

# Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

## Oral Questions



**March 29, 2022**

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[Original]

### CORONAVIRUS

**Mr. Melanson** (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, again, the Premier says something and does not think about what he is supposed to say. He said on Friday that we will all get it, when it comes to this pandemic and this COVID-19 virus.

I am taking a quote from André Picard, who is a health columnist with the *Globe and Mail*. He said this: “The primary goal of public health is to reduce harm to the public, and to protect the most vulnerable in society in particular.” Is the Premier not concerned about the most vulnerable in this province when it comes to getting COVID-19? I want to hear from the Premier. Has he actually thought about that, trying to protect the most vulnerable?

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I know that the Leader of the Opposition likes to pick and choose. What I said in relation to what we are seeing is what the Public Health had said, that we will see this: We will see people, and we will see more cases. It was very clear. Dr. Russell was very clear on that, and Public Health was very clear on that.

I would suggest that the Leader of the Opposition look around us and look at different provinces across the country. We are all in the same vein. We are all moving forward. Yes, Mr. Speaker, there are more cases, and we knew that. We are saying that you still need to be protected with vaccines and to stay current. But we are moving in a direction that the people are demanding. We are moving in a direction to see us get back to living with COVID-19 in a new normal—a new normal that reflects that we have to face this reality.

I would encourage the Leader of the Opposition to read the Public Health recommendations because those are the rules we are following, and I support our Public Health, Mr. Speaker.

**Mr. Melanson** (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, the Premier should not try to rewrite what he said on Friday. The new numbers are out today. The new numbers are out today. There have been 13 more deaths in the past 7 days. Over 14 days, there have been 29. That is about 2 per day—2 per day.

I want to go back to what André Picard said, that the most vulnerable are at risk. People aged 85 and older are about 340 times more at risk. Those aged 75 to 84 are 140 times more at risk. Those aged 65 to 74 are 65 times more at risk. There is more death. They are more at risk. Premier, will you explain to us why you have given up on New Brunswickers when it comes to dealing with COVID-19?

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**Hon. Mrs. Shephard** (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Well, Mr. Speaker, I would like to say that it was not us that quit on COVID-19.

You know, transition is tough. It is hard, and I know that there is a lot of anxiety out there. I feel it every day. COVID-19 has impacted a lot of people, but let's look at some facts, please.

(Interjections.)

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

**Hon. Mrs. Shephard** (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, 61% of those over the age of 50 are boosted. They have had two doses and have been boosted. For those aged 60 to 64, it is 73%; for those aged 65 to 69, it is 82%; and for those aged 70 to 74, it is 86%. We have lived through two difficult years during which we have educated New Brunswickers on how to protect themselves. We must figure out how to continue going. It is not easy, and there is anxiety. But they can help.

[Translation]

**Mr. Melanson** (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, maybe the minister is partially right. Certainly, when we were sitting on the COVID-19 committee, better decisions were being made. That is clear—that is clear.

That being said, Mr. Speaker, the minister must assume her responsibilities. Let's look at what is happening today. This is the last day that we will be receiving data and statistics to inform the people. According to the Premier, people will get COVID-19, but they can at least do everything in their power to avoid it. We will be able to get information daily from *The New York Times*, but we will not be able to get any from our own government here in New Brunswick. Can either the minister or the Premier rethink this decision and provide the information to New Brunswickers?

[Original]

**Hon. Mrs. Shephard** (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, we all have a responsibility in this House, and I take my responsibilities very seriously. I am not going to fearmonger. We are transitioning from a dashboard to a COVID Watch. Information will be available. We know we have a situation that New Brunswickers need to keep in mind every single day. We have not said that COVID-19 is over. We are transitioning to a life where we are going to manage with it because we need to.

The public has responded. Our booster doses are going up, and I must ask every New Brunswicker to continue to get boosted. It is very important. As the vaccine wanes over time, we need this protection for everyone. It is working. We see that our ICU admissions have gone down in this last week. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

**Mr. Melanson** (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): I listened to the minister, and I want to remind her, as she is responsible for Public Health, that based on André Picard's article, "The primary goal of public health is to reduce harm to the public, and to protect the most vulnerable in society in particular." To the minister's saying that we all have a responsibility, we do, but the government also has a responsibility.

It is still difficult. We can look all around us, and the sixth wave is here. It is here, and it does not seem as though this government wants to offer any plan to try to mitigate the risk of the sixth wave. We know that the level of vaccination for kids is low in New Brunswick, and the government is not doing anything about it that we can see as being meaningful. Can the Premier give us an idea as to whether the government is going to be there to help New Brunswickers if it gets worse?

**Hon. Mrs. Shephard** (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, maybe when the Leader of the Opposition stands up, he could tell us what he would like to see us do. Since he left the COVID-19 committee, he seems to have forgotten all the information that Public Health conveyed to him.

Public Health looks at all the social determinants of health. It is important that we have physical health, that we have good mental health, and that we have good spiritual health. It is incumbent on all of us to understand that we need—we need—to look at all those items. All the recommendations from Public Health have never ever been isolated to one factor. All its recommendations consisted of many elements. They continue today. Public Health is by our side all through this, and we are by its side.

**Mr. Melanson** (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): I have no doubt that Public Health is on New Brunswickers' side. I am worried about the government. Honestly, it seems as if the Premier has given up when he says that we are all going to get it. It seems as if he has given up. Premier, have you instructed Public Health to give up too? Have you given it those instructions? Have you?

There is a sixth wave about which a lot of New Brunswickers are worried—certainly the most vulnerable, the people who are at risk. I think it is time for the government to start talking about this sixth wave and to explain it to New Brunswickers if it gets worse. We see that everywhere else, in some places, it is getting pretty bad. If it gets worse, is the government going to act? Is the government going to take some measures to try to minimize the risk of the sixth wave?

**Hon. Mrs. Shephard** (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Well, I assume that this is potentially a new Liberal approach where those members want to fearmonger and to direct policy from the opposite side and not participate when they have the opportunity.

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(Interjections.)

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

**Hon. Mrs. Shephard** (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): We are wearing masks in this House today. If you go to UNB, you are going to be wearing a mask. If you go to the Provincial Court, you are going to be wearing a mask. Entities can decide what their level of risk is and what precautions they want to take. Nursing homes and hospitals are still working at an operative level. I have heard some advocates say, Open up the nursing homes because we want to see our loved ones. They are right, but there are still policies that are needed to mitigate risk. So, Mr. Speaker, it is not a free-for-all.

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

[Translation]

**Mr. Melanson** (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, indeed, there are employers who, I believe, have made the wise decision to continue to wear masks, as I do—as we all do—here in the House. Nova Scotia is still using masks in its school system. In Quebec, masks are mandatory for a few more days, and the government might change its mind.

I am asking the minister if she can give us the number of positive cases by zone today, because this is a very important factor. Could the minister give us the rate of confirmed positive cases in New Brunswick?

[Original]

**Hon. Mrs. Shephard** (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Yes, Mr. Speaker, today's report shows that we have 3 096 new PCR-tested cases and 4 551 POCT cases. We have 142 hospitalizations, which is up from 129, and since the member opposite talked about Nova Scotia, I will say that we are lower than Nova Scotia.

Keep in mind that 60% of those hospitalizations did not come to the hospital for COVID-19. They came to the hospital and were tested under a protocol to make sure that we take proper care to prevent spread. So 60% of those cases are people who came in for something else and tested positive for COVID-19.

We have 8 people in ICU, which is down from 16. And as the member opposite mentioned, we have had 13 deaths. We have a vulnerable population, Mr. Speaker, and every death saddens us. That is why we are trying to take precautions in those vulnerable settings.

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



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**Mr. Melanson** (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): I want to thank the minister for offering those statistics. However, after today, we will not hear those statistics anymore.

I want to tell the minister the positivity rate in New Brunswick as of yesterday. It is double the national average. I got that from Health Canada, not the provincial government. It is 32.1% in New Brunswick, and nationally, it is 15.6%. We have a vulnerable population in New Brunswick, and that is why, as a government, we have the responsibility to do everything that we can to try to protect these people.

The pandemic is not over, and I think that she said so. The World Health Organization has not yet declared that the pandemic is over, from what I have heard or read. It is serious, so I just want to hear this from the Premier: If the sixth wave gets worse—because we are seeing that it is everywhere else—and the positivity rate keeps increasing, is he going to take action from a public health perspective?

**Hon. Mrs. Shephard** (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, we have said from the very first day of the COVID-19 pandemic that we were going to be working with Public Health, taking its recommendations, and implementing its recommendations. The member was part of the all-party COVID-19 Cabinet committee, and he quit. He understood the information that was brought forward, and it was significant information.

You know, Mr. Speaker, we know that a sixth wave is coming. We see it now. But we also know that what is happening in our province is still happening elsewhere. We have followed the epidemiological information. We have high vaccination rates. There is no easy answer here, but if Public Health tells us that we need to take more measures... Public Health is going to be coming to the government with recommendations. Mr. Speaker, those are roads that we travel when it happens. Thank you.

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

**Mr. Melanson** (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Well, Mr. Speaker, I would have preferred not to be asking questions today about the pandemic and how it is being managed right now. I would have preferred that the government give updates regularly to New Brunswickers so that they would have all the tools that they could use to try to make...

Based on the government's decisions, New Brunswickers have to make their own decisions. But those updates will not even be provided beyond today. The *New York Times* will keep doing that, so we will look at the *New York Times* on a daily basis. I guess that is where, beyond today, we will have to go look. We will look at Health Canada because it will provide some information. Why will the government not be providing this?

Today in the health care system, we have 633 employees in isolation. That has to have an impact on the level of services that is being provided to New Brunswickers. All I am asking

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is whether the government is ready. If this sixth wave gets worse—and it is worse everywhere else—is the government going to act quickly and swiftly?

**Hon. Mrs. Shephard** (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, I believe that we have been very nimble through COVID-19. I believe that we have taken every measure that we could, with the information of the day that we had, to make the best possible decisions that we could.

The member across, the Leader of the Opposition—a leader—was a part of that. Now, his leadership skills just seem to want to go to fearmongering and increasing the opposition's strategy in the public, hoping that if things go off the rails, the opposition members will be on the right side of it. They will never be criticized for just jumping in there and throwing out information. I mean, is he hoping that it goes sideways? Does he want us to lock down again?

Tell me what the solutions are that he wants to put forward, Mr. Speaker, because there are many elements to protecting people and they start with vaccinations.

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

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Melanson** (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Clearly, the minister is not making any commitments. If the sixth wave that we are seeing elsewhere makes it here... It is already here, but let's say it gets nasty here. No. No, we do not want things to go badly for New Brunswickers. Ever.

What we want is for the government and the Premier to make a commitment that they will not throw in the towel when it comes to the pandemic. It would not be right to want everyone to be infected by COVID-19. When it comes to public health, the necessary steps must be taken to protect the public, especially the most vulnerable. I gave the statistics on vulnerability rates for older adults. We want a commitment that the government will take the necessary steps to protect the public and the most vulnerable.

[*Original*]

**Hon. Mrs. Shephard** (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, from day one of this pandemic—and actually a little before day one of this pandemic—the government has been putting in measures that the people have required, with Public Health offering us its advice and recommendations.

(Interjections.)

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



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**Hon. Mrs. Shephard** (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): If Public Health were telling us to shut down, we would be having that conversation with members in the opposition. We are working toward managing through the COVID-19 pandemic, managing from where we are now.

I know that we have gone through Alpha and that we have gone through Delta, and we are going through Omicron. There is, I believe, a BA.2 variant. We know that this is going to continue, and of course, we are going to do what we need to do to protect New Brunswickers. But we will be dealing with that as it arises. We are planning to manage through the COVID-19 pandemic. That is the plan.

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

[*Translation*]

## LOCAL GOVERNMENT

**Mrs. Landry** (Madawaska Les Lacs-Edmundston, L): Mr. Speaker, it has been very clearly established that this government has a double standard when it comes to making decisions on municipal reform. We have seen many examples of regions in the province that have been treated differently when it comes to the boundaries of entities and rural districts. It is clear that what is good for some is not necessarily good for others. As a party that is firmly rooted in the principle of equal opportunity, our party finds that reprehensible.

Can the Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform explain why the exemption request for Stilesville, a community in the Minister of Finance's riding, was accepted, while an exemption for Lac Baker was refused? I would ask the minister to clearly outline the criteria used to assess these two requests.

**Hon. Mr. Allain** (Moncton East, Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Thank you for the question. As you know, changes are not easy. We are reforming local governance. For the first time in 15 months, we are finally learning where the Liberal Party stands on governance from the statement made by the member for Tracadie-Sheila.

Mr. Speaker, these are the politics of division.

[*Original*]

(Interjections.)

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

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[Translation]

**Hon. Mr. Allain** (Moncton East, Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform, PC): These are the politics of division. If you had spoken... Did the member for Tracadie-Sheila speak to Mayor Haché from Lamèque? Did you speak to Jean-Pierre Ouellet, the Mayor of Upper Madawaska? Did you speak to Mayor Dawn Arnold from Moncton?

[Original]

(Interjections.)

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

[Translation]

**Hon. Mr. Allain** (Moncton East, Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform, PC): Have you spoken to Mayor Reardon from Saint John? I have talked to these people. They want the local governance reform to be implemented. I can tell you this: There is no conspiracy. The Chiasson conspiracy does not exist. We are moving forward.

[Original]

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

## CLIMATE CHANGE

**Mr. Coon** (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Mr. Speaker, today the Prime Minister will be releasing his plan to cut greenhouse gas emissions in this country by 730 million tonnes in just eight years. The question is this: What role will New Brunswick play in that transformation over the next eight years? That is just one election cycle.

If we do not move down the road to transformation by design in this decade, it will be forced on us by disaster in the next decade. A key measure will be in building the Atlantic Loop to provide us with the renewable green hydropower from Quebec and Labrador that we need in order to get off coal and electrify our transportation system. But the budget is completely silent on this. Murmurings from Nova Scotia suggest that the Premier is standing in the way. Mr. Speaker, why is the Premier blocking the construction of the Atlantic Loop?

**Hon. Mr. Crossman** (Hampton, Minister of Environment and Climate Change, Minister responsible for the Regional Development Corporation, PC): Thank you very much for the question from across the way. A news release from the federal government regarding net zero and regarding the Atlantic Loop was just posted in the *Telegraph-Journal*, that those conversations continue. As the member opposite knows from his committee, with the

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Climate Change Secretariat, things are moving ahead. We will be coming back soon from the secretariat with updates on where we are going and on green projects moving ahead.

We have just completed a vast number of meetings on the *What We Heard* documents, with people and groups coming in. It is all good stuff, to move ahead on mitigation and adaptation. Regarding green and renewables, we are moving that way and we are looking forward to hearing more in the very near future. EVs are picking up as well. What a timely fashion for those, with the price of fuel. More infrastructure is on the way as well. We are moving ahead. Thank you.

### PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION SYSTEM

**Mr. Coon** (Fredericton South, Leader, G): It feels as though we are on Magnetic Hill in Moncton, Mr. Speaker. We are moving backward.

Our greatest contribution in New Brunswick to this climate crisis is from driving. Public transit in urban and rural areas, which is needed for so many reasons, is an effective way of cutting those emissions quickly. Yet the mayors of our municipalities have been forced to go to the Premier with cap in hand to plead with him to accept the tens of millions of dollars available from the federal government to improve access to public transit. How humiliating.

Last year, the Premier left the money on the table, grumbling something about subway lines. There is plenty of money in the \$170 million in carbon tax revenue projected in the budget to provide the provincial contribution to match the federal dollars. Mr. Speaker, will the Premier avoid the same mistake this year and take the federal money to provide access to public transit for those who do not have it and to improve the transit that exists?

**Hon. Ms. Green** (Fredericton North, Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We have been working very hard with our federal counterparts to understand the needs of New Brunswick. We are a very rural province.

(Interjections.)

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

**Hon. Ms. Green** (Fredericton North, Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure, PC): Our transit needs are very different from Toronto's or Montreal's. The federal government is listening. It is listening to how we can change the criteria of its funding programs so that New Brunswick transit can fit into its programs. We are working very closely with our municipal counterparts and developing programs with them so that they can access these funds to work toward greening their fleets. I can also tell you, Mr. Speaker, that the Department of Transportation and Infrastructure is working toward greening our own fleet.

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I do thank the member opposite for his very timely question. There will be more information forthcoming about the programs that we will be working on with our municipal partners. I look forward to talking to you about it.

[Translation]

### LOCAL GOVERNMENT

**Mr. K. Chiasson** (Tracadie-Sheila, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I want to come back to the issue of the land that was removed from Entity 40 and placed in a rural district. Last week, during an interview with *L'Acadie Nouvelle*, the minister stated that all Crown lands had to be part of rural districts and that this was a mistake made by the department. On top of that, when the journalist requested more information on the land, the minister told him that he did not have the details.

Mr. Speaker, these are the facts: The four pieces of land are owned by the Irving company, cover 25 000 ha, and are assessed at over \$700 000. They have belonged to the Irving company since the 1970s.

My question is simple, Mr. Speaker. I want to know if the minister intentionally misled the public or if he is not familiar with his files.

**Hon. Mr. Allain** (Moncton East, Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform, PC): Mr. Speaker, the saga of the Chiasson conspiracy continues. There are eight cartographers working at the Department of Local Government and Local Governance Reform. They work on the New Brunswick maps. March 4 was the deadline to ensure that maps of the entities were sent to Elections New Brunswick.

Mr. Speaker, there is no conspiracy here. Does working against New Brunswick corporations reflect the position of the Liberal Party? Is that really what I am hearing today? In the department, our cartographers are working. The policy was very simple. When land is unoccupied, we certainly place it...

[Original]

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

[Translation]

**Mr. K. Chiasson** (Tracadie-Sheila, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The initial provincial map for the reform included the four pieces of land belonging to the Irving company in Entity 40. That was clear. It is important to bear in mind that, if the goal of the municipal reform is to strengthen regions by giving them some control over what happens on their

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land, it makes sense that these four pieces of land—meaning 25 000 ha—would be included in Entity 40.

The fear is certainly that the entity's municipal bylaws would apply to private property. So, I cannot believe that the civil servants suddenly clued in and thought: We made a mistake. Obviously, the Mayor of Sackville wanted these pieces of land to be part of the entity. So, at some point, someone called the department and said: Wait a minute, a mistake has been made, and the land must be removed from the entity and placed elsewhere. I, for one, want to know who authorized this change, Mr. Minister.

**Hon. Mr. Allain** (Moncton East, Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform, PC): Thank you very much for the question. Once again, what the member is trying to do right now is not right. As you know, there are many acres of land in New Brunswick. The four pieces of land were in a rural district. When the maps were made, in the white paper, the cartography was in fact not precise. Precisions were made.

This is the first time, I believe, since the tabling of the white paper, that we have received a specific question on this file. The member has not done his duty. As I said on Friday, he has not done his job.

This is why the cartographers had to finish the detailed maps over the last four months. The maps had to be finished by March 4 to ensure that elections could be held on November 28, 2022, with the new entity boundaries in place. That is very clear. There has been no collusion or conspiracy. It is the Chiasson conspiracy. The department did its duty, and that is why...

*[Original]*

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

## HEALTH CARE

**Mr. G. Arseneault** (Campbellton-Dalhousie, L): Mr. Speaker, surely this government would acknowledge that all citizens in New Brunswick deserve equal access to quality, reliable health care services in proximity to where they live. The obstetrics and ophthalmology services at the Campbellton Regional Hospital are presently closed. Vitalité told us that this is a temporary closure—temporary, Madam Minister. It has been three years—three years. This is temporary. This is unbelievable and unacceptable. I would ask the Minister of Health, in the name of fairness and equity, to inform the House when she will ensure that these services are restored permanently and to provide a timeline for this urgent situation to be resolved. Thank you.

**Hon. Mrs. Shephard** (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the question from the member from Dalhousie because this is a concern. I think



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that the member would also know that the biggest struggle we have is the recruitment of the specialists that we need for both of these services in that area. We are working on it. I cannot tell him today when we will be able to get this service returned permanently for the people in his area. I do know that it is important to them. I do know that Vitalité knows that it is important to them. We will make every effort to get it done for them as soon as possible. We have been speaking with the leadership in that area and conveying that this is our intent. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**Mr. Speaker** (Hon. Mr. Oliver): The time for question period is over.