

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions



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CONTENTS

FINANCE

Mr. Legacy
Hon. Mr. Steeves
Mr. Legacy
Hon. Mr. Steeves
Mr. Legacy
Hon. Mr. Steeves
Mr. Legacy
Hon. Mr. Steeves

HOUSING

Mr. Losier
Hon. Ms. Green
Mr. Losier
Hon. Ms. Green
Mr. Losier
Hon. Ms. Green

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

SCHOOLS

Ms. Landry

Hon. Mr. Hogan

Ms. Landry

Hon. Mr. Hogan

HEALTH CARE

Mr. McKee

Hon. Mr. Fitch

Mr. McKee

Hon. Mr. Fitch

Mr. McKee

Hon. Mr. Fitch

EMPLOYMENT STANDARDS

Mr. Coon

Hon. Mr. Turner

Mr. Coon

Hon. Mr. Turner

POWER RATES

Mr. Legacy

Hon. Mr. Holland

Mr. Legacy

Hon. Mr. Holland

Mr. Legacy

HOUSING

Hon. Ms. Green

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

[Original]

FINANCE

Mr. Legacy (Bathurst West-Beresford, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We are in budget week, but there was a break in session in which the Minister of Finance did his Q3 update. We haven't had a chance to partake in a discussion on this. He actually mentioned that the surplus is now going to be \$247 million instead of \$40 million, so, again, the projections are positive and up compared to the previous quarter in which everything looked grim. But in actuality, on December 31, the surplus was looking like \$517 million, so I wonder whether the minister can explain how he feels that that surplus, from \$517 million last quarter, is going to get closer to the now-adjusted projection.

Hon. Mr. Steeves (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): Thank you for the question. I will absolutely take this one under advisement. It has been a while since the Q3 numbers... I am sorry. My brain is only so big, I guess. Do you know what? This year's budget is what we're talking about mostly, and I will get back to you on Q3.

Seeing as I have some time left here, I will talk a little bit about the budget. There is nearly \$3.8 billion for our health care system, which represents a \$1-billion increase in just six years. That is what this government has done. How about the \$1.4 million for MyHealthNB, an app that is now being copied by other provinces? How about \$545 000 for SeamlessMD, \$6.9 million for NB Health Link and eVisitNB, and \$2.1 million to develop electronic patient care records within Ambulance New Brunswick? It goes on and on because this budget is about the people of New Brunswick. It is about—

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Bill Oliver): Thank you, minister.

Mr. Legacy (Bathurst West-Beresford, L): Oh, Mr. Speaker, I expected a canned answer. I mean, having forgotten that the Q3 update was, what, three or four weeks ago, it is really impressive that the minister has already forgotten what it was. Let's go back to previous years. The minister has always said that this is the most volatile quarter, especially for revenues. What confidence can we derive? Every year since I have been here, the surplus from Q3 to the end of the year has always, always increased. The gaps always increase. What does the minister think is going to happen this year so that this won't happen? I believe that \$517 million is not the correct figure.

Hon. Mr. Steeves (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): Mr. Speaker, thank you to the member opposite for the question. Yes, there is always in-year spending. Absolutely, there is in-year spending, and there is also revenue that comes from the federal government when it gets its results. Generally, those come around the first or second week of December, and that is that influx of revenue that we've had for the last few years. It is hard to predict because it is coming from the CRA. It is doing the work. It is collecting the taxes from this area of Canada, quite frankly. It does it for the four Atlantic

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

Provinces, and it also does it for Ontario. It takes care of the taxes, collecting the HST and distributing.

Now, the HST is a little bit different because it is a formula. So the CRA collects the HST, and it isn't like I pay 15¢ HST on a dollar stick of gum today and then Ottawa delivers it back to us tomorrow. It's not like that. It goes into a pot. There is a complicated formula around the HST, and it is divvied up by the provinces as they are entitled. That is how it works.

So will there be in-year expenses? Yes, there always are. You can count on some of those coming up. How much? We don't know yet, obviously.

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

Mr. Legacy (Bathurst West-Beresford, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. So, during the Q3 update, the minister actually sent a letter to the federal minister asking her to change her process and make it more predictable, because it was the only way that they could figure out how to take out that variability. But a couple of weeks later, in this budget, we hear a new term—the department is considering the “recent growth trajectory” to minimize in-year variances. That is only a couple of weeks after sending a letter to Freeland. So how confident can we be in the new numbers in this budget, now that you have a new process?

Hon. Mr. Steeves (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): I think that you can be confident in how we have run our budget over the past six years. You know, yesterday, in the *Edmonton Journal* and other papers across Canada, it was stated that the New Brunswick government was giving a master class in budgeting. The *Edmonton Journal* said that—a master class in budgeting. So do you know what? I think that the media right across Canada has recognized it, and maybe this Liberal government should recognize it as well.

But going back to how we spend the money, here is how we spend the money. This is how we spent it this year, in this year's budget. Take Social Development, for instance, with a 3.6% increase. That is \$7.3 million for social assistance rates. They've geared them toward inflation and the CPI, and they have also taken them up. That is 3.6%, so that equates to \$7.3 million under the Transitional Assistance Program and the Extended Benefits Program. There is \$51 million for the creation of a new \$200 monthly household supplement—

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

Mr. Legacy (Bathurst West-Beresford, L): We are talking about revenues, and I can see now why the minister is a little tired and confused. He must have had to read a lot of news media to get to Alberta to find a positive headline. I can see why he is so tired. But the point is that there is apparently a new process to look at revenues, so how can we be confident, again this year, that the revenue projections are actually aligned with what should happen?

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

We are looking at a \$40-million surplus, which ends debate on any kind of projected programs that we could put into the system. As with last year, extra hundreds of millions could show up in the next quarters. So how can we be sure that this year's revenue projections are better than they were last year?

Hon. Mr. Steeves (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): First of all, yes, it is a \$41-million surplus. But do you know what? When you are dealing with billions of dollars, millions and billions of dollars, it is hard for people to conceptualize that. So I've taken it down. If you took it down to \$120, that would be a 41¢ surplus on \$120. And you're talking about making changes with Freeland? Yes, at the deputy minister level, we are talking. We are trying to make that work and trying to make some changes there that are positive so that we don't have this crazy influx of cash in... Don't get me wrong—we love the influx of cash. However, it has to be predictable. It has to be predictable, and it has to be put into our budget. That is what we are trying to work through with the feds, with the Deputy Prime Minister.

In the meantime, I still have a few seconds left here, so I have to talk more about my friend from Social Development. There is \$18.7 million to continue the implementation of initiatives outlined in our nursing home plan. That continues. How about another couple million for seniors—

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

HOUSING

Mr. Losier (Dieppe, L): Mr. Speaker, last week on Twitter, the Premier shared that there were 5 500 new units being built in the province. This week in the budget, there seems to be a shortfall of 145, because it stated 5 355. I know that adding and subtracting are very difficult, so I'm not going to... It's an error, and I'll take it as an error. But I'd like to know how many of those units are affordable housing and how much the government has spent on this affordable housing.

Hon. Ms. Green (Fredericton North, Minister of Social Development; Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation; Minister responsible for the New Brunswick Housing Corporation, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I think we can all recognize that new construction starts every single day, so there could be a bit of a discrepancy in numbers since they change from time to time. When I get reported numbers, sometimes they're from the end of January, and sometimes they're from the end of February and whatnot. Numbers do change slightly.

Mr. Speaker, we have done something that no government has done in over 40 years, and that is to stand up the New Brunswick Housing Corporation and begin building public housing. I listened to the response to the budget speech yesterday so I could be prepared to answer any questions about that today. There were some comments about us not getting

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

going on building. Well, 40 years is a long time to get ourselves rolling again to begin building, but I can tell you that the builds for this year are going to be on steroids. We have 187 builds planned for this summer, starting right away.

Mr. Losier (Dieppe, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Translation]

Thank you for not answering my question. Given that there is a housing crisis throughout the province, can the minister specify how many of the 5 355 or 5 500 housing units—who knows which number is correct—will be built outside of Moncton, Fredericton, and Saint John, meaning elsewhere in the province? Thank you.

[Original]

Hon. Ms. Green (Fredericton North, Minister of Social Development; Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation; Minister responsible for the New Brunswick Housing Corporation, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'm not exactly sure what he was asking me when he asked the question. I believe he wants to understand the builds that are happening around the province rather than in our three major centres. I can tell you that this year, out of the 187 units that we're building, 76 of those units are going to be traditional constructions. We have 5 sites selected for those. We have 97 units that are going to use modular construction techniques. There are 11 sites for those, and they are all over the province, from the northern parts all the way down to the southern parts. Then, we also have an additional 10 units of modular construction. We are finding the last piece of property to be able to put those builds on.

I can tell you, Mr. Speaker, that it's all hands on deck. We are having opportunities for new affordable housing and new construction of public housing units. The developers are coming on board, the municipalities are on board, and it's all hands on—

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Bill Oliver): Thank you, minister.

Mr. Losier (Dieppe, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In the budget, we have the mention of \$3 million for the Rent Bank, which is a great program. I have acknowledged that in the past. For 750 households, a maximum of \$2 750 could be given to New Brunswickers who are in dire need. Doing a little bit of math, there's nearly a \$1-million shortfall from the \$3 million in the Rent Bank. Can you explain where that \$1 million goes?

Hon. Ms. Green (Fredericton North, Minister of Social Development; Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation; Minister responsible for the New Brunswick Housing Corporation, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Rent Bank is a really good program, and I'm glad you recognize that too. It is making a difference in the lives of New Brunswickers who are having unexpected bad things happen to them. Now, we can

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

step up to provide them with just a little bit of relief so that they can take a breath and get on with their everyday lives.

I can tell you that we've had almost 1 500 applications for the Rent Bank, and we have disbursed over \$330 000. The average grant that we're giving out is \$1 686. We're not giving out the full grant to each individual, and that's why the dollars are able to go further. There is no shortfall. Now, any of these individuals who applied could then apply a second time to get the remaining balance up to the \$2 750. We're making the dollars go really far, Mr. Speaker.

[*Translation*]

SCHOOLS

Ms. Landry (Madawaska Les Lacs-Edmundston, L): Mr. Speaker, we have called on the government to fully fund a school nutrition program throughout the province.

This government continues to distort the truth when it says that it provides a nutrition program in every school in New Brunswick. Schools in Nackawic, Dieppe, and Miramichi have said that they do not have a school nutrition program funded by the government.

Can the Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development specify how he intends to ensure that students have a universal nutrition program and compensate schools that do not have support from the community or other organizations to establish this kind of program?

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have been asked this question, and it is fairly complicated. Last year, in our budget, we spent \$2 million to ensure that every school that did not have a nutrition program would get one. We ensured that every school would have a nutrition program this year.

We really benefit from the groups who help us feed our children. I am waiting for the federal government to fulfill the promise it made six years ago to give more money to provinces to fund nutrition programs. This year, since...

[*Original*]

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

[*Translation*]

Ms. Landry (Madawaska Les Lacs-Edmundston, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

[Original]

Mr. Speaker, that is an answer... The federal government shouldn't be the one taking care of our kids in New Brunswick. However, I have another question for the minister.

Talk to any parents in New Brunswick with kids in school, and they will tell you that our classrooms across the province are overcrowded. Students are going to the washroom and heading to their next classroom in portables outside the school. It appears as though the government has finally acknowledged the challenges that have come along with enrollment. Could the Minister of Education please tell the teachers, educational staff, and support staff whether the \$18.6 million allocated for challenges related to enrollment growth in this budget will be used to provide the extra staffing and resources that are so desperately needed?

Hon. Mr. Hogan (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I want to applaud the work of our teachers and educational staff who work very hard every day to deliver a quality education to all our students.

I do want to clarify something. Our classrooms are not overcrowded. I heard this yesterday. It's not that our classrooms are overcrowded but instead that our schools are overcrowded because of the large influx of population that we've received. It's the largest increase since Confederation, and we're blessed by that, but it's created some challenges.

Yes, we have portables. Yes, we're working on a variety of different projects. We've announced a lot of projects. You know, two weeks ago, I was in Campbellton to confirm the construction of the new school there. We're working on this. As the member opposite well knows, these projects don't happen overnight. They take time, and we're working diligently to address this. Thank you.

HEALTH CARE

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, during a recent scrum, the Minister of Health indicated the forthcoming release of the long-kept secret primary care plan. However, his tone did little to instill confidence in the plan's effectiveness. In the snippet of his statement that I read, the minister mentioned that the plan would involve a number of different plans laid on top of each other, a description that raises significant concerns about his coherence and strategic foresight. The minister's statement suggests a patchwork approach—rather than a comprehensive and integrated strategy—that will only perpetuate the haphazard decision-making and ad hoc policy-making that have plagued this government's governance style. A vision and structured approach are vital for effective policy implementation and achieving meaningful outcomes in primary care. In light of this, I seek clarification on several points. What exactly does the primary care plan entail? How was the plan developed? And when can we expect its official release?

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I know the member opposite has visitors in the gallery, so I will certainly be very forthright and answer his question without too much slapping.

There is a white paper, which we consider to be the primary care plan. I referred to the multiple plans. Primary care and access to primary care are multifaceted, with various stakeholders taking part of that ownership. When I talk about various plans, I talk about the government's plan, *Stabilizing Health Care: An Urgent Call to Action*. I look at the RHAs and the annual plans that they put out. The annual reports from Vitalité and Horizon contain components of primary care. Actually, NB Health Link and EM/ANB are also components—

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Bill Oliver): Thank you, minister.

[*Translation*]

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, this is very worrisome. The Department of Health appeared before the Standing Committee on Public Accounts and gave us an annual report. In it, the department says it has a plan for primary care in New Brunswick. When we ask to see the plan, we are told that it isn't really a plan. We are told that it is a plan laid on top of another plan. Yet, there is no vision or strategy.

Today, the minister tells us it is a white paper drafted in consultation with the various stakeholders in the health sector. However, in reality, we also talk to the stakeholders, and they tell us that they haven't participated in the preparation of a plan, strategy, or vision for the Department of Health.

In fact, we heard on the radio this morning that Vitalité will be forming groups of family care practices on its own. The health network will be putting its own initiative in place without the help of the government. It is asking for the necessary investments to put the program in place, but the government is not even there to help it. So, what is the government doing to consult and draft...

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I would suggest that the \$70 million going to the RHAs in this budget would be somewhat helpful. In fact, it would be more than somewhat helpful because we've earmarked \$20 million to the RHAs specifically for primary care advancement here in New Brunswick. That's more than somewhat helpful. We meet with stakeholders on an ongoing basis. There's collaboration or communication back and forth on a regular basis. All these things are included in making sure that primary care is advanced here in New Brunswick.

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

Contrary to what the member opposite is saying here today, there is a cohesive plan. There is substantial funding. There is a real goal to make sure that the people of New Brunswick are looked after and that the people of New Brunswick have access to primary care. Whether it's done through extra-mural—

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

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, there is no plan. There is no consultation. If you talk to the stakeholders, they'll tell you that they were not involved in the preparation of this government's phantom primary care plan. I want to know when it plans on releasing an actual plan—not a white paper or a plan on top of a plan. We know that this government has failed at meeting targets since 2021 when it said that it would get everyone in the province a family doctor in six months. Its *Stabilizing Health Care* plan has kicked the can down the road by two or three years on every single category that relates to primary care. It has failed miserably.

I know why the government doesn't want to release a plan—if it even has a plan. If you talk to those stakeholders, you will hear that they want a plan. They want significant investments. They want \$70 million for primary care, not the \$20 million that this government is putting in. It's moving at a snail's pace. Get with it. Get with it and help New Brunswickers get family medicine.

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Well, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I'll congratulate the member opposite on his theatrics here today. I appreciate the little show.

Mr. Speaker, many people were consulted when we put together our plan, *Stabilizing Health Care: An Urgent Call to Action*. Other plans roll out from that plan, such as plans for mental health and addictions, a plan for primary care, and a plan for the long-term care of seniors. There are multiple plans that go together. They work together like a tapestry to make sure that the picture is clear at the end of the day and that people in New Brunswick are getting the health care they need. We know that it's not complete from the standpoint that there's more to be done. That's why we continue to recruit doctors and nurses. We continue to make investments Mr. Speaker, and this government is making the biggest investment ever in health care—\$3.8 billion. That's action the member across the way can't deny. It's being done—

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Bill Oliver): Thank you, minister.

EMPLOYMENT STANDARDS

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It has been more than a year now since I tabled Bill 27 to try to secure paid sick leave for all those New Brunswickers who don't have access to it. It was referred to the law amendments



Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

committee, which held public hearings in February 2023, and the committee recommended that PETL launch a wide consultation on paid sick leave and report back to the House. Those consultations were completed last fall, and the report has been compiled. The question is this: What happened to it? Can the Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour explain why he has not reported his department's findings on paid sick leave to this House?

Hon. Mr. Turner (Moncton South, Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour; Minister responsible for Immigration; Minister responsible for Opportunities NB; Minister responsible for Economic Development and Small Business, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Our government is committed to striking a balance between employers and workers. It's important to take the needs of workers and employers into consideration with respect to this report. The consultations and the report are complete, as the members mentioned a few moments ago. Honestly, our group will be reporting back to the committee when we get that opportunity in the very near future. The committee will receive the report, and we'll move forward from there. We thank you for the question, and we look forward to moving forward on this topic. Thank you.

[Translation]

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Mr. Speaker, vulnerable and low-income workers make up a large percentage of people who do not have paid sick leave. If they cannot stay home when they are sick, other people will get sick. Paid sick leave is clearly beneficial for the whole economy. Paid sick leave reduces not only the transmission of disease in the workplace, but also long-term costs for our health care system. When will the minister introduce a bill to establish paid sick leave?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Turner (Moncton South, Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour; Minister responsible for Immigration; Minister responsible for Opportunities NB; Minister responsible for Economic Development and Small Business, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. As I mentioned, the report is complete, and it will be going back to the committee. From that point on, we'll move forward with legislation. At the same time, it's important to remember that this report takes into consideration the needs of both the employer and the employees. Both are very, very important in the equation. Many employers have different needs, which need to be respected along with those of employees. Obviously, we really appreciate the efforts of employees in making the workforce in New Brunswick stronger. At the same time, the report was commissioned and finalized. It will be going back to the committee, and we'll be waiting for the committee to come back to us. Then we'll have the legislation in due course. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. We appreciate it. Thank you.



Oral Questions

POWER RATES

Mr. Legacy (Bathurst West-Beresford, L): Mr. Speaker, we know there's a major rate hike coming for NB Power. We would expect that, before NB Power came for this hike, it would have tried to find all the savings possible. I know PricewaterhouseCoopers was hired to do this, probably at a substantial cost. Then we heard this interesting conversation this morning about a government that is sitting on a \$1-billion surplus and charging a lot of fees to NB Power. I wonder whether there was any discussion around possibly finding some savings there as opposed to going right to the ratepayers and causing them that much trouble.

Hon. Mr. Holland (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development; Minister of Indigenous Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, to the member opposite, I'm very happy the member opposite has highlighted the fact that there has been a significant amount of work done by the utility that highlights the opportunities for it to find cost-saving measures. This is evidenced by the fact that it found \$50 million worth of savings in the first year and it is identifying another \$50 million in the upcoming year. That's a significant effort to ensure it's going to find cost-saving measures. Within HR, there have been cost-saving measures. The member opposite asked if the government wants to take it easy on NB Power with fees and taxes. That makes me wonder. Certainly, the member opposite isn't advocating for us to go easy on NB Power and harder on New Brunswickers, is he?

Mr. Legacy (Bathurst West-Beresford, L): There seems to be some confusion with the minister. He doesn't realize ratepayers are taxpayers. It doesn't matter. The point is you guys are sitting on a \$1-billion surplus and you could use it as opposed to just raising rates.

This morning in a story, there were some figures thrown out. That's what kind of opened up this whole discussion.

Earlier this week, the minister threw out a figure on the carbon tax, and it seems as though his department doesn't want to bring it up. NB Power isn't saying the same thing, and the Energy and Utilities Board (EUB) is asking the questions. So, it begs the question, who's he talking to? Where's he getting his figures? Where's he getting his information? I'm hoping it's not just from the Poilievre-Outhouse talking notes.

Hon. Mr. Holland (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development; Minister of Indigenous Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, to the member opposite, one thing that you'd have to recognize over the past six years is that I write my own talking notes, and I'll stand by them all day long. I want the member opposite to be held accountable for talking about a \$1-billion surplus. That narrative of falsehood creates issues within the province where people think that we're sitting on some mattress with \$1 billion under it. That's absolutely not true—nothing could be further from the truth.



Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

Did you sleep through the budget presentation where our Finance Minister mentioned the \$13.3 billion in, the \$13.3 billion out, and the increases associated with that? We've done a tremendous job managing finances, paying down the debt, and then taking the surpluses and reinvesting them back into New Brunswickers, reinvesting them back into affordability measures, reinvesting them back into energy efficiency. So, for future budget presentations, I would suggest that you wear bells, wear whistles, or do something, because the opposition obviously slept through your presentation.

Mr. Legacy (Bathurst West-Beresford, L): Mr. Speaker, we're going to let the minister of all things get his heartbeat down. To answer his question, I did not sleep through the budget, but it was a struggle. I will say that it was quite the struggle—it was.

HOUSING

However, I do want to get back to the Minister of Social Development just to clarify a point. I have to say to the minister, you have cheerleaders here. God knows, we want the housing to happen—we actually want the housing to happen—but we can only go with what we see and what's written.

In the budget, there was a three-year plan for \$100 million, and, in the budget, there's still only \$33 million this year despite the fact that there was only \$5 million spent. If everybody in your department is actually on steroids and ready to build, you would anticipate that in order to catch up, the budget would have been around \$61 million to recover the delay. So, are we actually going to push more this year, which means that the budget is going to be surpassed, or are we just going to do what is planned, which is \$33 million?

Hon. Ms. Green (Fredericton North, Minister of Social Development; Minister responsible for the Economic and Social Inclusion Corporation; Minister responsible for the New Brunswick Housing Corporation, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I just want to give a little challenge to that \$5-million figure. That was what was reported, but there's been a lot happening this quarter, so that \$5 million may be exceeded when we get to the end of the year. So, the \$100 million is \$100 million for public builds. It stays there. We kept the \$33 million in this year, but there are going to be more opportunities.

There's no question. We've got a snowball, it's halfway down the hill, and it's getting really, really big. So, when we were setting the budget, we kept the \$33 million and extended out an extra year.

However, Mr. Speaker, there are a lot of opportunities. We have 187 builds happening this year. We have the opportunity for probably 40 or 80 more. Those are discussions that I'll need to have with my colleagues, but this government is supporting housing. We've got a team at the New Brunswick Housing Corporation that's doing an incredible job. They've moved this file hugely, and I'm so excited for the spring when we start moving people into new units. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.



Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Bill Oliver): Question period is over.

