

# Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

## Oral Questions



**May 10, 2024**

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### ENERGY AND UTILITIES BOARD

**Ms. Holt** (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, I have a hunch that every member in this House is hearing daily about the challenges that New Brunswickers are facing in trying to pay their bills. The 13% increase to their power rates has meant that many families are struggling even more to put food on the table. I think a number of families were paying attention and thinking that, well, there's a rate review coming, and the Energy and Utilities Board (EUB) may reduce the amount of increase that we've seen to our power rates.

However, we've learned today that this EUB hearing has been postponed for quite some time because of the quorum, because of the Premier's failure to fill the two seats that have remained vacant on the EUB for a long time. New Brunswickers need this body to be acting in a timely and efficient way. I'm wondering whether the Premier can tell us this: Why has he failed to fill those vacancies and ensure that this body acts the way it should for New Brunswickers?

**Hon. Mr. Holland** (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development; Minister of Indigenous Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, to the member opposite, thank you for the question. The EUB does play an important role. We've made changes to the dynamics of what it refers to as its daily duties. We've added responsibilities related to the Financial and Consumer Services Commission. We've also added hearings related to the Mining Commissioner.

We are looking at the entire makeup of that board. Circumstances put the board in a situation where it finds itself down. We are aware of that. We are addressing it. However, it's important for us to talk about the evolution of the EUB. It's not just about the addition of some extra duties. That will require extra workload. We are aware of that. The entire framework and makeup of that board must be set up in a way that certainly affords and accommodates the absolute best level of work and attention to important files. We are doing that. We are aware of circumstances that change the dynamic of the makeup of the board. We are going to address it forthwith and right away. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

**Ms. Holt** (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate that the member opposite says that the government is aware of it and that it is addressing it, but it's too late. We had a rate hearing scheduled for next week that we are now being told might not happen until this fall. New Brunswickers are waiting to hear whether those rates are going to be reduced.

We have called on this government to deliver tax relief to New Brunswickers by taking the provincial tax off power bills so that the people who are struggling today will have some relief. At first, the government members said: Oh, maybe. That's interesting. Then they said:

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Nope. Nope, we don't want to help New Brunswickers. We don't want to take this tax off their power bills.

But this minister is telling us that he's addressing it. When will the vacancies on the EUB be filled?

**Hon. Mr. Holland** (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development; Minister of Indigenous Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, to the member opposite, we won't diverge into a conversation about the reduction of cost pressures on New Brunswickers. I could let the Finance Minister or the Premier stand here and discuss at length the amount, the millions of dollars, being put directly back into New Brunswickers' pockets, because this government does realize that difficult times need action. We've done that, and we'll continue to do that as it relates to the EUB.

The discussions and deliberations that are taking place will ultimately land on a decision, and that is cemented in a process that will ensure that whatever the rate determined, a rebate will be brought forward to New Brunswickers if that is the case.

It is a little disingenuous for the member opposite to make a statement about New Brunswickers needing something now as though this delay will prevent them from receiving that rebate. Nothing is further from the truth. The work will continue to be done right, and the rebate will come to—

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

[*Translation*]

**Ms. Holt** (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate that the minister suggested that the Premier would answer the question about why he will not be eliminating the provincial portion of the HST on power bills to help New Brunswickers. So, I am looking forward to hearing the Premier tell us why he does not want to remove the provincial portion of the HST from power bills.

[*Original*]

**Hon. Mr. Holland** (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development; Minister of Indigenous Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, to the member opposite, let's not look at this in isolation. We need to look at this in the total framework of affordability initiatives. The government has significantly and seriously reviewed so many different pressure points for New Brunswickers. We have delivered and will continue to deliver on those.

When you talk about the issue related to the provincial portion of the HST, we are not talking about something that doesn't have unintended consequences. We absolutely want to and will do things that bring relief to New Brunswickers. But when you're dealing with

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something that has a significant annual cost in the range of \$100 million, we need to be very careful. As the carpenter says, we need to measure twice before we cut once.

It's not as though we are not interested in having this conversation or are not actually having it, but the member opposite would have us just be flippant with money. We're not going to do that, Mr. Speaker.

### SCHOOLS

**Ms. Holt** (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Other costs that New Brunswickers are experiencing today, particularly New Brunswick parents, are coming out of our school and education system. I think that a lot of parents know the challenges of making sure that your kids go to school with a healthy lunch every day, making sure that they're paying their school fees, and responding to requests to fund supplies, trips, and all sorts of things that are making families struggle in New Brunswick today. Given what we've learned about the lack of supplies in New Brunswick schools, which has seen teachers and parents paying out-of-pocket for basic educational supplies, I'm wondering whether the minister can tell us this: How does the minister plan to ensure the education system and the supplies our students and families need are there?

**Hon. Mr. Hogan** (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. In reference to the question from the Leader of the Opposition, I'll note that I'm still waiting to hear which two schools she was talking about the other day, and I'm still waiting to hear what she was referring to when she spoke about parental rights on the podcast in Ontario that she partook in.

Parents have provided the basic implements such as pencils, crayons, scribblers, looseleaf, and binders, for time immemorial. We do recognize that there's a challenge. A lot of schools do school packs. They offer a deal to parents where they pay \$30, \$35, \$40, or whatever is reasonable. Parents who can't afford it work with the school, and the supplies are provided for the children throughout the school year. That is extremely important.

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

**Ms. Holt** (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, there are a number of challenges in our school system that reflect the fact that it is underfunded. Kids are coming to school hungry, and we have a government that has promised school food programs. Those school food programs have been piecemeal, and they rely on the generosity of teachers and the community to supplement the food, if they can. They've also been distributed unequally around the province. We think making sure that every kid is ready to learn with a full stomach is a responsibility of the government. We'd like to know why this government has not acted to ensure that every school in the

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province has an equitable and supported school food program so that teachers are not having to fill in that gap.

**Hon. Mr. Hogan** (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, we have provided a food program in every school that didn't have one. We put \$2 million in the budget. We continue to increase the education budget. It increased this year over last year. I agree that hungry children can't learn. We appreciate those groups, individuals, and communities that step up to provide food to help these children to learn. The primary purpose of a school is education, but one of the unfortunate things that has happened to schools is that they've become the holders of all the responsibilities and almost surrogate parents to children. In keeping that in mind, teachers go above and beyond every day. I thank them for that. They buy stuff for children because they care. They provide food for children because they care. At Christmastime, they provide boxes of food—

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

**Ms. Holt** (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I've had the privilege of speaking with a number of teachers over the past month as I toured schools all over the province and listened to what they had to share about the state of the school system today. I heard some stories that were really disturbing. I also heard some really consistent feedback. The minister is right. Right now, schools are bearing a lot of responsibility for things that go beyond academic learning.

I heard from schools that guidance counsellors are playing a critical role in addressing the challenges young people are facing today and in supporting teachers in the system. We currently have a 502 to 1 student-guidance counsellor ratio. Many schools told me they didn't even have a guidance counsellor because they didn't have 502 students. With today's challenges, having 502 students is a load too great for the system. I'm wondering whether the minister is listening to teachers' requests to change the student-guidance counsellor ratio to ensure their schools and their work are—

**Hon. Mr. Hogan** (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, I spent 35 years in the public school system. I've only been out of it since 2020, after the election. I represented teachers for a large majority of my career with the New Brunswick Teachers' Association (NBTA) and the New Brunswick Teachers' Federation (NBTF), at the local branch level. I talk to teachers all the time. I spoke to one in the parking lot at Canadian Tire last weekend. We were talking about changes to the cellphone policy. I got some wonderful advice from that teacher.

We provide resources. Guidance counsellors are certainly an important resource for a school. It's a role that can't really be shared by other roles. Guidance counsellors are shared between schools. We have Integrated Service Delivery (ISD) teams that travel to all our

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schools to provide those services where they're needed. When the principal identifies that a child needs a service, we make sure that child gets that service.

**Mr. Speaker** (Hon. Bill Oliver): Thank you.

**Ms. Landry** (Madawaska Les Lacs-Edmundston, L): Mr. Speaker, back in 2018, this Premier ran a campaign saying that he would have education decisions made by classroom teachers, not by politicians in Fredericton. Today, we see that the reality is widely different. Not only is this government micromanaging the education system, but the decision-making power also seems to be within the Office of the Premier. Will the Premier commit to leaving the education questions to experts and stop politicizing our children for his own political gain?

**Hon. Mr. Hogan** (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, in response to that question, we work with teachers. Our co-chair was the Executive Director of the New Brunswick Teachers' Association. We developed the long-term recommendations in concert with a number of experts. We're going to be working with Andy Hargreaves, who's world-renowned in education, and Michael Fullan and his team to implement the long-term recommendations.

On my mortgage bill, it says William Hogan, Teacher. It doesn't say politician. It says teacher. When we work with others in the education system, we're doing it for the betterment of all our students. Apparently, the Leader of the Opposition is confused, which is not surprising. Anyway, we're going to continue to work with experts, and we're going to move forward in that fashion.

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

**Ms. Landry** (Madawaska Les Lacs-Edmundston, L): Mr. Speaker, the mental health of our children should be given top priority. The government should ensure they are adequately supported within our school system, especially considering our current shortage of school psychologists and the mental health challenges that were aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Will the Premier shift the focus from rewarding friends and neighbours with high-paying jobs to investing in schools and providing adequate mental health support through school psychologists to help our kids reach their full potential?

**Hon. Mr. Hogan** (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the question from the member opposite. I want to point out that when everything's a priority, nothing's a priority.

The mental health of our students is extremely important. I happened to come across a document the other day in reference to school psychologists. There is a need for them. Part of the challenge is that, in our country, we don't have a lot of Ph.D. students, which is the

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requirement to be a school psychologist in New Brunswick. That is set by the board of psychologists.

But I did come across a document from Brian Kenny, a former Education Minister, one I must say I deeply respect. In my 35 years of education, I think he was one of the best Education Ministers I've ever seen, and I tell him that personally, because he worked with the opposition.

We continue to work toward providing these services. We're not going to stop. When we need to put services in—

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

**Ms. Landry** (Madawaska Les Lacs-Edmundston, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Premier's lack of planning skills is real, not only in budgeting but also in the management of the school system. The issue of the new schools being overcrowded and the need to attach trailers to them due to poor planning is a clear indication of mismanagement. This situation reflects poorly on the Premier's ability to allocate resources efficiently. Can the Premier tell us whether he believes investing millions of dollars in new schools only to find them overcrowded within a few years and needing additional structures suggests serious oversight in the planning process?

**Hon. Mr. Hogan** (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, nobody on this side has a crystal ball to foresee the future, or one of us would win the lottery draw this weekend. I don't think anybody over there has a crystal ball, although I sometimes think they think they do.

Nobody predicted the massive increase in population in New Brunswick, because we are a destination, a place to be. People want to come here. As a result of that, we've increased our student population over the past two to three years by at least 12 000 students. We have them coming every week, which is great.

Portables are not ideal. I certainly would never say to build a school full of portables, but it's a temporary solution while we're building new schools. We're going to continue to provide adequate space in our system for learning.

## INFRASTRUCTURE

**Mr. C. Chiasson** (Victoria-La Vallée, L): Nobody predicted it, but they sure as heck took the credit for it, didn't they?

Mr. Speaker, it seems that this government has decided to delay the refurbishment of the Centennial Bridge again by putting off the closure for yet another year. The citizens and, obviously, this government are concerned that the eventual closure will create serious



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congestion on the King George Highway as well as the whole of downtown Miramichi. Can the Department of Transportation and Infrastructure Minister please update this House on the possibility of a northern bypass as an alternate route? Has any preliminary design work been completed, or is there any money budgeted to do so in this fiscal year?

**Hon. R. Savoie** (Miramichi Bay-Neguac, Minister responsible for the Regional Development Corporation, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm happy to finally hear that question in the hall. It has never been mentioned before, and I have been waiting for it for a long time. We know that the people from Miramichi Bay, Neguac, and the entire Miramichi are aware of and concerned about the closure of the bridge. I can tell you that the bridge won't be fully closed this year.

On the other question, there is some work being done and talk within the Department of Transportation and Infrastructure and the city of Miramichi. Hopefully, going forward, there will be some sort of resolution to alleviate the extra traffic—

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

**Mr. C. Chiasson** (Victoria-La Vallée, L): Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure has come out and said that he is supportive of the project. The Minister of Education, as well, has said that he is supportive of the project. The Minister responsible for the Regional Development Corporation has said that he can wave his magic wand and make some money appear to get this project started.

My question to the Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure is this: Have you had any discussions with the Minister responsible for the Regional Development Corporation on funding that would start the planning phase of the northern bypass this year?

**Hon. Mr. Ames** (Carleton-York, Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. It is certainly a pleasure to get up and speak about all the projects that we do at the Department of Transportation and Infrastructure. The bypass has come up again. It is certainly an interesting topic, that's for sure. It is a concern of the community and municipality of Miramichi. We have heard loudly and clearly that people are concerned that if we do close the bridge, there will be a lot of congestion on the King George Highway. Yes, we are certainly looking at that. Hopefully, we will have a good, satisfactory resolution with all parties involved.

Mr. Speaker, there is some other interesting information that we have kind of uncovered about the Centennial Bridge. If you look back at Atcon... Actually, if you are not sure about Atcon, I encourage everybody to google "Atcon" because it is important. Oh, look at that.

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

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**Mr. C. Chiasson** (Victoria-La Vallée, L): You can only ride that Atcon horse for so long. You have beat that horse to death. You guys might as well stop.

There is no money for the northern bypass, and the bridge will not be closed again this summer. Because of this government's mismanagement of this project and several others, we are now facing a \$27-million lawsuit. That is money that could have gone to start the bypass project or speed up so many projects that seem to be stalled under this government.

Can the minister please inform this House about when the people of Miramichi can expect answers on the northern bypass and when the closure will actually happen? Will it be before or after the election?

**Hon. Mr. Ames** (Carleton-York, Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Where did I leave off? Google search "Atcon", Mr. Speaker. It is actually a very important topic because—

(Interjections.)

**Hon. Mr. Ames** (Carleton-York, Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure, PC): There is a lot of chatter coming from the other side, Mr. Speaker. I would really like to explain this.

When the previous Liberal government was in power, there was a tender that went out for Centennial Bridge. There was some work to be done. Three or four companies submitted bids. The lowest bid didn't get the job. Atcon, or one of its subsidiaries, was chosen. Then, all of a sudden, coming close to an election, it was cancelled. Talk about money being spent. The lowest bidder had to sue.

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

(Interjections.)

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

## CANCER

**Mr. Coon** (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It used to be that cancer was a disease of the elderly. My grandmother died of old age in her mid-nineties. Technically, though, it was cancer. The global incidence of early-onset cancer has increased by 79%. That is cancer in people who are in their twenties, thirties, and forties. The evidence suggests that risk factors such as environmental exposures to chemicals and pollution are an important part of this, particularly when those exposures happen in early life and young adulthood.

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Improving the early-life environment for children and youth and helping parents do that must be an immediate goal to reduce the rate of cancers in people in their twenties and thirties. To do this, government needs to embrace the power of prevention, which we've built into our healthy environment bill. Can the Minister of Environment explain what he is doing to reduce the rate of early-onset cancers in this province? Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**Hon. G. Savoie** (Saint John East, Minister of Local Government; Minister of Environment and Climate Change; Minister responsible for La Francophonie, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. That is an interesting question. That, to me, would be more for the Department of Health because how we help people live healthier lives is certainly a program that I think would be better done through the Department of Health. But I know where the member opposite is coming from with his clean air Act. One of the proponents of the bill actually lives in my riding. Gordon Dalzell is a good man. I like Gordon very well.

Here is the issue, though, Mr. Speaker. The member opposite is trying to take this issue and grandstand a bit about it because he wants to try to tell everybody that the sky is falling, that everything is terrible, and that we're not doing anything. In the Department of Environment, there is a very, very, very difficult balance that is achieved every single day. That is done by making sure, on the activism side, that we're protecting our environment and, on the other side, that we're allowing development and actions to take place that will propel our communities forward. That is where the department has to be, Mr. Speaker, and it is a very difficult—

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

**Mr. Coon** (Fredericton South, Leader, G): So, a certain number of cancers in people in their twenties, thirties, and forties is acceptable to this Minister of Environment, Mr. Speaker. That is extraordinary. Young women are more likely today to get breast cancer than three decades ago. Between 1988 and 2019, the rate of breast cancer among women in their twenties increased by 45%. Risk factors for those early-onset cancers such as breast cancer include exposure to chemicals and pollutants as well as alcohol consumption increases. Government regulates the sale of alcohol, the application of chemicals such as glyphosate, and the release of pollutants into our air and water that find their way into our food. If the power of prevention were embraced, there would be less exposure to alcohol, to pesticides, and to pollution, reducing the rate of early-onset cancers in people in their twenties, thirties, and forties. Can the Minister of Environment explain why he continues to permit the release of cancer-causing chemicals onto our land and into our air and water when they are risk factors for early-onset cancer?

**Hon. G. Savoie** (Saint John East, Minister of Local Government; Minister of Environment and Climate Change; Minister responsible for La Francophonie, PC): Well, Mr. Speaker, I would suggest that the member opposite needs to pull his horns in a little bit when it comes to cancer. I had Stage 4 cancer, Mr. Speaker, and the risk factors are not simply environmental. They are genetic. My mother had cancer and other people in my family had



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cancer, which raised my risk of cancer. I got it at a younger age than my mother and other people in my family. Familial risk factors and the things that we eat also play a role in that. I will take no lessons from the member opposite on whether or not I care whether people in this province get cancer. It's not something that we need to play around with and try to politicize in this House.

Now, there are other risk factors that we need to consider, Mr. Speaker, when we talk about people's health. My father was diabetic. I have diabetes, and I got my diagnosis at a different age than he did. This is something that is a pattern of behaviour. It is not simply—

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

### EDUCATION

**Ms. Holt** (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have been really concerned by some of the things that I've heard expressed by the Minister of Education today. He is referencing conversations with teachers in Canadian Tire parking lots when he should be engaging with teachers through the schools and formal channels. Saying that we've got new students coming in every week and that it's good suggests that he doesn't understand the pressure that, every week, those new students are putting on administrators and teachers who are struggling to have the resources to deliver to them.

Every week, it is disruptive to the classroom that we don't have enough English as an Additional Language (EAL) teachers to serve their needs. We don't have enough school psychologists or guidance counsellors. We don't have enough food. We don't have enough supplies. We don't have enough portables. But this minister is saying: When we need to put services in, we'll do it. Well, you needed to put services in two years ago. Teachers, parents, and administrators are still waiting. This government refuses to provide the education system with the resources it needs, starting with the teachers that our students deserve. When will he actually deliver for teachers in New Brunswick?

**Hon. Mr. Hogan** (Carleton, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, is the Leader of the Official Opposition suggesting that immigrants to our province are a problem? I speak to teachers every day. I have all kinds of friends who are teachers. Just because I speak to one in the Canadian Tire parking lot does not make it any less valuable than visiting Harvey Elementary School, like I did on Monday. I talked to a long-time friend of mine who happens to be the principal there. We served on the board of directors of the New Brunswick Teachers' Association.

I understand, and so do a couple of members on the other side, that teaching is a challenging position. We try our very best to provide all the resources necessary to meet the needs of teachers and students—well, meet the needs of teachers so that they can meet

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the needs of students—in our schools on a daily basis. When we need to, we provide extra resources.

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

[Translation]

### LEGISLATION

**Ms. Holt** (Bathurst East—Nepisiguit—Saint-Isidore, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[Original]

I've got to say that the discourse in the House this week is frustrating. I wonder what the people of Miramichi are thinking about after the Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure's response to their sincere concerns about the state of the bridge and the state of the northern bypass. He played games about Atcon.

Yesterday, I asked a sincere question about people with disabilities and their rights, and this government took the opportunity to play games and grandstand because one member has only 13 question periods left and wanted to get up and have fun giving a speech. This government committed to making things right for people with disabilities with an amendment to the *Employment Standards Act*. This House provided royal assent to that bill back in 2022, but it has yet to be proclaimed. I'm going to give the government a chance to answer the question again. Can the Premier explain the delay in proclaiming this work that this House approved?

**Hon. Mr. Higgs** (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Thank you for the question. I think that the Leader of the Opposition would know that this Act has to be proclaimed at the end of this session. It will be moving forward in that regard. We also have an accessibility Act coming forward in this session, based on the recommendations of the committee. So, Mr. Speaker, we are moving forward in real terms on that file, and I am proud to say that the team has worked very hard to come up with recommendations that can be implemented over time. That's been an ongoing focus for us.

I don't see any downside here as we work on that file and find ways to improve the activity on that file so that it has a program in place and we can keep it moving. As part of that, we look at the structure of how it is set up in order to make sure that we don't lose sight going forward. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

