawaska Les Lacs-Edmundston, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. So, what will happen if there is a big storm and someone in a rural area is having a medical emergency? Will that person be told: Too bad, and nothing more? Will paramedics be ordered to drive on unplowed roads? I would like to hear a clear answer, Mr. Speaker.

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Oliver (Kings Centre, Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure, PC): Certainly, we do not deal with what-ifs. These are realities, and as we have done in the past on any occasion when we have run into an emergency situation, we send our plow trucks out to make sure that the emergency vehicles are able to make contact with the individuals or with the catastrophe that is occurring at the time. That is what we will continue to do. We have no plans to make changes to that aspect of how we operate the Department of Transportation and Infrastructure. Thank you.

ROADS

Mr. Harvey (Carleton-Victoria, L): Regarding the capital budget document that was released a few days ago, I refer to page 20, the Department of Transportation budget, the second line. This is very bad news for rural New Brunswick. There has been a \$31-million reduction—20% of the capital budget of the previous year. There is a 20% reduction in the highway budget, in this budget that was presented the other day. It is shameful what this government thinks about rural New Brunswick, the roads that we drive on, and the safety of our people. It is shameful. What will this minister do?

Then, the minister gets up and speaks about a rural road policy. Well, that is a big joke, Mr. Speaker. It is a big joke, a rural road policy that the members opposite have. But what will this minister do...

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Guitard): Order.

Mr. Harvey (Carleton-Victoria, L): How will he correct this measure, other than by just paving roads in his own members' ridings, as was done last year? Is there a plan? What is the plan, and will the minister tell the House?

Hon. Mr. Oliver (Kings Centre, Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure, PC): I certainly take exception to being called a big joke. The big joke here is the MLA opposite, who is trying to use scare tactics on the people of New Brunswick. He knows full well that the budget of the Department of Transportation and Infrastructure is the same as it was

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last year. We have traded some funds from one pot to another, but it is the same number of dollars. We are going to use that as we see fit. We have to work with all the departments. We have to work with the federal government, and that is exactly what we are planning to do to make sure that the projects we do are the projects we need to have done—not the policy and not the projects that the member opposite just wants to have done to satisfy his wants and desires.

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Guitard): Question period is over. Do we have unanimous consent to revert to Introduction of Guests?

Hon. Members: Agreed.

