

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions



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CONTENTS

COST OF LIVING

Mr. Melanson
Hon. Mr. Higgs
Mr. Melanson
Hon. Mr. Higgs
Mr. Melanson
Hon. Mr. Higgs
Mr. Melanson
Hon. Mr. Higgs

CHILD PROTECTION

Mr. Melanson
Hon. Mr. Fitch
Mr. Melanson
Hon. Mr. Fitch
Mr. Melanson
Hon. Mr. Fitch
Mr. Melanson
Mr. Melanson
Hon. Mr. Fitch

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Mr. K. Chiasson

Mr. K. Chiasson

Hon. Mr. Allain

Mr. K. Chiasson

Hon. Mr. Allain

Mr. K. Chiasson

Hon. Mr. Allain

COST OF LIVING

Mr. Coon

Hon. Mr. Higgs

Mr. Coon

Mr. Coon

Hon. Mr. Higgs

MENTAL HEALTH

Mr. McKee

Hon. Mrs. Shephard

Mr. McKee

Hon. Mrs. Shephard

Oral Questions

[Original]

COST OF LIVING

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, tomorrow is June 1. It has been about five months since the cost of living has gone up every single month. The price at the pump again today is \$2.08. The Premier, with his inaction and not caring about people who are really hurting right now every time they go to fill up their gas tank or try to fill up their gas tank, has been mumbling different ideas. He talked about a rebate that never happened—he changed his mind. Last week, he talked about a targeted solution, and everybody is waiting to see what he really means. Mr. Speaker, since other provinces are really taking this seriously and helping out, is the Premier going to announce what his proposal is?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I think that last week, when we talked about this... It came up on a few different occasions in relation to something coming forward this week, and that is actually true. We are looking at a food and fuel program that will indeed get to the most vulnerable people. It is a program that could amount to in the range of \$20 million and that could get out quickly. It could get out in June. There will not be a wait of six months. It will actually get out and be on the ground and affect people when they need it and where they need it.

When you talk about doing something, you do something that will really have an impact. The program is not something that is a headline for somebody who may come to the pump and not need the program. It is for somebody at home who is seeing the impact when going to the grocery store or somebody at home who has to get to work but does not have the same wherewithal as others to do so. What we are doing is targeting, which is what I said last week. If the Leader of the Opposition was paying attention—and I think he was—I said that we want to target this to get real results and not just throw it out for a headline, as would be a practice typical of the Leader of the Opposition. It will be announced tomorrow, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Well, Mr. Speaker, the more we dig, the more we start to see bits and pieces of what this government, which actually had no idea as to what to do and no intentions of... With the consistent pressure by us, here, in the official opposition... We really tried to get this government to do something right away.

Now, I think that the Premier mentioned something like \$20 million. What is that, if you do the breakdown, Mr. Premier—\$50 per New Brunswicker? You cannot just throw out a number like that without putting it into context and detailing what it means. You have been doing that for the past five months, and people do not actually know what you want to do.

Try to help them out. Reduce the provincial gas tax at the pump and give \$500 to people who make \$25 000 per year—now. You can do it now. Will you consider that, Premier?

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): You know, Mr. Speaker, it is rich to hear the Leader of the Opposition talk about it, that, you know, he just needs to hammer away and we get things done. Do you know what? They were not here last week. That is when we got something done—when we were actually back at work, working in the office and figuring out a way to help New Brunswickers.

We said it was going to be targeted, and that is what it will be. It will be targeted. It is not a wherewithal for everybody because not everybody needs it. Not everyone is in the same situation. Not everyone is going to a food bank. Not everyone is on a fixed income. But we know that there are people who really need this and who are feeling the effects of inflation, inflation that is very much triggered by the federal cousins of this Liberal Party. They have put our whole energy security in jeopardy, and there is no reason for it.

Beyond that, we have had the highest rate of growth in the province that we have had in decades. So here we are, kind of in the tsunami, as I mentioned last week. But it is a tsunami that we will get through stronger and better and in a better condition and in a province that people are respecting and seeing more and more of each day. And that, Mr. Speaker, is as we come out of COVID-19.

[Translation]

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, if the Premier left his office from time to time and talked to New Brunswickers, he would know that they are having an incredibly difficult time paying not only for their groceries, but also for the gas they need to fill up their cars to go to work, to daycare, or elsewhere. He would realize that there are serious problems and would maybe take further action, without waiting five months before making an announcement, the content of which we are still not sure about today.

Mr. Premier, when will you announce officially and formally what you have discreetly said here this afternoon? New Brunswickers are waiting. They are suffering and need help. All other provinces are managing to help their people. Once again, New Brunswick, with Premier Higgs, is ranked last in terms of help. Will you really help them?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): You know, I said in the previous answer, Mr. Speaker, that this would happen tomorrow, but I can repeat it: It will happen tomorrow. It will happen tomorrow. But when the Leader of the Opposition is talking about going around and talking to New Brunswickers, I wonder whether he talks to every employer in the province who cannot find workers and who cannot find people to get off EI and to help at a time when we really need to have people in the workforce. Everywhere I go, I am confronted by people who say: I do not have workers. I do not have anyone who wants to work in New Brunswick.



Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

So if we want to do something together, then let's put an EI program together and propose it to the federal government—a program that really, literally works and causes people to be part of the solution. We need everybody on deck. And we can all talk about reasons why we cannot work, and there will be some that are very legitimate. But then there are other people who need to be in the workforce, and we need them like never before in every single part of the province. Let's talk about that, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Maybe I should ask the question again because nobody is talking about what the Premier just talked about. We are talking about the cost of living. We are talking about the price at the pump. Do you know why we are talking about that, Mr. Speaker? It is because New Brunswickers are talking about it. They are worried about it. They are sick and tired of this Premier doing nothing about it and waiting five months, I guess, to announce something tomorrow.

We have been burned before and disappointed before by this Premier. Honestly, we will wait to see the details of what he will announce tomorrow. But at the end of the day, this Premier will be known for his inaction, for not caring for the people who are hurting the most in society, and for worrying only about the revenues of the province and not about the well-being of New Brunswickers. Give us details, Premier.

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

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, once again, short on details, long on verbiage, which is just typical. Look at our budget. Let's look at our budget, at every single department, Mr. Speaker—record investments in Health, record investments in Education, record investments in Social Development. Mr. Speaker, record investments.

Do you want to talk about a government of action after coming out of COVID-19? We are on the move in this province. Never in the history of this province—for what, 40 or 50 years?—have we seen growth as we are seeing it here today in New Brunswick. Why is that, Mr. Speaker? It is because people are looking at New Brunswick as the place to be, the place to live, and the place to work.

If the Leader of the Opposition thinks that no one is talking about EI, maybe he should read the editorial today. Maybe he should read the *Globe and Mail* today, Mr. Speaker. We have a shortage of workers, but do you know what? They are right here at home. "At home" is the key phrase. We need them in the workplace.

CHILD PROTECTION

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Well, the Premier must have had a good golf game last Thursday because he seems to be really hyped up today, trying to say that he has the solution for everything and that his record is the best that we have seen in

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

50 years. We will let others make those comparisons, Premier, not you, honestly. We will see what that really means.

I am going to ask you this, through the Speaker, Premier. Bill 114, *Child and Youth Well-Being Act*, as I said last week and as we on this side of the House have said, is a very good start to a bill for protecting our children in this province. However, there are many different experts out there, such as the Child and Youth Advocate, for example, saying that it is a good start but that there needs to be some improvements. The Child and Youth Advocate has made some suggestions for some amendments that should be brought in. Will the government, through you, Mr. Speaker, commit to bringing this to the law amendments committee so that we can have stakeholders come and chime in?

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

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Social Development, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the opportunity to get up and talk on Bill 114. The member across is right. The child, youth, and seniors' advocate, just for a point of clarification, did come out and applaud the government for moving forward with the bill. There were a number of suggestions that the child, youth, and seniors' advocate put forward.

Again, from a process standpoint, the members across the way have not even let this get out of second reading. The suggestion that I made, along with some of my colleagues here, was this: Let's let the process unfold. Let's let it get to estimates. Let's have that discussion on the floor where we could go back and forth. Let's, again, have that robust discussion here on the floor of the Legislature. If, in fact, the opposition members do not think that they are getting all the answers to their questions or to those of their backroom lobbyists, then let's consider it from there. But, Mr. Speaker, let's let the process begin...

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

[*Translation*]

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, we want an open and transparent process. We want a process that enables experts to come give us their opinion on a bill that is an excellent starting point.

This bill changes an Act that has been in place for 40 years. Why could we not make this bill the best in the country? We could provide the best protection to youth and children here in New Brunswick. There are people who have expertise and information that could enlighten us here, as members. At the end of the day, we could make a better decision on this bill.

I would therefore like to get a commitment from the minister that he will allow experts, who want to get publicly involved to further inform and educate us on the bill, to do so. So will he allow it?

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

[Original]

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

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Social Development, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the member asking about Bill 114. As mentioned earlier, the child, youth, and seniors' advocate, under the Act, the particular Act that governs that office's actions, has a recommendation option. Now, from a consultation standpoint, the department did extensive consultations before this bill went forward to Cabinet. Mr. Speaker, when you look at the discussion paper that received a number of responses from various people... The online survey received 950 different completed survey responses. We had in-person sessions.

So if the member opposite wants to supply us with the list of people that he is talking about who feel that they have not had the ability to comment or who missed the consultation, let's see whether there are some that were missed. Again, from a process standpoint, getting this bill forwarded out of second reading and into committee is a good way to go.

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

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, it is mind-boggling that the government and the minister will not accept bringing experts in front of a legislative committee and having them chime in based on their experience, expertise, and knowledge. We are not here asking for everything under the sky. We are asking for experts to come in front of legislators to explain what is good and what can be improved.

Why are you stubborn? Mr. Speaker, why is this government so stubborn that it will not accept bringing these experts in? I just do not understand it. It is only to be constructive, to make improvements, and to make it the best legislation in the country. Minister, through you, Mr. Speaker, why do you not just say that, yes, you will bring in these experts?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Social Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, why does the member opposite not just say yes to the bill?

I have a question for the member opposite. Do his experts include the Child and Youth Advocate? We have talked about that before. The advocate has been consulted. Do his experts include the New Brunswick Foster Families Association? Those experts have already weighed in. Do his experts include the New Brunswick Association of Social Workers? Those experts have already weighed in. Do his experts include Partners for Youth? Those experts have weighed in. Do his experts include New Brunswick's schools of social work?

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

Mr. Speaker, the member opposite has to come clean. Stop hiding the people behind there, and tell us who is on your list that has not been consulted. There were 1 000 people who were consulted on this bill. That is a lot of people. Who are you hiding in the back rooms?

(Interjections.)

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

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, let's stay calm here. We are talking about the safety and protection of children and youth.

(Interjections.)

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

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): If the minister were to go back and listen to what the opposition has said from the get-go, he would hear us say that this is a good bill. There are a lot of good things in this bill. Actually, we thanked the department and congratulated the minister and government for bringing it forward. We on this side did that, and many others did that as well. So do not be defensive, minister. Just look at this as an opportunity for experts who want to, to be able to come in and explain what should be improved in this bill and in this process and why. I do not know why this government does not want to do that. It is a simple ask, it is a simple yes, and it is the right thing to do, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Social Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, we want to make sure that the children and youth in this province are protected. That is why we are pushing this bill forward.

Mr. Speaker, I was in Saint John on Friday for an affordable housing announcement. Once again, this government is doing good work and moving things forward. I went around and talked to a number of social workers from the department, and they said, Mr. Minister, we are so pleased that you finally have this on the floor of the Legislature.

It has taken years of consultation, years of input, and years of going to the experts, whom I have already listed, and getting input on this bill. The social workers were saying that they are so excited that this is moving forward and so pleased and hopeful that this will be passed expeditiously. Unfortunately, I had to say that the opposition members seem to be putting up some barriers. They have some people that they have not named but are referring to, and I have given the list of some of the...

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

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Mr. K. Chiasson (Tracadie-Sheila, L): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Last week, I questioned the Minister of Local Government on concerns arising from the residents of South Nelson. Over 100 homes in this region of Southwest Miramichi-Bay du Vin have been lumped in with the city of Miramichi against their wishes. They are very, very concerned about this.

(Interjections.)

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

Mr. K. Chiasson (Tracadie-Sheila, L): They have held meetings, including one with the deputy minister, but they have not been heard or listened to.

Mr. Speaker, South Nelson is rural, and the folks there want to be in Rural District 5. Last week, instead of answering the question, the minister deflected his convoluted answer to references of Haut-Madawaska and Edmundston. Again, I am asking the minister to give the people of South Nelson the reason that they are being forced in with the city of Miramichi rather than being put in Rural District 5.

Hon. Mr. Allain (Moncton East, Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again, I had the great opportunity to be in the Renous area of the Miramichi riding twice last week. I had great conversations with people from all over the riding. Again, regarding South Nelson, we definitely had discussions with some individuals there. We will have discussions with our department in the next couple of days, I think. Let's hope that we can definitely gain more information on that to see what has happened and what has transpired. I know that there are discussions also with the city of Miramichi. I hope to be there again this weekend to talk about that situation.

Mr. Speaker, we are moving forward on local governance reform. There is no surprise here. It is open and transparent. We have definitely been giving more information than ever before, so let's hope that we have a good discussion this week. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. K. Chiasson (Tracadie-Sheila, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Minister, why are the residents of Stilesville, who are in the exact same situation, allowed to remain rural when the residents of South Nelson are not?

Hon. Mr. Allain (Moncton East, Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform, PC): As we know, Stilesville is a neighbourhood in the Greater Moncton area. We had some discussions before the 4th of March. Again, for our Liberal opposition members to wake up, they needed a by-election. We had a great discussion with the individuals in Stilesville. We definitely talked with the city of Moncton and came to an understanding, and that is what we have today.

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

Across New Brunswick—and the MLA from Tracadie will not like this—reform is hard. It is making changes. We are changing attitudes. We are looking to reduce duplication, and we are finding efficiencies, which are some things that I think the member opposite does not like to do. But on this side of the House, Mr. Speaker, we want to reduce that demographic deficit. We want to make sure that 100% of New Brunswickers have the ability to vote during municipal election time and to move forward. Finally, after 25 years, there is a government that is moving on local governance reform. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

Mr. K. Chiasson (Tracadie-Sheila, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Entity 22, now known as Miramichi River Valley, has had, over the past six months, a tumultuous time navigating the requirements imposed upon it with regard to amalgamation. Miramichi River Valley will be going from the village of Blackville with a population of 1 100 to an entity of over 7 000, encompassing five local service districts, including Renous, Quarryville, South Esk, North Esk, and Sunny Corner.

The elected members, the council, and the LSD chairs are moving mountains to meet the strict timelines set out by the minister's department. Members of the community have been somewhat divided on this issue through no fault of their own. Had the minister held proper and inclusive public meetings in the first place, perhaps we would not be in this situation. Can the minister please explain why he decided to move forward with the input from local residents in this area? And please do not say that change is hard and that sometimes we need to move quickly to get results. That is a cop-out, and the people of Miramichi River Valley deserve better.

Hon. Mr. Allain (Moncton East, Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform, PC): Mr. Speaker, actually, this week, I was in the Southwest Miramichi-Bay du Vin area. We went to Blackville, we went to South Esk, we went to North Esk, and we went to Sunny Corner. We went to Sillikers, actually. We went to Sillikers. We talked to people. That is what this is all about.

Entity 22 and all the other entities are going through local governance reform. We are changing how the partnership will be between the municipal governments and the provincial government. This is normal. The people from Entity 22 have the ability to work together, to collaborate. That is part of what reform is all about—working together to make sure that we find efficiencies, that we reduce duplication, and that people have the ability to vote during municipal election time.

Also, Mr. Speaker, it is important that the member across the way makes sure that he talks to people the next time he is in the area doing politics. I was there this week, and people are happy that we are moving forward with local governance reform.



Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

COST OF LIVING

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Mr. Speaker, renters need affordable rents, but the rents are going to be jacked up for the coming winter because the temporary Tory rent cap will vanish on New Year's Eve, with the year 2022. Heating our homes is going to be more expensive next winter because the Premier allowed NB Power to increase the power bills. Is the Premier doing anything to make it affordable for New Brunswickers to pay their power bills, such as financing central heat pumps or helping people to replace drafty, cold windows? No.

The Greens have a plan for affordable living, with permanent rent caps for affordable rent. Increase the minimum wage now, not later, so that people can keep their heads above water now. Beef up the HST rebate cheques with the HST windfall from high gas prices so that people who depend on those cheques to get by can afford to get by.

Mr. Speaker, what is the Premier's plan? What is he waiting for? Why does he not tell us and the people of New Brunswick today what he plans?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Well, Mr. Speaker, there are a lot of topics to discuss there, so I do not know whether I should pick just one. Maybe I will pick one, and that is the high cost of energy.

The Leader of the Green Party should be well aware of how we got here and where we are heading, because it is only going to get worse. If he thinks that the government can keep up by taxing more people more money—more money, more taxes—in order to try to offset the increasing cost of energy... It is going to take a bigger strategy than that. I know that it is not going to be all about wind and solar. Those are going to play a big part, but it is not going to be all about that.

So, Mr. Speaker, I think that it is time that the Leader of the Green Party came clean. What is his plan for energy costs that are going to go through the roof, because there is not any real plan to deal with them? Mr. Speaker, we are looking at the long haul. We are trying to find the transition where we can actually move into an area that people can afford. But it is not going to be a continual program of raising taxes on somebody to pay for somebody else, and just keep doing that in a cycle that will never yield the right result. But we will have a plan.

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Mr. Speaker, many New Brunswickers are trimming their costs and trying to make a dollar go further, but those who do not have enough to live on—at least those who did not have enough to live on before the cost of living shot up—are now at their wits' end with the cost of living going through the roof.

This is Disability Awareness Week. The question is this: How are the disabled who cannot work or who find it difficult to find an employer who will hire them supposed to live on



Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

their income assistance payments? The Tories' cost-of-living adjustment for social assistance recipients was set six months ago, and it has already been swallowed up by inflation.

A disabled constituent of mine asked whether there could at least be a special bus pass for them. It is a good idea, and it should work on both city transit and on Maritime Bus. How else are people who are confined to social assistance supposed to get where they need to go? We know that the Premier does not see public transportation as an essential public service. He has left tens of millions of dollars on the table in Ottawa.

(Interjections.)

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

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): How does the Premier expect people with disabilities to be able to go where they need to go?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, you know, it would be great to have affordable transportation all over this province. It requires trying to balance that out with the population. Maybe if our population growth continues at a sure pace, we are going to get there in pockets of our province. It is all about building for the future and providing what is necessary in many categories.

I think that if the Leader of the Green Party looks at what we have done in the areas of social assistance... I think, Mr. Speaker, that it has been a record in that sense as well in terms of investments made. Yes, we are into a period here that is uncharted territory, with the inflation rate as high as it is. But, Mr. Speaker, we will continue to meet the challenges of those who need help the most.

Yes, we had a meeting just a week or two ago in relation to working with a disabilities group and understanding people's priorities. We are developing an action plan, with real items that mean something to them about how they can live comfortably in this province, because we know about the challenges that some people face. Those challenges are real, and we need to be responsive. It does not mean that you can be everything to everybody, but you have to be something to somebody who really needs it.

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Time, Mr. Premier.

MENTAL HEALTH

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, L): The position of mental health advocate was unanimously adopted by this Legislature in the fall of 2019—over two and a half years ago. Time and



Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

time again, the minister has said that it is on her radar or she has used the pandemic that took over as an excuse. But those are excuses, Mr. Speaker.

[Translation]

As you know, Paul Ouellet has been lobbying the government for years, and he is indeed the one who inspired us to introduce our motion. He has two sisters and a brother who suffer from schizophrenia. He has helped them and taken care of them. He can see the difficulties that families face. Not all families have someone like Paul Ouellet to advocate for them. People who are suffering have no voice and often suffer in silence. For the most vulnerable people in our province, we need a mental health advocate. I would like the minister to tell us once and for all whether this government actually has no intention to establish a position for a mental health advocate.

[Original]

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the question. As always, the opposition members take an extremely negative connotation. I realize their passion. I understand their passion for this. Look, I have met with Mr. Ouellet. He is a genuine soul who really, truly does advocate for those suffering with mental health diagnoses, and he has made a real difference in the province of New Brunswick. I want to state that because I truly appreciate all that he has brought to the table, and I have enjoyed my meetings with him.

I agree with the member opposite that we need to get this settled. The member alluded to the fact that I used the pandemic as an excuse, but I will just say that the Department of Health has been overwhelmed with the pandemic and working through the crisis that we have had. But it is time for us to get back on this. We have had meetings with the child, youth and seniors' advocate to see where this can lie, and we will continue to do that.

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, the Mental Health Court operating in Saint John has been widely praised by advocates for its focus on community treatment and rehabilitation, and it is time that this court is expanded to other areas of the province. At the same time, the city of Moncton has seen a significant increase in homelessness and crime, especially in the downtown core. I recently attended two town hall meetings of residents. They want solutions now, and they want all levels of government to step up.

The Premier recently visited the area, and he went on the record as saying that Moncton needs additional resources. At one of the meetings, the inspector for the RCMP even said that Crown prosecutors are reluctant to approve charges against those suffering homelessness and mental health issues. Mr. Speaker, that is why a mental health court is needed—to connect those people to services and treatment instead of going through the justice system or instead of the Crown prosecutors not at all even addressing the issue.

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

When will this government commit to expanding the Mental Health Court to Moncton and to other areas of the province?

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

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Again, Mr. Speaker, I so appreciate this question because it is very important. I could not support the Mental Health Court more. I have seen the success of the Mental Health Court in Saint John. I myself was frustrated when it lapsed when we were in between judges that were supporting it.

What I can say is that quite some time ago, or well over a month ago, I issued a letter of financial support to my colleague and to the Department of Justice to show that those funds were there to support the Mental Health Court. I have no doubt in my mind that the Department of Justice will be bringing forward a plan to expand the Mental Health Court to Moncton. I shared that letter with the mayor, and I want to see it proceed as soon as possible as well. I welcome the question, and I hope that the answer was what the member opposite was looking for.

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): The time for question period has expired.

