

# Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

## Oral Questions



**December 8, 2020**

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### IMMUNIZATION

**Mr. D'Amours** (Edmundston-Madawaska Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, despite the fact that many Canadian provinces announced several weeks ago who would be responsible for the vaccine rollout in their jurisdictions, the Conservative government here only did so a few days ago. It is now a matter of days before the vaccine arrives in Canada, so it will be in New Brunswick very soon.

People deserve to know what vaccination plan their government has established. When will the Premier introduce his vaccination plan? Where will the sites be located? Will people have to drive long distances to get vaccinated? A few days from getting access to vaccines, we are all wondering where the Conservatives' plan is.

[*Original*]

**Hon. Mrs. Shephard** (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): I appreciate the question. I think that what is really important to note is that New Brunswick not only is set for the vaccine but also is probably the most prepared province in this country to receive the vaccine. I know that the members of the opposition would like to have every single detail put before them, but I can assure them, preparation is still ongoing and decisions are still being made. We are working with our federal partners, and we have been meeting with them every single week, virtually.

This vaccine that we are going to be receiving has not even been approved by Health Canada yet. While we are preparing our plan, the federal government is also finalizing its plan. We will utilize its guidance, but we will make the decision that is right for our province.

**Mr. D'Amours** (Edmundston-Madawaska Centre, L): We need to be clear. It is not we who are asking the question. It is the people of New Brunswick who want the answer. We learned that trial runs for vaccine deployment in New Brunswick are taking place this week. We all recognize that priority for distribution of the vaccine will be for frontline health care workers, those working in long-term care facilities, and vulnerable populations. Will the Premier confirm that the rollout plan will ensure that the vaccine will be distributed equitably in all regions of the province when it is available?

**Hon. Mrs. Shephard** (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): New Brunswick has been informed that we are going to receive up to 1 950 doses of vaccine in approximately a week. That is going to be the first part of two shipments. I can assure members of the public that this will be a very transparent and rationalized distribution of the vaccine. There will be no secrets here. This is about being responsible, and as this unfolds—it has rapidly

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changed, even over the past couple of weeks—we will work with our federal partners to ensure that we are responsible in the delivery and distribution of the vaccine.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. D'Amours** (Edmundston-Madawaska Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, if vaccines are due to arrive within a week, why does the Conservative government not have a plan to present to people? We are not talking here about a vaccine that will arrive in six months, we are talking about a vaccine that will arrive within a week.

Mr. Speaker, the government is telling us it has decided to just give the first dose of the vaccine to nearly 1 950 New Brunswickers initially. Knowing that two doses of the vaccine are necessary for each person, can the Premier tell us what the maximum acceptable time is between the two doses to ensure the full effectiveness of the vaccine? In addition, can the Premier confirm that doses of the same vaccine will arrive in time for this second vaccination?

[*Original*]

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Thank you for the question. I will respond here because I have been involved with a lot of the calls with the Prime Minister and with my colleagues across the country. It was only a few days ago that we learned that there actually were 1 950 coming. Up to that point, there was a trial run of fewer than 200. It was basically to see how it could roll out, and it was related to the Pfizer vaccine, because of its difficulty in handling and the freezers that would be available. There are not that many, and the federal government has bought only 26.

We have Greg MacCallum, the Director of our Emergency Measures Organization, who is working with our folks in the military, as required. The biggest unknown is that we do not know how many are going to arrive and in what frequency they are going to arrive so that we can plan the distribution. All we know, as of three days ago, is that 1 950 are going to arrive at some time next week and they are designated to go to an undisclosed location at this time, because that is the way they want to roll it out. It is more of a test for Pfizer, Mr. Speaker.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. D'Amours** (Edmundston-Madawaska Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, it is quite ironic and also worrying to hear the Premier say that the first 1 950 doses of the vaccine are going to arrive here, while he is unable to tell us what the prescribed time frame is to guarantee the second dose is given to New Brunswickers. He is also unable to give us a guarantee that this second dose will arrive in time.

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[Original]

Mr. Speaker, we all know that the vaccines that will arrive in the next few days will need super freezers to keep them. While other provinces offer much more transparency regarding the next unprecedented vaccination campaign, here, we are still waiting. Can the Premier confirm the number of super freezers his government will have in its possession and the list of vaccination centres across the province?

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): I can appreciate why the opposition wants to make an issue out of this, but the point is that we do not have the information on delivery. In a conversation with Minister LeBlanc a week ago, the time frame was that we were going to get vaccines to start to be delivered in January for the first quarter, but it was not determined how many. The top end was 60 000.

There was a question about the timing between the double vaccination. I believe that it is three weeks. There is the 1 950 we are getting next week, and there will be a second vaccine of the same quantity available in January. We have been told that much.

But we are in a better position to roll this out than, as the minister said, just about any other province. If members opposite want to look at the details of other provincial rollouts, I think they should do that, just to see the state we are in, because we are in a very good position to roll out and meet the needs of our citizens in a methodical and appropriate way, commencing with the vulnerable population first.

[Translation]

### RENTS

**Mr. Gauvin** (Shediac Bay-Dieppe, L): Mr. Speaker, we learned earlier this week that a single mother would be getting a rent increase she could not afford. She does not know if she is going to be able to find another place to live. The Premier said that he would look into the issue. I can assure you that this mother is hoping he will not be looking into it all winter. The issue of rent increases does not need to be looked into; it needs to be dealt with now. Everybody knows that. We know it; they know it; up there, they know it; people out there know it; people sleeping outside know it. Now is not the time to study; now is the time to pass the test. Will the Premier commit to taking immediate action in order to deal with this problem?

[Original]

**Hon. Mary Wilson** (Oromocto-Lincoln-Fredericton, Minister of Service New Brunswick, Minister responsible for Military Affairs, PC): Thank you for the question, Mr. Speaker. New Brunswick, along with the majority of Canadian provinces, does not have rent control. Despite this, we have the second-lowest rent increases in the country—lower than British Columbia, Ontario, and Prince Edward Island, which all do have rent controls. We have the

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lowest rent in Atlantic Canada and the second-lowest rent across the country, second only to Quebec. What New Brunswick does have, Mr. Speaker, is low rent inventory at 2.6%. What we need is more development, Mr. Speaker.

We are very, very sympathetic to some tenants who are dealing with extremely large rent increases. However, rent controls will not fix this problem of low inventory. It will have the opposite effect, Mr. Speaker. History has shown that as the quality of housing goes down, availability goes down, instead of up. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**Mr. Gauvin** (Shediac Bay-Dieppe, L): Mr. Speaker, I am sure that the lady I talked about will be very happy to learn about those stats. One thing is for sure—Prince Edward Island did something, and Nova Scotia did something. All across the country, every province did something. A total of 8 out of 10 provinces signed a deal with the federal government last May. The portion to New Brunswick would have given \$98 million over the next eight years. We did not sign this agreement.

Pretty soon the Christmas songs will come, and there is a song...

(Interjections.)

**Mr. Speaker** (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Order.

**Mr. Gauvin** (Shediac Bay-Dieppe, L): There is a song that says, “So this is Christmas, and what have you done?” Pretty soon, the song will be over. It will be Christmas, and what will this government do? Thank you.

**Hon. Mary Wilson** (Oromocto-Lincoln-Fredericton, Minister of Service New Brunswick, Minister responsible for Military Affairs, PC): Thank you, again, Mr. Speaker, for the comments and the question. Again, rent controls will not solve this problem. Rent controls will make it worse. In fact, we are already hearing reports from Nova Scotia developers about putting capital projects on hold and scaling back on projects just due to the recently announced rent caps. I have reached out and spoken to many developers here in the local area, including one who has a \$5.5-million development in the works. If rent control happens, he cannot do it. He cannot do it, Mr. Speaker. Therein lies a big part of the problem.

Many of these landlords whom I have reached out to have this year increased rent by under 2% and some, by nothing at all, even with all the things that they are dealing with, such as increased costs in insurance, maintenance, water, and sewer. One landlord knows that due to the pandemic, it is very difficult and has chosen not to increase rent at all.

**Mr. Speaker** (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Time, minister.

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**Mr. K. Chiasson** (Tracadie-Sheila, L): Mr. Speaker, in April, municipalities across the province came out asking for financial aid in order to help them deal with the economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. There was not a word from the Premier. Fast-forward to July when the federal and provincial governments reached a \$200-million agreement, of which \$40 million would be going to municipalities. Again, there was not a word from the Premier. Finally, on November 6, seven months after municipalities asked for help, the government sent a letter.

The town of Quispamsis said that if it had known about the funding earlier, it would have done things differently—opened the complex and hired more students. The bottom line, Mr. Speaker, is that municipalities had to take drastic actions in order to protect their taxpayers and ensure that they could balance the books. This is what I am asking: Why did the Premier sit on his hands for so long while municipalities across the province were struggling with this global pandemic?

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): The member opposite is correct. It took a long time to get that \$218 million actually confirmed in midsummer. The idea was that \$40 million was available for municipalities and available as a matched funding formula. We have said to municipalities to submit their applications. The one application that has been dealt with at this point has been related to transportation.

In addition, every municipality has had an open line of communication to the Department of Local Government. I am sure that the minister will want to speak to this if further questions pursue. The idea, Mr. Speaker, is that we have been working with communities and businesses directly in relation to their needs. It is a time when we all look at how we manage through the pandemic.

Mr. Speaker, there is one fundamental difference. We are thinking about next year. When the member opposite talks about Christmas and what have you done... Next year, we want to have a province that is left with a taxation policy that this province can survive on and a province where people will work and live. They are already moving back, Mr. Speaker.

*[Translation]*

**Mr. K. Chiasson** (Tracadie-Sheila, L): Mr. Speaker, \$41 million is now available for municipalities. However, to have access to that money, they must write a report, identify and specify total losses, make a list of the savings they have achieved, get municipal councils to vote on the reports and approve them, and do all that before December 31.

The Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform had the audacity to say that nobody had complained. What are the other provinces in Canada doing, Mr. Speaker?

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They are giving the money directly to municipalities using the per capita approach. That approach puts money in the coffers more quickly, requires no accounting, and does not overload employees with work.

Mr. Speaker, I am asking the Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform why he imposed this heavy administrative burden on our municipalities when it came time to distribute taxpayers' money.

**Hon. Mr. Allain** (Moncton East, Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am honoured to be here today, before you, my colleagues, and represent the people of Moncton East. I can assure you, Mr. Speaker, that the Premier is working hard on the COVID-19 file. I do not know if the Liberals recognize this, but there was an election recently, and the top priority is COVID-19. I can assure you that we are going to manage this situation properly.

The only reason why the Liberals are in a bad mood today is because the CRA polls came out; that is why they are in a bad mood today.

Mr. Speaker, the member for Tracadie-Sheila is explaining that New Brunswickers got \$218 million because of COVID-19. The strategy is worth \$41 million; people want accountability. The money was provided in three phases. In the first phase, \$1.6 million was provided for transit. That amount was provided on October 30, 2020. Money for the second phase was provided on October 30, 2020. This is in the same press release, and municipalities were able to get the money.

*[Original]*

**Mr. Speaker** (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Time, minister.

**Mr. K. Chiasson** (Tracadie-Sheila, L): Mr. Speaker, this story gets better as we go along.

*[Translation]*

The Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform told the media this weekend that municipalities are going to receive their money six to seven days after submitting their request.

*[Original]*

Okay, minister, explain this to me. There are 102 municipalities in the province, and a detailed financial statement from each is being sent to the department all at roughly the same time. Are you trying to tell us that you are going to get the cheque in the mail in less than a week?

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Mr. Speaker, the list of expenses from the COVID-19 pandemic was never factored into the 2020 budget. They have already submitted their 2021 budgets without confirmation of getting any financial aid. I would like to ask the minister the following question: How will the municipalities be able to spend this money, and accounting-wise, how can they enter the amounts received in the municipal ledgers?

[*Translation*]

**Hon. Mr. Allain** (Moncton East, Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform, PC): Mr. Speaker, as I said, there are three phases. The first phase was focused on transit, and \$1.6 million was provided. This may be a strange concept for the Liberals, but it is called accountability, which means the money is being spent on the right things. The municipalities certainly asked for money. We worked with the Association des municipalités du Nouveau-Brunswick, and the municipalities are going to receive \$20 million.

As you see here, there is a City of Saint John press release indicating that the province acknowledged the request from the city and granted the money. This city submitted the request on a Friday and received the money the following week. As for the lists from the municipalities, they are being taken into consideration, and I will certainly provide the information. I can guarantee you this: The COVID-19 money is for COVID-19, and that is why we have money to spend.

[*Original*]

## PROPERTY TAX

**Mr. McKee** (Moncton Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, you would think that New Brunswickers had taken a big-enough financial hit from the current pandemic and global recession without getting hit with a tax hike. Yet that is exactly what is in store for a number of New Brunswick families and households if the Higgs government follows through on its plan to raise taxes for New Brunswickers. This government has announced that it will eliminate the permanent assessment gap exemption that has provided protection for homeowners who have seen significant increases in property tax assessments over the last decade. Mr. Speaker, we are in the midst of a pandemic, when experts are saying that the last thing that we need is government raising taxes. How does the minister justify such a blatant tax grab?

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): This is what freezing rates does for you. If we went back to 2010, we would see that there was a freeze of property taxes because of spikes that were happening. Then, after that, there was a 10% cap put on, which protects against that, as a onetime property tax hike. But freezing rates puts things way out of control. You have neighbours next to neighbours in identical houses with very different tax levels. This is about fairness, not about revenue for the government. Out of a \$9-million fund in tax collection, \$8 million will go to municipalities.

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Mr. Speaker, this is correcting a situation where many had benefited: 106 000 homes have benefited now for the past eight years, and the average bill difference will be about \$100. Every one of those households should say, Well, I guess I won the lotto for eight years, but now, it is fair taxation with my neighbours. It is as simple as that, Mr. Speaker.

**Mr. McKee** (Moncton Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, this is about timing. Tax hikes are always painful for families, but they are twice as harmful during times of economic uncertainty, such as we have right now. New Brunswick's economy is projected to contract by about 4.5% this year, representing a significant economic hit for the province. Introducing a tax hike at a time like this will only make that hit worse by taking more money out of families' pockets and reducing their ability to support local businesses. The Premier has indicated that he does not plan to raise taxes, but this is clearly a backdoor approach to doing so. Will the minister tell us how many property owners will see a tax increase as a result of this action and when that increase will take effect?

**Hon. Mary Wilson** (Oromocto-Lincoln-Fredericton, Minister of Service New Brunswick, Minister responsible for Military Affairs, PC): Thank you for the question, Mr. Speaker. I wish I had more than 60 seconds to explain this. Keep in mind that my door is always open if anybody wants to come in.

There will be 102 523 properties affected by the P-Gap. Again, the average is \$100 per year, which people, if they wish, can put on monthly payments, at about \$8.30 more per month. Of those 102 000 properties, 86% will have the P-Gap eliminated in the first year, and 99.9% will be eliminated after a five-year period. If we do not do this, it will take 25 years for this to right itself. This is all about supporting municipalities and local service districts. The majority of the revenue, as our Premier stated, is going to go to them, not the province. Mr. Speaker, our local governments and municipalities cannot wait 25 more years. Thank you.

## RENTS

**Mr. Coon** (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My caucus colleagues and I have heard from some constituents about massive increases in their rents that are forcing them out of their homes in the middle of the pandemic. During a state of emergency, a 50% increase in rent, by any measure, is unjust. Imagine what that means to a senior living alone on a fixed income or a family just scraping by, living cheque to cheque. Now, they are out on the street, having to look for a new place to live in the middle of this pandemic.

Faced with a similar situation in Nova Scotia, the McNeil government chose to institute a 2% cap on rent increases until the end of the state of emergency. What is the Premier going to do to protect those tenants who find themselves on the receiving end of these punishing increases in their rents?



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**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Thank you for the question. I guess, like everything, rather than throw it out as a generality of how many situations we have, we are very interested to understand how big a problem this is. I am not suggesting that there are not cases that have seen this. We have been asked to look at what affordable housing looks like in the area because of the fact that—with the economy starting to grow, with the acquisition of houses, and with the influx of people from outside buying properties here—we have seen a renewed interest in real estate. As a result, it has raised the rates in some areas.

Let's not take a particular example and say, there, throw the book at that because there is the problem. Let's understand how big the problem is and deal with the specific situations. I am very prepared to do that. But in typical government fashion, it is, Throw the book at it, and because there is a problem somewhere, we are going to fix it if we throw the book at it. Mr. Speaker, I have never subscribed to that formula, but I have subscribed to fixing the issues. Thank you.

**Mr. Coon** (Fredericton South, Leader, G): The Premier did not answer the question about how he is going to fix it. The other challenge faced by some New Brunswick tenants during this pandemic is the termination of their leases to facilitate renovations, sometimes called "renovictions". These do not show up in the eviction statistics because they are technically lease terminations. The end result, though, is the same. People are forced from their homes during this state of emergency, left to try to find a new home in an extremely tight rental market. During this pandemic, for many, their only source of security is their homes, which they have created. Sure, they rent them, but these are their homes.

Nova Scotia has recognized the problem and has taken action by prohibiting lease terminations for renovations until the state of emergency has ended. Will the Premier amend the state of emergency order in order to cap rent increases and prohibit renovictions until the state of emergency is lifted?

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, at the risk of repetition, the point is to determine whether there is a problem. We are not seeing the statistics that say that there is a problem. Yes, there may be one-offs that we should look at and determine how we can help those situations. Let's do that. I would be... I am sure that the minister would be more than prepared to work with the Leader of the Green Party to actually understand the specific issue that he is looking at—what has caused it and what we can do about it. That is a lot better approach than saying: The problem is universal. It is all over the province. Therefore, let's put a stipulation on the free marketplace and bring it to a halt.

Mr. Speaker, our economy is starting to rebound faster than any economy in the country, and we are seeing people with a renewed interest in New Brunswick. The vaccine is only going to help that. Let's not put measures in place to put artificial controls on the free



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market, and let's let it grow. But let's find a way to deal with specific concerns and issues effectively so that all will benefit because of it.

### INVESTIGATIONS

**Mr. Austin** (Fredericton-Grand Lake, Leader, PA): Mr. Speaker, on September 1, we received information about an incident involving Department of Natural Resources fire crews and a JDI herbicide spray plane that occurred while crews were fighting a forest fire in the Chipman area. As information began to unfold, we called for an investigation into the matter. When asked, a spokesperson for the Department of Natural Resources told members of the media: There was no such incident; there is nothing to see here.

However, we sent a right to information request to the department, and this showed that there were, in fact, not one but two incidents involving glyphosate spraying in the vicinity of DNR employees who were fighting forest fires in the Chipman area on August 23. Can the minister explain why a spokesperson for his department denied that this incident occurred?

*[Translation]*

**Hon. Mr. Holland** (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, I thank the member opposite for his question, and I will be pleased to answer it.

*[Original]*

I am very much aware of this file. I have seen a significant amount of information about it, not because I got a call from the member opposite or received an email or had any form of other communication, but rather by viewing it on his Facebook post. Now, I want to share something with the members: Contrary to popular belief or what you may think, not everything that you see on social media is true. That is why I am a little disappointed that the member did not pick up the phone and give me a call so that we could have talked through that and I could have explained it.

When we talk about incidents, not as they relate to this particular issue, I ensure that the department does a thorough investigation and that protocols are followed. There are protocols up to and not limited to the very wind speed and the direction of the wind during any of our aerial applications. When the member opposite would like to have a conversation, perhaps, he could not focus on Facebook but pick up the phone and call us. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

**Mr. Austin** (Fredericton-Grand Lake, Leader, PA): Thank you, minister. I agree that not everything on Facebook is true, of course, but the right to information that I hold in my hand sure is. It verifies everything that I just said.

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Further to the RTI request, we also learned that when the incident took place, it was brought to the attention of the fire chief at the provincial fire centre, who then contacted JDI to investigate. Now, that seems odd to me. Can the minister explain to the public who it is that investigates these types of incidents? Is it industry, or is it the Department of Natural Resources? According to this report, it seems to me that the fox is guarding the henhouse.

[*Translation*]

**Hon. Mr. Holland** (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, the member does not have just one question; he just asked another one, which is fantastic.

[*Original*]

It is a pleasure to answer two questions back to back. Once again, I am hearing a rabbit trail of misinformation. The member opposite, not unlike his Facebook posts, is full of conjecture and little questions that can lead people to maybe form opinions that are not based on fact.

Of course, the fire centre investigates, and of course, the fire centre reaches out to the proponent and to the licensee. A collaborative effort between it and the department will ensure that all protocols are followed.

To insinuate that a fox is guarding the henhouse when we are talking about someone who is directly involved in those operations... Not to include them in that investigation would be irresponsible, just as irresponsible as trying to create some narrative of fear or conspiracy from a Facebook post. Mr. Speaker, it is time that we talk about facts related to this stuff and not irresponsible posting that is done through social media. Anytime that you want to talk about the great way that we manage this forest, we are open for business.

**Mr. Speaker** (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Time, minister.

## IMMUNIZATION

**Mr. Melanson** (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, we are starting to see...

(Interjections.)

**Mr. Speaker** (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Order.

**Mr. Melanson** (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): We are starting to see a divide between the People's Alliance and the Conservative Party today. That is a first over the last two years or so. I guess that it is a precedent.

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Mr. Speaker, to come back on the vaccination plan, we have the minister...

(Interjections.)

**Mr. Speaker** (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Order, please.

**Mr. Melanson** (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): We have the Minister of Health saying that we are probably the most prepared province to roll out the vaccine. We have the Premier who cannot even explain what that plan is and who is complaining that we just heard three days ago about the vaccine coming in next week. We know that the government—at times, but often—does not reveal its plans. It is all in its mind.

Vaccines are going to be here next week. Can the Premier get up today and, at a minimum, tell us and New Brunswickers that there will be a plan made public before the end of the week so that we all know who will be able to get vaccinated next week and where?

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Thank you for the question. Mr. Speaker, we know that it is coming sometime next week, 1 950 cases. As I said, we found out three days ago. We know that there is a trial run this week, just to confirm the practicality of moving this Pfizer vaccine to different places. There is an undisclosed location that is not being made public for security reasons at this point. That is certainly what the officials have said, and that is the way that they would like to keep it. There are only 1 950 vaccines. At that time, there will be 1 950 people who could get vaccinated over the coming week before Christmas, but then they have to come back and get vaccinated again early in January.

We cannot roll out a full plan because we do not know how many vaccines are coming. We have not gotten a commitment from the federal government when we will have the quantities and at what frequency of delivery. Mr. Speaker, we said that we would be ready to roll out our full vaccination plan when we have determined just how much we are going to get for supply, and we will. It will not be a problem.

**Mr. Speaker** (Hon. Mr. Oliver): The end of question period has arrived.