

EVENING SITTING

COMMITTEE OF FINANCE

General Revenue Fund
Environment and Resource Management
Vote 26

Item 1

Mr. McLane: — Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Mr. Minister, welcome to you and your officials.

Just a couple of brief questions and those pertain to our water in Saskatchewan, in particular I think the term that you would use would be surface water — talked about wells. I'm wondering what your department, Mr. Minister, is doing in terms of ensuring that our water system is safe, given the continuing upward trend of chemicals in this province.

And also, with the arrival of large hog operations, and the concern that of course has been raised south of the border in terms of a safe water supply, what role does your department play in that area to ensure that our groundwater is safe and indeed safe for us to drink?

Hon. Mr. Scott: — Thank you, Mr. Vice-Chairman. I would like to, if I might, also introduce another official that is here this evening — Donna Kellsey, director of financial and administrative services.

I thank the hon. member for the question. Certainly water quality, which we all depend on, is very important and we do work very closely with communities in monitoring water. And if problems are suspected or detected, we are quick to work with the communities to resolve these issues. And you're correct in saying that there's always new chemicals on the market, new industry — in this case potential hog barns.

We have with Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food developed very stringent guidelines for the development of hog barns and in fact it may require an environmental assessment. We just compared our guidelines with those of Manitoba and Alberta and we feel that we have more stringent guidelines than our neighbouring provinces. But none the less we have to be very vigilant in monitoring our water and certainly whether it's small communities or even farmers that have potential problems, we will do whatever we can to help them out.

Mr. McLane: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. Could you maybe in a little more detail tell me, number one, in the area of a community that has dugout water for example, does your department play any role there in regular monitoring of the water and testing of the water? And as well with many towns that have wells that supply water to the community, a lot of those are quite often near undesirable locations. Do you do any regular checking of those water supplies or is it up to the community to ensure on their own that the water supply is indeed safe for the people that live there?

Hon. Mr. Scott: — We have a process whereby every community is required to at least once a year, preferably more

often depending on the size of the community and where it's located, to submit water samples to the government and they are tested through the provincial health lab.

As far as dugout water, if a community is relying on dugout water — or a farm — we would certainly provide the service for testing that water as well. So also we certify the town foremen and workers to monitor their wells and sewage lagoons and we work with them and there's a certification process whereby the workers are more informed all the time as well.

Mr. McLane: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. Is there a cost associated with that to the communities? Do they pay for the annual testing?

Hon. Mr. Scott: — The only cost incurred by the communities would be the actual getting the sample and getting it into the provincial health lab and I believe it's been a long-standing tradition where the testing is done free and the results are reported back to the community.

Mr. McLane: — Now if the communities choose, Mr. Minister, to test semi-annually or four times a year, does that same apply there in terms of cost?

Hon. Mr. Scott: — That is correct.

Mr. McLane: — In terms of the hog operations, can you tell me what role your department plays, Mr. Minister, in the monitoring of hog operations in terms of water supply. I'll give you an example possibly where a hog facility is being built or located. A neighbouring farmer or a resident has a problem or a concern about their water. What's the process there?

Hon. Mr. Scott: — With the hog barn scenario, there's a number of conditions that are in place through the Department of Agriculture and Food before a barn may be established. For an example, groundwater would be a concern, if it is an issue, that would be taken into consideration, and the site may be rejected on that basis.

Also proponents of the projects are actually offering to put in monitoring wells next to lagoons. And because this is a new industry, we want to make sure that we are taking every safeguard possible and available to ensure that there aren't problems.

And in fact if it is a large project and there's some considerable or some public concern, we can require an environmental impact assessment in addition to the regulations in place through the Department of Agriculture.

Mr. McLane: — Thank you, Minister. In terms of an ongoing safety precaution after the facility, the hog operation, has been established, under whose jurisdiction does it become then to ensure that the surrounding groundwaters are maintained at a safe level?

Hon. Mr. Scott: — In large hog barn operations monitoring wells are required near lagoons and such like and those reports

are relayed to us at a regular basis. A smaller operation where perhaps there's no monitoring wells, if there was any indication of a problem from a nearby farm or community we would be quick to take action to resolve the problem.

Mr. McLane: — Thank you. Of course there's also the problem of the disposal of the waste from these hog operations. What happens if the product is being hauled 5 miles from the location of the industry? Whose jurisdiction and whose responsibility is it then to ensure that someone else's groundwater isn't being affected through seepage or through the ground, through a creek? A 7-inch rain can do a lot of things. Tell me who's responsible and who covers that off. Is it your department or Health or where does it lie?

Hon. Mr. Scott: — Manure management is part of the overall licensing of these hog barns. The proponent would need to indicate where the land would be located, where the manure would be disposed of, and Department of Agriculture and Food would be responsible for monitoring the disposal and make sure it's put at the right place at the right time. And again if there's a problem we would do what we could to resolve it along with the proponent and the Department of Agriculture.

Mr. McLane: — Thank you, Minister. For individuals then, who would bear the cost? If I as an individual think that I want my water tested — I might be 10 miles from one of these operations or I could be 10 miles from a town lagoon or anything — is there a cost associated to an individual who wants to regularly check their water quality annually? Semi-annually? And if not, who will monitor that in the event of water getting into a system that could end up 20 miles or 30 miles down the township affecting somebody's water quality? Whose jurisdiction is it to ensure that those types of things don't happen?

Hon. Mr. Scott: — Again the idea of having monitoring wells around the site — the lagoon — and perhaps the facility itself, is to detect any groundwater leakage or contamination long before it got 20 miles downstream. And the costs of controlling the effluent in the lagoons and what not is the responsibility of the proponent. If a lagoon is discovered to be leaking it's up to the proponent or the manager of the project to cover the costs of repairs.

Mr. McLane: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. The former minister of Highways, I know he's just dying to ask some questions — and his seat mate. And I wish they would come across and help me out here. But just a couple more questions, Mr. Minister.

I guess we all know what happened in Saskatchewan . . . and you keep talking about the lagoon. I guess I'm talking about in terms of where the refuse is being spread on a piece of land. Tonight we have a 7-inch rain. The water carries some of the stuff away and it goes into . . . it can go 20, 30 miles away and your test holes will do no good there because you don't have them there. Who monitors that? I guess that's the question I'm getting at.

(1915)

Hon. Mr. Scott: — Well again, Mr. Chair, the manure is part of the management plan. It must be worked into the soil very

quickly, and theoretically it would not be spread at an acceptable manner or depth on the soil, and there is always the chance of some of it washing off. But part of the plan is that it would be worked into the soil as quickly as possible. And granted there is always the potential of a 7-inch rain that may carry some of the organic fertilizer into the waterway.

Mr. McLane: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. You have to remember you're talking to an old farmer here so I . . . I don't think I'm going to get the answer I'm looking for. What I'm trying to do is, and I think I know the answer to the question I'm asking . . . and you're kind of . . . you're beating around the bush on me.

Well I'll just ask it once more and then I'll take my place and let the members . . . is somebody has to be responsible for our water. And the question will be, is it your department that's responsible for groundwater in Saskatchewan?

Hon. Mr. Scott: — To give you a straightforward answer, yes it is our department responsible for the monitoring and basically looking after groundwater. We also work very closely with Saskatchewan Research Council, who have a network of monitoring wells throughout the province and we are able to look at long-term changes in groundwater flows and potential contaminants. So we feel we have the best handle on the situation as possible, realizing that groundwater is very important to many of us here in Saskatchewan.

Ms. Julé: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. Good evening, Minister, and good evening to your officials. Mr. Minister, just moments ago you were speaking to my colleagues about . . . with my colleague rather, about the quality of groundwater. And I think that it has been brought to your attention and certainly the attention of the people in Saskatchewan through the news media that there is a major problem with this at St. Denis in Saskatchewan. And I know that you have commented on this, from the media. And they have mentioned that you made some remarks on this.

Apparently there is a hog barn within that vicinity and there is increased sludge evident in the groundwater and it's obvious that the quality of this water is deteriorating. So I would like to know what is being done in this particular instance, if you could let me know what the minister, what his department, are doing and what the responsibility is to respond to this kind of a crisis.

Hon. Mr. Scott: — Thank you very much for the question. I'm sorry I do not have the details on this specific case, but if we could get the information from you, we'd be very glad to provide you a formal, written response.

I can say that since 1974 we have had the livestock pollution control Act, which has been recently replaced by the . . . I can't remember the title from last year but new legislation and it is certainly . . . if there is a potential or actual pollution from a hog barn or any other operation, we would be very pleased to look into it. I'm sorry I don't have the particulars here but if we could get that from you later.

Ms. Julé: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. I'd be pleased to get the details of the situation for you.

I noted from just listening to the news on TV regarding the situation that a number of the residents in and around St. Denis are saying that it looks as though their only option is now to have water hauled in from Saskatoon or from some other source in order to ensure that they have got good drinking water. So I'm a little bit concerned about that and I was hoping that maybe you had more details so that we could see what was going to be done. But I will try to compile them for you and bring them to you, and I just would like to make sure that the concern of these residents are being answered.

Along another line, Mr. Minister, is there some legislation in place right now that ensures that topsoil is not being eroded because of water drainage through fields? Is there something in an environment Act?

I understand that someone referred this to me, and they know of situations where there is a great deal of water being funnelled through certain areas of land, and apparently there is some legislation that they know of, through the Department of Environment, that really requires that this does not happen — that topsoil is not being unnecessarily eroded. And I was just wondering if you could maybe comment on whether there is anything like that in legislation.

Hon. Mr. Scott: — Thank you for that question. We don't have any specific legislation to prevent soil erosion on farm land.

We all know that it's a very detrimental effect on the land, whether it's wind or water erosion, and many landowners of course are taking steps to reduce erosion with the planting of trees, putting erodible land in a permanent cover and something very successful is continuous cropping and zero till.

It is illegal to drain water onto somebody else's land without a permit which may result in water erosion, and that would be under the department . . . or Sask Water, but soil erosion is a very big concern here in the Prairies. But I think many landowners, realizing this, don't want their soil to erode away. It decreases the value of their property and also the production; so there are a number of things landowners are doing. But as far as legislation to prevent soil erosion, there isn't such a thing.

Ms. Julé: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. Along one more line, what is available to persons in the province that recognize or have some evidence that there are toxic wastes and so on being dumped into the river? Where should they report this, and how can they make sure that this does not continue, as it is certainly a grave concern to many citizens.

Hon. Mr. Scott: — Certainly the illegal dumping of toxic wastes or pollutants into waterways is totally illegal, and if anyone knows of this happening, contact your local conservation officer or my office right here in Regina. This is of great concern if this is happening. We do have basically very good cooperative arrangements with industry, where effluents are being disposed of, where strict monitoring is in place. So if there is illegal dumpage, we want to know about it.

Ms. Julé: — That's all the questions I have. So if any one of my colleagues would like to present more questions, the floor is

theirs.

Mr. D'Autremont: — Mr. Deputy Chair of committees, I'd like to welcome the minister and his officials here this evening. You received, Mr. Minister, a letter from some people in my constituency dated May 1, so it's a very recent letter and hopefully you'll be familiar with it. It comes from the Antler River Outfitters and Blaine Hjertaas. Now I don't know if you know Blaine, but you probably know — I'm not sure if it's his brother or his cousin who works for the Department — so one of the two, I'm not sure. I'm not sure if it's a brother or cousin. But you probably know some of his other relatives also.

But what Blaine is writing about is an alternative to some of the hunting that is being carried out today. It would be of benefit to the local area, to the local landowners; it would be of benefit to wildlife depredation because it would eliminate a few more animals; and it would be of significant benefit to the government because there would be more taxes spent and collected by the government in our area. What he's talking about is opening up the south area of the province to non-Canadian hunters. And right now I'm not sure where the boundary line lies; it may be No. 1 Highway; it was at one time; it may be further north than that, I'm not sure.

But in our particular area non-Canadians are not allowed to hunt in our area, and they're proposing that the area be opened up. I'd like to read you a part of one paragraph just to familiarize yourself a little bit with it. And I quote:

As you are aware, the problem becomes worse each year as more wild lands are converted to agricultural production. The remaining habitat has to support additional deer populations, exacerbating the problem for landowners. The landowners pay the entire cost of supporting this resource and receive very limited compensation. We believe that if nothing is done to address the problem, the existing wildlife habitat will very quickly be converted, and there will be large scale die-off due to the lack of habitat. Within a few years, hunting as we have known it will be lost for ever.

So, Mr. Minister, it's not that they are trying to wipe out the deer herds in our area. If that was the case, there would be a very significant effort needed to do that because deer are almost like vermin in our area. And if you ask most landowners with livestock, they will tell you they are vermin. But most of us enjoy the wildlife and like to see it protected and harvested in a proper manner to everyone's benefit.

Unfortunately though, Mr. Minister, the wildlife, because it has been reproducing so quickly, is becoming a serious problem . . . (inaudible interjection) . . . Well there isn't any moose . . . or I shouldn't say there isn't any. It's a rare moose in our area, although they do travel back and forth between the Moose Mountains and the Turtle Mountains in Manitoba. I think the moose that we do see are mainly Manitoba moose that are trying to head back home. Even the moose are leaving; they can't afford the taxes here.

Mr. Minister, what they're proposing to do is bring in U.S. (United States) hunters and possibly others, but he specifically

talked about U.S. hunters; that they would charge a fee which is probably comparable to the going rate, \$2,500 for a five-day hunt . . . (inaudible interjection) . . . Yes, it's a significant amount of money, but they're prepared to pay those kind of dollars to come to hunt here because we do have record animals here for them to hunt. And a significant portion of that money would be returned to the landowners, based on the amount of habitat they have on their particular pieces of land, because this is mainly agricultural land. The people who would be doing the outfitting and the guiding obviously would be paid for it, but approximately two-thirds of that \$2,500 would be returned to the landowners.

So, Mr. Minister, are you familiar with the letter? Are you familiar with Mr. Hjertaas's project that he's trying to get off the ground and the proposal for a pilot project for the area to see how it would work out? Have you made any determinations on this kind of proposal?

(1930)

Hon. Mr. Scott: — I'll thank the hon. member for the question. I haven't received a letter yet, though I do know Blaine. And I'm familiar with what his ideas are, and I certainly respect those ideas.

Most recently, the wildlife diversification task force, which consisted of a couple of dozen agencies, organizations around the province such as SARM (Saskatchewan Association of Rural Municipalities) and the wildlife federation, said no to American hunters in southern Saskatchewan, American big game hunters and outfitting. The American outfitting hunters are restricted to the forest area of the northern part of the province. There's a number of reasons for this. The local hunters view that the land would be tied up; the best habitat would be tied up by American outfitting.

But at the same time we realize the significant contribution that landowners make towards wildlife. And that is why we have a very successful waterfowl crop damage program, and we've implemented the big game damage compensation program this year to help the landowners out. And we've got a number of programs, such as conservation easements, which we want to get up and running to reward the landowners for keeping habitat on their land.

So I will look forward to Mr. Hjertaas's letter and will be responding to him.

Mr. D'Autremont: — Well thank you, Mr. Minister. Perhaps I should read another sentence or two from Mr. Hjertaas's letter, because he goes on to talk about the concerns that local hunters have. "We think this will retain wildlife habitat for all of us and keep our environment healthy. Local hunters will have access to private land which will have habitat on it to sustain white-tailed deer."

As is probably happening in your area or certainly happening in my area — I know it's happening up in the member for Moosomin's constituency — more and more farmers are pushing the bush off of their land to try and produce from that land agricultural crops. When that happens, Mr. Minister,

you're very aware that there are no white-tailed deer left on that land if they push every stick of bush off of it.

Now we are coming to the point where we have some alternatives. Either farmers in a lot of cases are going to push that bush because they need every dollar just to survive, or we can have some lands with wildlife habitat on it that pays some kind of a return to the landowner, and continue to have our resources.

And it's not too far into the distant future that we're going to have to make that choice. We're either going to have habitat and wildlife or we're not, because farmers need the land to produce some income for themselves. And you have the opportunity to have some direct input into that and make some long-term recommendations and provide some long-term solutions, Mr. Minister.

If you move to provide the wildlife federation's membership with access to private land, as is currently the case, in short order, 20 years at the very most, there will be very little habitat in southern Saskatchewan. People will be going up to the forest fringe to hunt, and if all the hunters in southern Saskatchewan have to go to the forest fringe, there is going to be very few animals left in that forest fringe or there is going to be a very small hunter turnout. And then your department is going to be in serious trouble because you're not going to be getting the revenues you need to support the wildlife.

So you have a choice, Mr. Minister, and I'd like to hear your thoughts on this because there is a move and a need to allow more hunters in to have access. Either our local hunters are going to have to start providing some form of compensation to the agricultural producers of this province for the habitat they have on their land or there will be no habitat.

Hon. Mr. Scott: — Well I just said we are doing a number of programs to compensate landowners. We have the big game damage program most recently, and conservation easements.

And the way wildlife management is operated in Saskatchewan and in Canada, it's a publicly owned resource. And I don't think anybody is prepared to have wildlife privatized, at least here in the south part of the province. And if an American hunter is going to come in and hunt on a farm, for \$2,500 probably he won't want two or three other people stumbling around to spoil his hunt and that land would be posted and resident hunters would be excluded. And once that door is open, the people on the wildlife diversification task force are very sceptical and scared about it and they were not prepared to allow outfitting, as you suggest, in the south and the people of Saskatchewan are not prepared.

But we also recognize that landowners do make a great contribution to wildlife and many of the people do keep habitat on their land. And I have more faith in landowners that the habitat will not all be destroyed; and by helping them out with compensation, conservation easements, and other programs, we will be able to ensure that we do have a good balance here in agriculture Saskatchewan.

Mr. D'Autremont: — Well, Mr. Minister, I think you can keep

your faith that agriculture producers won't push the land, and if you drive around with blinkers on you can remain that faithful to that. But you drive down into our country with your eyes open and you are going to see a lot of bush being pushed every year. And that bush is being pushed in a lot of cases by good Saskatchewan wildlife members.

People who proudly display their membership are the guys that are pushing the bush, Mr. Minister, because they have to make a living too. Because the wildlife on their land returns nothing to them but a headache. Because it's eating their crops and it's eating their hay that they have stored and their grain that they have stored, with little or no compensation. And, Mr. Minister, that frustration is going to only grow.

Why when you say the American hunter isn't prepared to come into here to hunt white-tailed deer and pay those kind of fees to have a local hunter along side of him, when he pays exactly those kind of fees to have the local hunter hunting along side of him in the North. There's no difference. When he's out after that moose, the local hunter is out there just as much as he is. There's no difference, Mr. Minister, whether he's hunting moose at Hudson Bay or he's hunting white-tailed deer down at Carnduff. It's the same thing, Mr. Minister; they both have access to that land. The American hunter and his guide — the guide can keep other guided hunts out of there, but he can't keep the local hunters out; he can't keep the native hunters out; he can't keep the Metis hunters out. Everyone else has access along with that American hunter. The only others that are excluded are other guided hunters.

It would be the same thing down in the South, Mr. Minister. Americans used to be allowed to come in and hunt. They're allowed to come and hunt birds. It's only the big game animals that they are restricted to the North.

And certainly the northern people have a vested interest in trying to ensure that big game hunting is not allowed in the South because that forces it all north. The wildlife members in Regina and Saskatoon have a vested interest in ensuring that no out-of-province hunters can hunt in the South because that allows them better access.

Hon. Mr. Scott: — Well we have a very interesting discussion going here, and I find it passing strange that the member opposite is, I guess, so critical of our wildlife federation members. Wildlife federation members have signed up well over a hundred thousand acres of land voluntarily without getting a penny through Acres for Wildlife and Wildlife Tomorrow.

And again the member relies on all of the good points of the American hunter. It's the Saskatchewan hunter that stays here and farms, provides job opportunities, pays taxes, contributes to the big game damage compensation program, works with landowners on conservation easements, and so on and so forth; feeds deer in the wintertime. It's not the American hunter that . . . maybe he'll pay \$2,500 but he's only after the big buck, the cream of the crop. And American hunting will do very little, if anything, to reduce the number of deer. They aren't going to shoot a fawn or a doe and take it home and hang the head on the wall — they want a trophy buck.

And our Saskatchewan hunters I believe, need that opportunity first and foremost. And granted right now we do have a fairly high deer population or at least we did until the last couple of years. And we are able to manage this through regulations of adjusting seasons, and so on and so forth, and I believe our wildlife management is next to none. And that is why the American hunters want in here in the first place.

Mr. D'Autremont: — Well, Mr. Minister, when you talk about a hundred thousand acres having been contributed through the wildlife federations, you're talking of a hundred thousand acres out of 50 million acres — very small, small portion. Certainly it's important to have that. But for those farmers that farm around that particular piece of wildlife land, it's a serious problem for them and you know well, Mr. Minister.

If the American hunter is only going to come in and take big bucks he's . . . Mr. Hjertaas is talking of 20 hunters — 20 hunters. If he takes 20 animals out of the area, what kind of an impact? And that is if. He's talking 20 hunters for five days would return \$9.92 an acre to the landowners in that area — \$9.92 for every acre of bush they have, not for the cultivated land. That encourages them to keep their bush land and not tear it up, because it costs them money obviously to tear it up.

But you, Mr. Minister, are not prepared to accept that.

Hon. Mr. Scott: — That's right.

Mr. Toth: — Thank you, Mr. Deputy Chairman. Mr. Chairman, I find it very interesting that the current minister, who is one of the real pains in the backside of the former government when it came to wildlife enhancement, is now all of a sudden quite protectionist in some degrees; and in some other areas it's interesting, some of his views.

I want to commend the minister for his views on uranium development in the province of Saskatchewan. I certainly think that's an economic benefit, and I think the economy certainly has a major role sometimes to play. And it's funny how members with certain political persuasions can all of a sudden change when the green bucks start floating by. But we'll get off the uranium and back to wildlife.

Mr. Minister, my colleague was just talking about offering people the opportunity to be guides in southern Saskatchewan. One of the things that has been a problem, and this past winter was still a problem, is wildlife damage.

And you're quite familiar, I think, with the letter from the ADD (agriculture development and diversification district) board, the District 5 ADD Board, and the problems that arose in their area as individuals became frustrated with your department — not the local conservation officers, although it ended up with a problem with the conservation officer. But some of the difficulties that were associated in some of the understandings that they thought they had with the department as to how to manage wildlife population or deer damage on their properties, specifically in their feedlots.

I'm wondering, Mr. Minister, what your department is doing to

address this for the long term. Not the short term, because it's maybe here, maybe gone for a couple of years, but then it's back — it's a cyclical thing. What's your department doing to address wildlife damage in the long term for individuals that tend to have an ongoing problem with wildlife damage to especially feed stocks more so than crops.

Hon. Mr. Scott: — Well I appreciate the question, and in fact when we met with the District 7 ADD Board, which the member refers to, a year ago, just over a year ago, we adopted a number of their recommendations such as allowing hunters to drive in fields with written permission. We also extended the seasons. We also provide permanent fences for landowners which incur continuous damage. Some farmers are happy to take these fences; we supply the material free of charge. And others have, through their own choice, refused them. That is their choice. But if they refuse these fences the question is, should the taxpayers be compensating them for their loss of haystacks?

So we are prepared to work with landowners and we will continue to do so. And again, having the crop damage program in place was a very successful program this year and something that the District 7 ADD Board had asked for as well.

(1945)

Mr. Toth: — Mr. Minister, this year you came up with \$11 . . . I believe they call it depredation fee, to hunters. And I'm wondering, Mr. Minister, what were the number of licences issued in the 1995 year for big game? What were the number of licences issued . . . how many in the 1996?

Hon. Mr. Scott: — I don't have the exact figure here but I believe in 1975 . . . or in 1995 we sold about 7,600 white-tailed deer licences, and this past year it's about 66 and we can get you the exact figures if you so desire.

There was a number of factors which contributed to the reduced number of white-tailed licences sold this year. One being an early snowfall in November which plugged many back roads and it was very cold. And many hunters just said, to heck with it; I'm not going out hunting. We also had the court case with the Metis situation where Metis hunters did not have to purchase licences. And we did expect 5 to 10 per cent drop in licence sales because of the \$11 licence.

And that \$11 does go strictly towards crop damage prevention; it does not go to general revenue. It's an ear-marked fund and many people are very pleased to know that that \$11 is going towards what it is to be used for.

And we've also put \$2 million into the fund this year and we're looking for another \$2 million from the federal government to top it up. We do expect upwards of a million and a half dollars in claims this year.

Mr. Toth: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. Mr. Minister, you mentioned . . . your last comment was I think you said you're expecting about a million and a half dollars in claims. Is that . . . when you look at those claims . . . and I think part of the thing you'll find, Mr. Minister, if I'm not mistaken, when a person makes a claim there's a 500 deductible on that claim.

And going by memory on the basis of one individual that talked to me, he had a conservation officer out, looked at some damage in a haystack where they had estimated about a thousand dollars worth of loss. The conservation officer said, by the time you pay your \$500, and then there was another nominal fee there, you're left with about \$250. The individual said, well why should I waste my time and effort to even apply for that.

So how many . . . when you're talking 1.5 million, my guess is there may be a lot of producers, because of the restrictions you have in place, really don't take the time and won't take the time to submit a claim for loss because of what's happened in the past.

And I guess I would like to know is . . . what has your department done to inform individuals as to what is available and the fact that they will actually see some valuable dollars versus just a token appreciation for their bringing this concern to your attention?

Hon. Mr. Scott: — Well commodity prices do change, and this happened — as a good example — last fall. When we initiated the pay-out on hay losses, we set it at \$50 a tonne. And because of the long, cold winter and the shortage of food, hay was worth a lot more than that, so we in fact bumped it up to 70, \$75 a tonne.

We recognize that this is a first year of operation for the fund, and we'll be looking at fine-tuning it to make the fund more fair to landowners who experience damage — and particularly with hay crops. At the same time we'll be hopefully fixing these problems permanently by providing permanent fences to landowners that experience annual damage.

Mr. Toth: — Mr. Minister, before I forget, we sent off a series of global questions awhile back, and I'm wondering if you have the answers, responses to those global questions or if your department's received them. We want to make sure you've received them, and as well, when can we expect to receive responses to them?

I see some puzzled looks. Is that an indication that the questions haven't arrived?

Hon. Mr. Scott: — I can assure the hon. member that as soon as we get the questions through the system that you will get a response, and we'll do that as quickly as possible.

Mr. Toth: — Mr. Minister, when you're saying through the system, you do have the question on hand? You just . . .

Hon. Mr. Scott: — I don't believe they've reached our department yet, but we'll be pleased to do a check on that and see where they are at.

Mr. Toth: — That's interesting because about three weeks or a month ago I signed a number that I was responsible for, departments. I'm surprised that you wouldn't have received yours because I think our staff are pretty efficient at getting them out. So we'll double check, and we'll make sure we at least get another copy off to you if they got lost in the mail

sorting or whatever. But you should have had them.

And when you're responding to those questions, we'd like you as well to give us a list of the amount of travel conducted by yourself on ministerial duties this year, including all officials, MAs (ministerial assistant), that were with you and all expenses incurred, if you wouldn't mind providing that as well with the global questions that we're sending to you, Mr. Minister.

Mr. Minister, I'm not going to take a lot more time here tonight, but I just was going to ask you . . . one of the big questions and concerns over the past number of years has been the underground storage tanks. I'm wondering where we sit today regarding that. And has your department been able to come to an understanding with a number of people, and certainly communities and local governments, in regards to how they deal with underground storage tanks. In view of the fact that a number of these facilities aren't really creating a problem for anyone, I wonder where we sit today and what's being done?

Hon. Mr. Scott: — I can tell the hon. member that the whole issue of underground fuel storage tanks has come a long way since he and his colleagues introduced the legislation about eight or ten years ago.

We've made a number of amendments in making it more palatable, more practical for operators. And in fact 85 per cent of the service station owners have complied with the new regulations. And basically if your tank isn't leaking, you want to put in a \$200 monitoring well, your tank can stay in the ground. There are some areas of concern where groundwater is close to the surface. And we are still working with a few individuals, but we've come a long way.

And of course there's a whole issue of abandoned sites. And we've put together a task force to deal with that, and they'll be reporting to us very shortly as to the recommendations. Again, we have stakeholders from various areas of the public, and we will be getting that report to see what we do with orphan sites and other problem areas.

Mr. Toth: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. I'm pleased to hear that you're at least consulting and working together with groups and individuals on this issue because it's become a contentious issue. And certainly even locally I know a number of situations where people walked away from . . . basically they hadn't paid for the property and just handed over the keys and said, here it is. They didn't want to deal with it because of the fact that if you were to look at it, if there were any problems there, it would probably go back 30 years to owners that had been there, the fifth owner before this or previous to.

So it was an issue that needed to be discussed in view of the fact that a lot of people entered into sales agreement under one set of regulations. Then they changed on them and they had no knowledge prior to.

One other question I want to raise — and I've raised this before in question period — is the whole question, matter, of Metis hunting. And it's a concern to a lot of people. It's certainly been a concern in our area. And I just want to have you reaffirm, Mr. Minister, that your department actually has a handle on it.

The concern along our area is that there may be hunters from the Manitoba side actually hunting in our area. And I'm not exactly sure if you can say they are or aren't because an imaginary boundary line, for someone just to come in and shoot an animal and leave, it's pretty hard to tell whether or not they have or haven't.

But what are you doing to address that concern out there? I know in the Hudson Bay area, one conservation officer suggested it is bad. Not only are there a lot of Metis hunters out there; we've seen a substantial increase in the reporting of trafficking of wildlife. And I suppose he'd be making that based on a number of the calls that they would get.

And so there's very serious concern. I think it's important and imperative that the ruling by the judge certainly is appealed and looked into. Is that process under way, and what else is the department doing to address this concern?

Hon. Mr. Scott: — You raised a very valid concern among a number of people, and that's the whole well-being of our wildlife resource. The member is quite correct in saying that Metis, as of the recent court decision last fall, as well as treaty Indians, can cross the Manitoba-Saskatchewan boundary and hunt on either side of the border legally.

As the member knows, the province of Saskatchewan has appealed the decision called the Grumbo decision, and that appeal will be in the courts in June. So we will wait until after that appeal to see where things are at.

But in the meantime we are working with the Metis Nation groups as well as the Indian bands, first nations, to better manage, better control . . . to give us more opportunity to see what the harvest is in particular areas. And certainly the well-being of our resource is very important to everyone.

And you make mention to the trafficking of wildlife. We are strongly opposed to that, and we've put more enforcement, more officers, on to cracking down on the trafficking of wildlife. We simply will not tolerate trafficking of wildlife. And again if anybody suspects this is happening, we urge them to call our TIP (Turn in Poachers) line or contact the local conservation officer.

Mr. Toth: — Well thank you, Mr. Minister. I don't have really any other questions at this time, other than to thank you and your officials then. Maybe one other question. Is that why all the conservation officers appeared in our area . . .

Ms. Julé: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. I have had a couple more questions brought to my attention, and I hope we can just get right to the point with them and make them quick because our House Leader is trying to ensure that the Education critic has got ample time to present his questions.

Mr. Minister, I understand that the contract for printing of the fishing licence and other game licences is being contracted, in fact, out of this province. Is that true?

Hon. Mr. Scott: — That is correct. Under the western Canada

accord, for any printing job over \$10,000, we have to advertise across western Canada. And that firm came in with the lower bid. It met the credentials of western Canada accord. But seeing that they were late this year, they may not meet it next year.

Ms. Julé: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. I'm just concerned about economic opportunity for people within Saskatchewan and find it quite amazing that no one in Saskatchewan could match the bid.

But I'd like to be able to present another question to you. I have had it brought to my attention, by a taxidermist just north of my constituency in fact, that there was a great delay in their receiving of permits so that they could ship items associated with taxidermy to the United States. The delay has caused some anger on the part of the taxidermists and their customers in the U.S. Now I'm wondering why such a delay in them receiving these permits?

Hon. Mr. Scott: — We would appreciate receiving the details, but of course when you're crossing international borders, probably the import country was more concerned about the issue than we were in Saskatchewan because we knew the background. And there's a whole bunch of legislation, the Lacey Act and other pieces of legislation, which has to be cleared. But if you would like to give us the details, we would get you more specific answers.

Ms. Julé: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. In fact I asked what their understanding of this delay was, and they said that they understood that it was the printing was being delayed and taking . . . you know, that whole issue of where the permits were being printed was causing the delay. So this is why the two questions, one associated with the other. So I thank you.

Mr. Belanger: — Thank you, Mr. Deputy Chair. I just want to share with the minister the letter I referred to earlier in estimates, before 5, a letter from the chairman of the co-management board, Green Lake, Mr. Gilbert McKay; and also a letter from the trappers that are concerned addressed to Mr. McKay. So I will forward that letter to you.

And also to make a point in reference to the recent decision on McArthur River mine — that we're sincerely and consistently looking at the services in northern Saskatchewan to make sure that SERM is not affected because if we're going to have a lot of mining activity, what you don't want to do is have environmental resource management positions be withdrawn from an area where we have heavy activity in mining.

So we're certainly hoping that the result of the positive news with the McArthur River, that your department will no longer cut any services or transfer any positions or facilities out of northern Saskatchewan to any other location within the North or out of the North for that fact. Thank you.

The Chair: — While we're waiting for the minister to formulate his response, I thank the hon. member for Athabasca for not taking issue when I referred to him as the member for Cumberland. Both Cumberland and Athabasca are beautiful parts of this province, and of course we just had the member for Athabasca make a statement and ask for a question.

Hon. Mr. Scott: — Well thank you very much for this material. We will respond to you.

And also for your information, we're moving the whole uranium operation of the department up to La Ronge so it is closer to the North, closer to where the actual mining is occurring. And we're looking forward to this opportunity.

Item 1 agreed to.

Items 2 to 12 inclusive agreed to.

Vote 26 agreed to.

**Supplementary Estimates 1996-97
General Revenue Fund
Budgetary Expense
Environment and Resource Management
Vote 26**

Items 1 to 5 inclusive agreed to.

Vote 26 agreed to.

Hon. Mr. Scott: — Thank you, Mr. Vice-Chair. I'd like to thank the hon. members for some very good questions, a wide cross-section of questions, and I appreciate their interest and concern for the Department of Environment and Resource Management.

(2000)

**Supplementary Estimates 1996-97
General Revenue Fund
Budgetary Expense
Legislation
Vote 21**

The Chair: — I'll invite the minister to introduce his official.

Hon. Mr. Nilson: — I'm pleased to have with me this evening, Darcy McGovern from the Department of Justice.

Item 3 agreed to.

**General Revenue Fund
Legislation
Vote 21**

Item 8

Mr. Krawetz: — Thank you, Mr. Deputy Chair. One question to the Minister: Mr. Minister, when the freedom of information officer — I'm not sure what his title really is — when he is or she is on holidays there doesn't seem to be anyone there who can continue issuing the freedom of information requests. And as an opposition party we find this very inconvenient. And I'm wondering if you have a solution in mind that would ensure that the process can continue all year long.

Hon. Mr. Nilson: — Well I think the answer to this is that when he is away on vacation he still has support staff in his office. And they're able to reach him; so that if there is an

urgent question he can be reached. But if it's not an urgent matter, well then it may wait until he comes back. We have looked at this and I've talked with him directly about this question and he didn't realize that there was any problem with that. But practically, he does have support staff who are available and he said he was available by telephone wherever he was on his vacation. So that's one part of that.

The other part of it was we are looking at, well should there be some kind of a back-up person that's available when he isn't around. And we're looking at possibly whether that role could be fulfilled by another officer of the legislature, like the Ombudsman. So we're looking at some other possibilities.

But practically, I think that right now the only time that there may be a real clear problem if there was an appeal that needed to be dealt with immediately. But the nature of these things that happen under the freedom of information Act, they often have more time involved with them and can usually work their ways around vacation schedules.

Mr. Krawetz: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. Everyone should have a holiday and I agree that the person needs to get away from work. But yet the directive that has to be there for staff has to ensure then that the process doesn't become bogged down. As an opposition we found that it's become a little bogged down. We appreciate the fact that you are aware of the problem, that you're looking at the possible solutions, and we encourage you to ensure that the process continues to move.

Item 8 agreed to.

Item 9

Mr. Toth: — Thank you, Mr. Deputy Chairman. Just a quick question to the minister; it's probably something that maybe other members have talked about as well. But in my discussion with the Conflict of Interest Commissioner over the last two years, we brought up the issue of the forms that are being . . . that have to be filled out. And it would seem to me that we've got quite a complicated, antiquated form.

There's a lot of information asked of members which I don't think originally members had a problem with, but to have to basically put the same information down on the same type of form every year, it would seem to me that once you've got a conflict of interest form filled out it would be feasible to come up with just an addendum that you could add on a yearly basis, add or delete.

I've talked to the Conflict of Interest Commissioner. He certainly has a strong feeling that way too.

It seems to me he's beginning to realize that it just . . . the way the forms currently exist just aren't really relevant. And I'm wondering what discussions have taken place and if indeed there is a process to address this concern and simplify it without taking away from the information that you require.

(2015)

Hon. Mr. Nilson: — Well we have been in discussion about

this point and I understand exactly what you're talking about. And basically the commissioner has the power to make his regulations and set up his own forms, and so officials of the Department of Justice have been talking with him to help him create a short-form, if you want to call it that, that could be an addendum. And hopefully that will be in place for next year.

Item 9 agreed to.

General Revenue Fund Post-Secondary Education and Skills Training Vote 37

Item 1

Mr. Krawetz: — Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Chair. Mr. Minister, and to your officials, welcome.

The Chair: — Order. I'm sorry, I apologize to committee members. I neglected to invite the minister to introduce his officials, and I suspect that's what you were . . .

Hon. Mr. Mitchell: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. Beside me is Dan Perrins, who is the deputy minister; behind me, Lily Stonehouse, the assistant deputy minister; beside Ms. Stonehouse is Mae Boa, who is the executive director of finance and operations. Also in the House at the back of the Assembly is Tony Antonini, of the New Careers Corporation. He's the executive director of finance and technical services; Margaret Ball, the assistant director of facilities planning; John Biss, executive director, university services; Wayne McElree, executive director, training programs; and Brady Salloom, the director of student financial assistance, here to assist the committee tonight.

Mr. Krawetz: — Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Chair. And welcome to all of the officials who were here back on April 21, I think it was, and to any of the new officials that have joined in the team.

Mr. Minister, there are a couple of questions that we didn't finish with last time around the area of job training, and the announcements regarding the *Bridges to Employment*. And at the time of the announcement, I know you had made reference to the fact that the regional colleges were going to be the group that was going to oversee the strategy in terms of implementing the strategy province wide.

When I take a look at *Estimates* and see the grant that has been allocated for regional colleges, and the fact that now you're expecting, I think, a little more from the regional colleges in terms of an effort, in terms of involvement, in terms of work, how do you see the two tying together, and indeed do you see the budget for regional colleges sufficient to carry forward the ideas that were expressed in the *Bridges to Employment* document?

Hon. Mr. Mitchell: — We think that they will have sufficient funds to carry out their new functions as well as their old ones. We think there is enough money in their budgets to be able to enable the planning and the accountability functions which are the new functions that the board must take on.

The member will recall the partnership arrangements that are planned for the regional colleges where they will involve all of the people in the community, all of the organizations in the community that have an interest in the training subject, in planning and in delivery. And that will not be a costly item, as we see it; that will be very largely a volunteer effort.

For example, where they're partnering with the oil industry in Swift Current, the planning sessions around that will not require a lot of funds to take care of. We think that the existing staff of the regional colleges will be up to the challenge, will have the time available to do it.

They will also have increased funding through ABE (adult basic education) programing and other programing in the course of time on the training side.

So we think between the money that's in the budget for planning and the increased funds for training there will be sufficient resources at the regional level for this to go forward.

Mr. Krawetz: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. Mr. Minister, at the time of the announcement you described I think, a partnership, a delivery partnership between the regional colleges and SIAST (Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology) on how the campuses . . . I'm wondering, the principal role here seems to be being played by the regional colleges. What kind of reaction have you had from SIAST and are we still talking about compatibility and indeed an effort to meet the needs of what Saskatchewan people require?

Hon. Mr. Mitchell: — Oh indeed we are. Mr. Perrins and Ms. Stonehouse have just completed visits to the four SIAST campuses over the last week. And at every place they had lively sessions, but they were positive, ranging I believe from positive to very positive. So we were quite pleased with their reaction to the training document and to the new approach that's described there.

Mr. Krawetz: — I'm very pleased to hear that, Mr. Minister. Mr. Minister, I guess in terms of a new program that comes into place and new challenges that are being met, what kind of monitoring system or accountability system are you putting in place to ensure that the new job training programs are being properly administered and indeed meeting the goals?

Hon. Mr. Mitchell: — Madam Chair, and to the member, of course we're all aware that within each region there will be a process for involving all of the so-called stakeholders — it's a term that I don't like; I imagine a bunch of people walking around holding stakes and wondering what they've got to do with training — but in any event, the interested organizations and the interested people in the community, to identify needs and prioritize needs and to bring the resources together from all the partners to meet those needs.

And these same partners who have made the plans will be the primary ones to hold the institutions, including the regional colleges, accountable for carrying out the plan. The first accountability will be at the regional level, to the very people who assessed the needs and put the plan together. That will be the first level.

And we will be consulting in the system to develop a framework which will enable the institutions to demonstrate to the province, to the government, and to the public, the effectiveness of the system and the degree to which it's working. Now that's something that has to be . . . we don't want to impose that. We want to work it out and get the consensus on the appropriate benchmarks or measures that will be used in the accounting process.

Mr. Krawetz: — One other question on the program that was put out, Mr. Minister. I think the document related to . . . it contained a section, I should say, that refers to strengthening partnerships with the first nations and the Metis people.

And I'm wondering if you have specific objectives or specific ideas as to how you can see that develop within the framework of not only northern Saskatchewan; because we're not really talking about only northern Saskatchewan, we're talking about Metis people and first nations people that are throughout the province. And how are we going to meet the special needs that seems to be indicated in your document?

Hon. Mr. Mitchell: — Madam Chair, I took a moment to be certain that I was able to give you a full answer. This is a very interesting part of the package and a very important element of it, considering the demographics of the province and the ambition of aboriginal people to get employment, become qualified for employment, and to better the quality of their lives as a result.

Their involvement in the system will be in the partnership mode and will take place at various levels. It will take place at the regional level between the regional people, including the colleges and other organizations interested in these questions, with Metis locals and tribal councils and first nations.

Then at the provincial level or the larger level with the FSIN (Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations) and with the Metis Nation of Saskatchewan. The aboriginal institutions are also important — SIFC (Saskatchewan Indian Federated College) and SIIT (Saskatchewan Indian Institute of Technologies) on the Indian side, and GDI (Gabriel Dumont Institute) and DTI (Dumont Technical Institute) on the Metis side. The member will know what those acronyms mean.

And we plan to do as much as we can, particularly with GDI and DTI and SIIT, to enrich their programing and to make some changes to try and help them offer more training programs within those institutions and perhaps enlarge their enrolment and become more vital than they have been in the past. I'm not criticizing them at all, but I think we haven't given them sufficient opportunity to spread their wings and fly here. And I think that that opportunity will emerge as part of our approach to these questions.

(2030)

There is also the question of the bilateral arrangements with the federal government respecting Pathways, both for the Indians and for the Metis. And I think everyone would be well served if those programs and our programs found a way to get closer

together. The Pathways program do use our institutions, both SIAST and the regional colleges, and that's to be expected.

But they are going . . . it would be to their best interest to become actively involved in the planning, in the needs identification, and in the various kind, of partnership arrangements that will make this program run as I expect it to.

Now we have made a considerable amount of progress with the Metis Nation on these issues, and I think we're clear on the major lines of the program; we're clear on the major elements of it, let me put it that way. And there is a high level of excitement there that should produce quite good results.

On the Indian side, we're at an earlier stage, and a good deal of work remains to be done there. But the FSIN and the tribal councils have an enormous interest in these subjects and we don't expect to have any major problems there. We think we'll be able to work out quite satisfactory arrangements.

Mr. Krawetz: — Thank you for your response, Mr. Minister. Mr. Minister, I know that you have received a copy of . . . or I should say the original letter, and I've received a copy of the letter sent to you by the Woodland Institute Students Union regarding the Saskatchewan training strategy.

And I guess there's two points that I want to raise with you, Mr. Minister. And I wasn't aware, the gentleman has indicated that the tuition for the particular courses that he was taking increased 31.57 per cent in January of '96 and then 17.39 per cent in September. Then he says another 12.08 per cent again in January of '97. So as a result his tuition hikes, to me, from first glance, seem to be astronomical.

And I'm wondering, is this accurate, that the tuition increases for a particular course at the Woodland Institute have increased that dramatically over that year and a few months?

Hon. Mr. Mitchell: — The member's figures are accurate. We haven't checked it just now as we sit here, but I think the student's numbers are accurate. And they represent increases that were agreed to as long ago as 1990 in a process involving SIAST and the students, and they laid down a plan that was a six-year plan, for a six-year plan of tuition increases, at the end of which the tuition would cover 10 per cent of the costs of the programing, so that the student's figures are quite correct. But they were not recent decisions; they were part of an old plan arrived at in 1990 that was phased over a six-year period.

Mr. Krawetz: — Mr. Minister, is there a situation that arises that costs fluctuate during the year, and therefore tuition changes can occur mid-course? It seems by the letter from this gentleman there were surprise tuition increases.

Now you seem to indicate that, you know, there was a plan that was put in place. It was a six-year plan. I would suspect that students then would know that those increases are coming about. This gentleman seems to indicate that there was really very little forewarning and that students midway through suddenly are overburdened by a tuition increase and as a result are in fact . . . he indicates that some have left the programs because they can't afford them. Could you respond to that,

please?

Hon. Mr. Mitchell: — We're going to have to investigate that, Madam Chair, and I'll get back to the member with the precise answer, perhaps with a copy of the letter that I send to the student. But our understanding of the SIAST system — and we have a good understanding of it — is that these decisions are all made in advance. They're all part of the plan here and that it was all laid down. There should have been no surprises to anybody.

There certainly couldn't be the snap kind of increase that this student complains of. That would be unprecedented. These things are, these tuition fee increases, are the subject of consideration by the board. They act on recommendations from the management of SIAST, and then the tuition fee increases are submitted to my office for final approval. And in that scenario, snap increases just aren't on. These things have to be decided way down in advance.

Mr. Krawetz: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. My colleagues are making it difficult for me to concentrate here, and yours too; I can see that. I look forward to a response, Mr. Minister, and I'll leave it at that.

At the time that the training strategy was announced, I'm on record as saying that I supported the initiatives that your government was undertaking in terms of building partnerships with business and ensuring that we move to a better training strategy and indeed skills . . . producing people with skills that are required.

The last comment that is contained in this gentleman's letter, I think further emphasizes my point. And he says, to reiterate, "The Saskatchewan training strategy is bursting with great ideas and words." But then he says, "Now we would like to see government back up their words with some real actions."

And that's the point that I raised, Mr. Minister, at the time that we were discussing the training strategy. I want to ensure that indeed we don't have a document that has been put together with a lot of thought, a lot of good ideas, a lot of plans, that collects dust. And I know that there's a three-year implementation plan and the like. And I would like to ensure that your department would indeed assure the people and this gentleman that yes, we will put some action into those policies.

Hon. Mr. Mitchell: — Yes, I will state that. The member has been quite actively involved in the various stages of the development of the strategy, as has the member from Rosthern. And no doubt that will continue in the future. And, Madam Chair, I'm going to sit down because the member's not listening to my answer anyway.

Mr. Krawetz: — Mr. Minister, it's difficult trying to listen to three people at the same time here. Mr. Minister, we've seen some restructuring around the finances for Post-Secondary. I see a new partnership developing between New Careers and in fact Social Services and Post-Secondary. Could you tell me how the plans were initiated and how we see transfers of finances from those three departments to now take care of job training?

Hon. Mr. Mitchell: — Madam Chair, this is a very good question and it's . . . I always have to go back and check the answer because it's not simple. With respect to New Careers the programs remain out there as they were but the administration is absorbed into the department and restructured in that sense. The staff of New Careers — the field staff — will be attached to the regional colleges.

The money saved from the administrative restructuring of the management of New Careers and the absorption of those functions into the department will be redirected to provide counselling services at the . . . in the regions. So that there's a shift there from management to field services, but the New Careers programming continues.

The provincial training allowances will no longer be paid by Social Services but will be paid by my department. And the basic education funding that previously was paid by Social Services is now a part of our budget at Post-Secondary Education. That in a nutshell is it, but it's not simple.

Mr. Krawetz: — Thank you for that explanation, Mr. Minister. And I guess if I see an explanation within the estimate maybe it will help me and maybe others understand. And if I could refer you to page 106 under training programs and subvote no. 4.

When I hear you say that the function of New Careers will be now within the department, is that the reason why we see the New Careers Corporation there that had a \$6 million budget last year and has a zero budget now this year, yet I see under basic education and literacy, dramatic increase of almost the same \$6 million?

So is this just a reshuffling and a realignment of the dollars; is that something you were explaining in your first response?

(2045)

Hon. Mr. Mitchell: — Mr. Chair, sorry again to take some time, but as I tried to tell the member this is not an easy trail to follow.

Referring to page 106, which is what the member was looking at, the 6 million that was opposite New Careers Corporation is, as the member guessed, included in the basic education and literacy item two lines above. So you were right — that's where that is. And that's basic education money — it was before, it is now.

And if you turn back to page 105 you will see as a result of the administrative changes that I referred to, the regional college budget is increased by an amount equal to the amount of that difference. That budget has been increased by New Careers funds.

Mr. Krawetz: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. You mentioned that Social Services funding has been allocated into the student support and employment programs. And as I see that in section no. 3 on page 104 when you made reference to the provincial training allowances, I see an increase of \$17 million there in terms of expenditure in that line.

Could you indicate to me from the Social Services budget then,

which line item in Social Services decreased the 17? Is that the income security and support? Is that where the \$17 million comes from?

Hon. Mr. Mitchell: — Yes.

Mr. Krawetz: — Thank you. Now in the New Careers Corporation as indicated in subvote no. 5, the third section, New Careers budget has virtually remained unchanged; in fact it decreased just a little bit there. What will be the role now of this particular function of New Careers? Is it still maintaining the program as it did before?

Hon. Mr. Mitchell: — The answer is yes.

Mr. Krawetz: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. Mr. Minister, in the whole rescheduling and re-targeting for students, how many students do you think will be eligible for the income-support training programs that you've instituted?

Hon. Mr. Mitchell: — For this fiscal year between 6 and 7,000, and it's projected for next year, 8,000.

Mr. Krawetz: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. Mr. Minister, one area that we've had a number of concerns raised and expressed to us by individuals is in the area of student loans. And the section that you've indicated that you have in your estimates of course is that the support for the students hasn't changed a lot in terms of student aid. The amount of dollars is very nearly the same.

Could you indicate how the numbers have changed from '95-96 to '96-97 in terms of — two points — the amount of money that was allocated for student loans and the number of students that actually qualified and obtained a student loan for those two years?

Hon. Mr. Mitchell: — In 1995-96 the amount of money allocated was 35 million. In '96-97 it is 28 million. And in 1997-98 it is projected to be 28 million. The reason for that drop is the different arrangements now. With the bank being involved, it requires less of an expenditure on our part. And the number of students are between 15 and 17,000.

Mr. Krawetz: — Thank you for those statistics, Mr. Minister. Now that the student aid has been within the Royal Bank's administration area for a full year, have you had a chance to analyse how this has worked with Royal Bank and can you tell the House what kind of changes may be necessary, if any?

Hon. Mr. Mitchell: — There was an initial break-in period in which there was some problems with the arrangement. A lot of that is because we in this province pay out on a monthly basis to students if they . . . so that they can budget appropriately. And that created different kinds of problems for the bank and it just took awhile for the system to get into effect.

It went into effect August 1 last year so we've less than a year. We don't have any numbers, like numbers of students or amount of loans or anything like that to share with you, but we can say that there have been no complaints at all recently with the way in which the system works. And from all reports we have, it's working well.

Mr. Krawetz: — Did Royal Bank assume the old student loans prior to August 1 of 1996?

Hon. Mr. Mitchell: — No they did not.

Mr. Krawetz: — Then, Mr. Minister, some very specific questions then about, I guess, the old loans. What type of collection methods does your department use for overdue student loan payments?

Hon. Mr. Mitchell: — I'll tell the member the various steps that we take, Mr. Chair. First of all, a one-month overdue letter is sent to the borrower at the most recent mailing address when one monthly payment has been missed. A two-months overdue letter is sent to the borrower when two monthly payments have been missed; and then a final notice letter is sent to the borrower when three monthly payments have been missed.

A default notice letter is sent to the borrower and to the borrower's next of kin mailing address when the fourth monthly payment has been missed and a demand for payment letter is sent if the borrower breaks a repayment arrangement previously agreed upon.

Several attempts are made to contact the student borrower by telephone to discuss repayment arrangements, and in some cases a registered letter may be sent if telephone attempts are unsuccessful.

Students who are in contact with us but are unable to repay their loans — they may be unemployed or underemployed or ill or whatever — they are referred to the interest relief plan which can provide up to 18 months of repayment deferral.

And once a student borrower has used up the maximum interest relief and still has no ability to repay, the account may be placed in postponement until the student's financial situation changes.

The accounts that are not collected by that process are referred to private collection agencies. This has been going on for some years now. In the 1996-97 fiscal year approximately 110 accounts per month were referred to a collection agency. Once a loan goes into default, of course, the loan becomes immediately due and payable in full and the student is no longer eligible for further loans until the defaulted loan is paid in full.

Mr. Krawetz: — For clarification, Mr. Minister, did you say 110 loans per month?

Hon. Mr. Mitchell: — Yes, that's correct.

Mr. Krawetz: — I find that a staggering number. That was, I believe, statistics that you've quoted for 1996. Is this continuing into 1997? — first question. Second question, are we talking about a collection agency who is receiving a fee for monies collected that is a commission basis, or are they paid a flat amount to pursue the collection of a bad account?

And the other point, Mr. Minister, I guess maybe that's why we're hearing the fact that collection agencies apparently have

been very rude and have treated individuals with not much care. And we're wondering what you're doing about a situation where 110 referrals are made to a collection agency per month, and if that's continuing I think we need to do something about that. And I wait for your reply.

Hon. Mr. Mitchell: — Mr. Chair, and to the member, I want to put this in some perspective. There are probably a hundred thousand odd, a hundred thousand odd outstanding loans. We don't know how many there are. They go back for years and years and years. Some of them are old and some of them are new. And the figure of 110 a month, while it sounds a bit startling by itself, taken in that context is explainable. And we don't go to collection until . . . you know, if there's any level of cooperation from them, any response, any kind of dialogue with us, we'll try and work something out, work out some repayment schedule or something like that. So we're not terrorizing these kids or being very, very heavy with them.

But if they don't pay and if it goes on as I've described through all of these months of receiving letters and phone calls and that sort of thing, and it's referred to a collection agency, then it's out of our hands. The department's not in the business of collecting debts in a professional way. So for many years these matters have been referred to collection agencies and they charge a commission. They're not paid a fee. They receive a commission on the amounts that they collect. And I am really disturbed to hear that there is rude treatment. There ought not to be. I suppose that collection agencies can be pretty aggressive, but they ought not to be rude. And I'd like to know of those cases so that we could correct that behaviour.

One other thing I might mention is that there's no longer 110 such cases being referred because since last August the new loans at least are in the hands of the bank, and we're not having to deal with them.

(2100)

Mr. Krawetz: — Two follow-up bits of information required there, Mr. Minister. When you talked about commission, is it a percentage? And secondly, how many people in your department are actually involved with the letter writing and the follow-through to the 18-month period with loan . . . delinquent loans, I guess is the best way to refer to them?

Hon. Mr. Mitchell: — There are presently eight people in the department who are involved with these collection attempts. They'll gradually work themselves out of a job, of course, over the course of time, but at the moment there are eight.

Oh yes, and the commission agents are paid on a percentage basis. We're not sure. We just can't recall, but that's information I can send to you.

Mr. Krawetz: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. There are a few things that I want you to send to me, and I think that's where I'll wrap up.

But first of all, when you say that there is a commission . . . and we understand it to be somewhere in that 20 per cent range. I think that's why we're hearing the complaints from individuals,

from students who are saying that these people are very rude because they won't receive any money unless they can make commitment and can get a commitment from the student that indeed monies are paid. If monies are paid and they've collected it, then they're going to receive a commission on that.

And I think that's something that we have to have . . . your department has to take a look at because we are also aware that certain collection agencies have offered discounts to students to say, well if you can't pay the full 50,000 or 30,000, we'll let you pay this much, and you'll be absolved of your responsibilities. I think that should be instead of the province of Saskatchewan losing that money and turning it over to a collection agency to again get a commission . . . Is there any thought to your department looking at a better system at collecting those overdue ones?

Now I know you're talking about a new system, and I see your explanation last year indeed is that there's going to be an additional 5 per cent paid to the Royal Bank now as a risk for, I guess, their bad debts. Now they have a different system of collecting debts, and I guess there's credit ratings, and there's all the kinds of things that people have to be afraid of. So could you comment on that, please.

Hon. Mr. Mitchell: — It was of course, as I've mentioned, a decision that was made some years ago to use collection agencies, and I understand that decision because it's not . . . government employees are not trained in collection techniques, and it's really not the sort of thing that government likes to do, to hound people for money.

And I suppose that lay behind the original decision to refer to collection agencies. They have no authority to make the kind of compromise that the member's referring to. There is not one case that we are aware of where that's been authorized by the department. We will consider those sorts of situations I suppose, but the collection agencies have no such authority at all. And if the opposition ever encounters a case like that please refer it to my office because we just won't stand still for that; they don't have that power. Now they're paid by commission, which means they've got to collect money to make money, so they're likely to be quite aggressive in their techniques. But what are you going to do, you know?

I say again to the member we're really at pains to establish some contact with the student and get some kind of response, to get some understanding of why payments are not being made. And if they will respond to our letters and to our phone calls, then we'll try and work out something that they can live with. And it's only if they don't respond that we have to do something else, of course.

Now sometimes the student moves and we can't find them, can't catch up with them you know. So then these letters are never answered and it gets referred to a collection agency without the student having the opportunity of relating to the department and working something out. But we really do bend over backwards to establish a harmonious way of working out the problem and seeing that the debt is repaid. And if there's just no response or no cooperation then we really have no alternative but to do what we do.

Mr. Krawetz: — Thank you, Mr. Minister, and yes I would agree with you that long before we get to the point that a student loan should be turned over to a collection agency, I think every student should endeavour to do everything possible to ensure that they communicate with the department.

Mr. Minister, I'd like to ask your officials if they could supply me with some additional information in the essence of saving some time. You've indicated the number of delinquent loans that are referred to every month. Could you supply to me — and I guess it would be fine for the last three years prior to August 1 and the new program coming into place — how many new loans were issued in each of the preceding three years prior to August 1? How many loans do exist overall in the province of Saskatchewan? And how many of those are in that delinquent category? And I know you've referred to maybe 100,000 or whatever that number may be. If you could supply those answers to me.

The other thing I know that will occur long before we're in another session is there will be a full year of administration by the Royal Bank. August 1 will be coming up. Could you supply those numbers when they become available in terms of what numbers of student loans were issued in this calendar year, '96-97, and what numbers of dollars if indeed we reached that 28 million. I would appreciate that.

If your official would supply me with that, Mr. Minister, I would say thank you and I would say to your officials thank you very much for sharing that information and to you as well for being open and upfront.

Hon. Mr. Mitchell: — Thank you, Mr. Chair, and to the member, thanks very much for those remarks. We'll certainly provide that information for the member, and I'd like to thank the member for the way in which we approached these issues. I appreciate it a great deal.

Item 1 agreed to.

Items 2 to 6 inclusive agreed to.

Vote 37 agreed to.

Hon. Mr. Mitchell: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. I neglected to thank my officials for coming and helping with the work of the committee tonight. I left it to my friend but I should also add my thanks to them as well.

General Revenue Fund Loans, Advances and Investments Post-Secondary Education and Skills Training

The Chair: — This item is simply if there are any questions. Are there any questions? Is that item agreed? Carried.

General Revenue Fund Education Vote 5

The Chair: — Before I ask the minister to introduce her

officials I just remind committee members that this department was last before this committee April 17.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Mr. Chair, beside me is Deputy Minister Craig Dotson; on the other side is Michael Littlewood, director of third party funding and legislative services; behind Mr. Dotson, Ken Horsman, assistant deputy minister; and behind myself is Mae Boa, executive director of finance and operations.

Also in the House tonight is Karen Lautsch, manager of school grants; John McLaughlin, executive director of the Teachers' Superannuation Commission; and Cal Kirby, director of facilities planning.

Item 1

Mr. Krawetz: — Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Chair.

Welcome, Madam Minister, and your officials. We'll try to get through a fair amount of business tonight, and I appreciate the fact that we have a number of people here to assist.

The last time we met our discussion centred around restructuring and amalgamation and the public consultation process that had been undertaken by the Department of Education throughout Saskatchewan and the fact that there was a consensus, as the minister explained, that there would be amalgamations but they would take place on a voluntary basis. I guess the question that I have for you, Madam Minister, is was the minister's initial plan to have all school divisions participate in amalgamation?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — The plan is this. The expectation is such that we expect each school division to develop an action plan to consult with their neighbouring school divisions as well as their public to see whether in fact their public is interested in going forward with a restructuring initiative.

Obviously there will be parts of the province where restructuring will make some sense, and there will be other parts of the province where it may not make sense because of demographics and distance and geographic area. So we are not in any sense of the word saying that every school board in the province has to restructure, but we are saying is . . . we want each school board to develop an action plan to consult their public and, based on the consultation, come forward with initiatives.

Mr. Krawetz: — Madam Minister, as we sit here today, are you pleased with the number of voluntary amalgamations that you are aware of and that have come forward, and how many do you expect to see happen before the summer holidays?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Well as you know, there has already been one amalgamation that's gone forward with the Blaine Lake School amalgamating with the Sask Valley School Division and the Hafford School amalgamating with the Battleford School Division.

In addition, we have several examples where boards have served notice of intent, and it's their intention to go forward

with elections based on a restructured school division. An example would be the P.A. (Prince Albert)-Carlton, P.A. Rural and Kinistino school divisions. As well, the Wilkie-Kerrobert Division is going forward with an initiative. Last Mountain School Division-Long Lake are going forward. It appears as though we may have an initiative in the North Battleford-Battleford School Division areas, as well as Timberline and Canora, in addition, Arcola and Oxbow. And it looks as though there may be some initiatives in the area of French schools, as well some initiatives in the Catholic system. And we have another initiative with Wood River, Gravelbourg, and Lady of Fatima — it looks as though there could be an initiative there.

So quite frankly I am quite pleased with the number of voluntary initiatives that have come forward since the government made its announcement in early December. And it's my expectation that it's quite likely that by the end of the year we will see what I consider to be significantly fewer school divisions in the province. And this has come about not as a result of the government drawing a map, but as a result of school boards on their own volition consulting with their public and making the decision to go forward with restructuring.

Mr. Krawetz: — Madam Minister, with the number of projects that you've described, there are two questions I guess I have, is what will your department be doing in terms of providing guidance, in terms of providing leadership to all of these projects to make sure that everything is done correctly and accurately? And when you start to look at restructuring the concerns that were expressed . . . I know a number of years ago that the boundaries that were drawn are boundaries that have been in place since 1944. And you've mentioned many instances, two school divisions that may be developing, restructuring, and in fact creating a new school division.

Will there be the ability for either your department or the school divisions that are restructuring and amalgamating to take a look at their, sort of what I would call the external boundary around the two and say, can we do some shifts? Because I think your department has . . . I know I've made things aware to you, that indeed there are parts of school divisions that have to move from the entity that they're in right now to another school division. What kind of plans are you putting in place to ensure that this is done consistently across the province rather than in a piecemeal fashion?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — The member may know that all of our partners in education and ourselves are just in the final stages of developing a guide that will be given to school boards to assist them in the process of developing action plans and going about restructuring. We expect that that document will be released within weeks.

The second point I want to make is that we're not necessarily going to see the amalgamation of two or three school boards under one school division. The Blaine Lake example is a good one, in that the Blaine Lake town people wanted to go towards Sask Valley, and the Hafford people wanted to go towards Battleford because that was their natural trading pattern. And obviously we are not stuck on amalgamations of two or three school boards and keeping the boundaries whole; that there will

need to be . . . some flexibility in this in order that local considerations can be taken into account.

Mr. Krawetz: — Thank you, Madam Minister. Madam Minister, there have been a lot of concerns expressed by individuals, communities, school divisions, around on-reserve schools. Can you indicate to me how many on-reserve schools there are in the province of Saskatchewan right now?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — We don't . . . As you know, on-reserve schools come under the auspices of band control, and the federal government is involved in the provision of services to schools. We can get that information for you. But because band schools are not provincial schools, we don't have that information readily accessible. But we can certainly try and get obtain that information from Indian and Northern Affairs.

Mr. Krawetz: — Thank you, Madam Minister. Would you know how many new on-reserve schools will open in this next year?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — I don't know how many on-reserve schools will open. I do know that the federal government is spending approximately \$42 million, I think, in this fiscal year to build on-reserve schools.

Mr. Krawetz: — That figure, Madam Minister, indicates to me that there must be a few, and we know that there are a few that have been built before. What impact do on-reserve schools have for existing school divisions? And is this a problem for school divisions that are seeing an on-reserve school being built in their area as far as the stability of that existing school division? What kinds of things are occurring?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Well I can say to the member that certainly this is a concern for many rural school divisions that have historically had first nations children attending provincial schools on the basis of tuition fee agreements between the band and the school. The Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations and ourselves have entered into a protocol where we're in the process of ensuring that our provincial curriculum is appropriate for Indian or first nations students.

The second point I can make is that the government last year introduced an increase of \$1 million in the Indian and Metis education development program in order to assist those rural school boards in providing culturally sensitive programs that school boards felt they were unable to provide, given the nature of tuition fee agreements. And consequently we've seen a significant increase in the number of programs that are offered in rural schools to first nation students, and we think that this is beginning to address some of the concerns from first nations people when it comes to ensuring that their students have access to language programs, for instance elder programs, or other culturally sensitive programs.

The third point I could make is that we're just in the process of discussing with the Flying Dust Band and the Meadow Lake School Division, the possibility of a school that could be jointly funded by the Flying Dust Band and the province, and consequently, perhaps co-managed by the band and the school division in order to accommodate first nations children that are

presently leaving the Flying Dust Reserve and going into Meadow Lake. And the Flying Dust Reserve and Meadow Lake are side by side.

And here's an example of where we may have a joint-use facility that can meet the needs of the school division in Meadow Lake, the Government of Saskatchewan, and also the first nations people from the Flying Dust Reserve.

Mr. Krawetz: — Thank you, Madam Minister. And when you talk about joint-use facilities and that movement with native groups, that is something, I think, that is necessary in many parts of Saskatchewan.

That takes me to different joint use, an announcement that you just did not too long ago, Madam Minister, which is the new project in Yorkton. And I guess if we look at media reaction in terms of different parts of the province, we see the Yorkton people, the Yorkton Catholic Board of Education, the Public Board of Education, I think responding quite positively to this new venture. Yet we see the response by the Catholic school section as not necessarily as warm, I guess, as the other. How do you see this new project in Yorkton influencing what might occur provincially?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Well I think that this is a wonderful initiative for the city of Yorkton, in that as I understand it, not only have the Catholic and public boards come together to develop a school for a particular neighbourhood, but now the city of Yorkton has also involved itself in that project in order to provide facilities for Yorkton and the community within this school is going to be built.

In terms of what impact does this have on the rest of the province, I mean we're not talking about a very large school in the Yorkton context. I believe we're talking about 500 children between the two facilities. Obviously joint use will go forward where it makes sense for the community, and where we have agreement.

Right now in terms of capital planning in the province, joint-use facilities move quickly up the list because the province is encouraging the notion of joint use, particularly between adult learning institutions in rural Saskatchewan in particular, and school divisions, along with health boards and municipalities and library boards and so forth.

I think we have a wonderful example of joint use in the town of Tisdale where the community college, the health board, the school division, and the town have come together and what they have developed in a collaborative, cooperative way is a facility that I think that will receive international attention and national attention. And I suspect it will win international and national awards because of the forward thinking of the community of Tisdale and area.

Mr. Krawetz: — Thank you, Madam Minister. Multiple use of structures that cost us millions of dollars is necessary and I think that the public is demanding of that to occur. And I'm very happy to see the Yorkton people proceed with such a project.

One question, do you see that school being administered by one set of administration, or are we looking at shared facility but still two separate entities in terms of teachers and principal, administration and the like?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — At the Yorkton facility the gymnasium and the resource centre will be shared by the two school boards, or the two schools. Each school will have its own administration. They will jointly share the resource centre or the library and the gymnasium for physical activity and community activity.

Mr. Krawetz: — Thank you, Madam Minister. As a result of a capital construction in the city of Yorkton, do you see any . . . has there been any discussion with other communities in terms of discussing their concerns with you because they live further out of Yorkton and indeed now they may see the potential that school closures or great discontinuance will occur because of the construction of a new school in Yorkton?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — I'm advised by my officials that Yorkdale, which is the school division that surrounds the city of Yorkton, was involved in the planning for this facility. And this facility is part of a long-range plan for Yorkton and the Yorkdale area.

Mr. Krawetz: — Okay. Thank you, Madam Minister.

Madam Minister, I'd like to take you back to April — whatever it was — 17, I guess. I asked a couple of questions about Media House and I need some clarification. That day you indicated that your department had renewed its . . . had not renewed its five-year contract with Media House. And you responded that the audio and visual duplication services were tendered out and another company won the bid. Now I've heard and we've been informed that audio and video not necessarily occurred. Can you tell us whether the audio portion of that contract was included, or was it not included?

(2130)

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — What I can tell you is audio is going to be done internally, video is going to this company that won the tender, and the 16 millimetre films are being discontinued.

Mr. Krawetz: — The response that I had from you in *Hansard* was indeed that the contract was awarded for all of those things, so I'm glad that you've clarified that for me.

When we took a look at audio, and I think that the statistics were that about 25,000 audio tapes were released by Media House throughout all of last year to the public. Are you saying now that your department is going to look after 25,000 audio tapes?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — We don't have the official here that has the answer to your question. So what I'll have to do is contact Dr. Margaret Lipp. She's got the information and we'll share that information with you as soon as I can.

Mr. Krawetz: — Thank you, Madam Minister. Madam Minister, when your department decided to tender, I guess, the

new contract whatever it called for, had you conducted a survey of the schools, the educational users of audio and video tapes to see whether or not there was a need to change the system? Is this as a result — that is, the change to a different type of arrangement — is that as a result of complaints of the old system? What changes or what things precipitated your need to ask for a new tender?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Media Group, as I understand it, had a five-year contract. The decision was made to tender this. This is not unusual, for government to tender various services that are provided by independent business groups. We tendered it, and the other company won the tender.

The other thing that the department advises me is the use of 16 millimetre film was going down significantly because people are now using videotape machines.

Mr. Krawetz: — In response to that comment, Minister, I have three letters from three teachers who have described to me, I think a total of nine titles here that were available in 16 millimetre film and now have been told that they will not be able to be supplied. And there's no replacement for them by new technology.

How will teachers who have been using particular media, the 16 millimetre, and if they are not being duplicated by some other source . . . what process is in place to inform these teachers that alternatives to that media is available?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — I'm advised once again by the department that the 16 millimetre films are going to be given to Media House in Regina. Media House will then have to seek the rights to those films, and then they'll be in a position where they can offer these films for rental.

As well, the film titles that are of extreme usage, I suppose by school divisions, we're attempting to replace those 16 millimetre film with videos because there are groups that make the transition from film to video.

Mr. Krawetz: — Could you indicate to the House the kind of contract that is in place with the new supplier, and who is the new supplier?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — The new group is . . . the successful component was Media Group Inc. from Saskatoon. Media Group Inc. is owned by a company called C Prompt Computer Systems Inc., and the agreement has been negotiated with Media Group. The contract has not yet been signed . . . Oh, the contract has now been signed and it is for a five-year period beginning July 1, 1997.

Mr. Krawetz: — Thank you, Madam Minister. We'll leave that issue for the moment.

If I could ask you now to take some specific look at the section on page no. 42, which is the teacher pensions and benefits and a couple of questions around the teachers' pension.

I note that in the cost of teachers' pension, there has been a decrease, and there's been a decrease over the last three years.

What do we attribute that to and what are long-term projections?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — It's attributed to the increase in the number of retiring teachers.

Mr. Krawetz: — Do you expect that number to continue to decrease? And as a result will there be additional funds available, or will that now be taken up by the new pension plan?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — We expect it to increase but fluctuate from year to year until the year 2005.

Mr. Krawetz: — In the section entitled, educational grants and programs, section no. 4, I note that Official Minority Language Office, when I look at the estimates for '96-97 and '97-98, we see almost a . . . in fact it's a little more than a \$3 million reduction in terms of the expenditures. Could you explain how this happened, and what kind of changes will be made? Because obviously a \$3 million change must mean that there must be significant changes.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — As you may know, there was an agreement with the federal government for capital funds for the renovation and construction of francophone schools in the province. My understanding is that all the francophone schools have undergone their renovations or construction, and therefore there is a reduction in OMLO (Official Minority Language Office) because we're no longer . . . all of the schools have got their renovations and their capital construction done.

Mr. Krawetz: — Madam Minister, in the area of capital funding, you've indicated that approximately 16.8 million is available for capital funding this year, an increase over last year. And I note that about 3 million new dollars has actually gone into the area of capital because we have a decrease in interest rates . . . or interest payments, I should say. Is there a projection available for interest payments by the department for the next three years?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — We'll have to get that information for you.

Mr. Krawetz: — Thank you, Madam Minister. Yes, I would like an explanation as to the interest payments. And I see, like, the '95-96 year at 12,000 and then 10 for this current estimated year, and where are we moving in terms of the future. Because that will clear up some, I think, capital projects that are before us.

How many projects is the facility department now handling in terms of the first request by the boards of education? And what do you see occurring with 16.8 million in terms of the number of capital projects that will now be able to be approved?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — The amount of money for block projects is \$8.3 million, and we expect that there will be about 110 projects.

As well there is approval in principle for the North Battleford joint youth project, the Estevan joint youth, the Yorkton joint

youth, and there are funds allocated to this fiscal year. As well there is money allocated to Moose Jaw King George, Wadena Comp phase 2, Central Butte phase 2, and work being done on the new school in Biggar.

Mr. Krawetz: — Sorry, Madam Minister, what was the first number that you indicated in terms of number of projects?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — \$8.327 million and 110 projects under block funding. Those tend to be occupational health and safety projects, new roofs. They're small projects; they're not large projects. They come out of block and the rest of the money, another 8 million, goes into capital construction of new schools or the completion of phases or the beginning of phases.

Mr. Krawetz: — Thank you very much for that clarification. Madam Minister, a lot has been said in terms of the payment of grants to school divisions during the spring, the delay that occurred on budget day because of some reassessment figures being unavailable from certain cities. And I think the constraints that boards found themselves in caused some difficulty for many of the boards.

Let's begin by asking this question, Madam Minister. You've indicated in the budget, or the Minister of Finance has indicated, that there was an additional \$8 million provided for grant purposes. In terms of the department's analysis of the entire costs of education, when you say the recognized expenditures, what change took place to — and again I recall last time that I asked for those figures to be provided to me and I do not have them yet — what kind of changes occurred to the left side of that column whereby we note that recognized expenditures increased? What total amount did the expenditures increase for all boards in the province?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — The total recognized expenditures increased from 863.8 million to 882.8 million.

Mr. Krawetz: — Thank you, Madam Minister. If my math is correct, that's about a \$19 million change.

An Hon. Member: — Correct.

Mr. Krawetz: — Okay. Madam Minister, if we look at a recognized expenditure of 19 million approximately and the province's commitment of 8 million new dollars, we see a continuation of the slide. And we've talked about 60/40 funding. We realize that all stakeholders, whether we're talking about the municipal governments of SARM and SUMA (Saskatchewan Urban Municipalities Association) and whether we're talking about the school boards, everybody is lobbying you, I'm sure, and the minister that the 60/40 split is not acceptable.

With a \$19 million change in recognized expenditures and an \$8 million commitment, that's about 40 per cent again. So we haven't made any significant move in that respect. What kind of plan do you see being put in place not just . . . I mean we don't see a plan occurring for this year, but what does the future hold in terms of moving from 40/60 to 60/40?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Well as the member knows, total

recognized expenditure doesn't mean that that's what school boards spent. In fact school boards can spend much less, much less.

So what I will say to the member is that the Premier, in his address to the Saskatchewan Urban Municipalities Association as well as SARM, as well as his discussions with the SSTA (Saskatchewan School Trustees Association), has indicated very clearly that it is the intentions of this government this year to consult with our various stakeholder groups that have an interest in educational taxes on property to determine how we might — in a realistic and sustainable, fiscally sustainable way — move back to the 1978 period when 58 per cent of the cost of education was borne by provincial property taxpayers . . . or provincial taxpayers and about 42 per cent of the expense for K to 12 education was borne by local property taxpayers.

(2145)

So I expect that we will at some stage come forward with a plan to gradually get ourselves back to those heady days of the late '70s, but I could say to the member that 60/40 is not going to happen overnight; but it is our intention to come forward with a plan that is financially sustainable to move us in that direction.

Mr. Krawetz: — Thank you, Madam Minister. Two questions then related to that. I know you don't have this year's budgets because boards are working on them right at the moment. And probably you don't even have 1996 audited financial statements yet. If you do, could you tell me then what the total amount for K to 12 expenditure is. Because you've indicated a number of 882 million as far as recognized expenditures and I was under the understanding that we're almost at \$1 billion in terms of the total cost of K to 12 education.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — We don't yet have the audited financial statements but what I can say to the Leader of the Third Party is that if we weren't spending some \$760 million in interest payments, we could go to 60/40 immediately.

Mr. Krawetz: — Thank you, Madam Minister. I wasn't sure whether someone else had joined our conversation. I didn't realize that you were referring to someone else.

Madam Minister, when you talk about \$20 million increase in terms of recognized expenditures and an \$8 million additional funding allotment from the Minister of Finance, how then did boards manage to balance their budgets with that kind of recognition?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — I guess what I can say to the member is, had we lowered the recognized expenditures, boards would have spent the same amount of money. So regardless of whether it goes up or it goes down, boards still have to deliver a K to 12 education in this province and they will still spend the same amount of money.

Mr. Krawetz: — The recognition that you require from boards in terms of the financial commitment is determined by the equalization factor. I understand that that changed, but because of the change in assessments; could you indicate what amount it changed as far as the old assessment system?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — It basically changed by 2 old mills.

Mr. Krawetz: — Then if that's true, Madam Minister, 2 mills is the equivalent of about \$12 million, so therefore what you're saying is that boards of education were expected to contribute an additional \$12 million towards the recognized expenditures.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — As the member probably knows, this is a distributional effect. This is about equalization. Had we lowered the computational mill rate, boards would still have spent the same amount of money. So I disagree with what you're representing.

Mr. Krawetz: — I didn't say anything about lowering the rate. My question is, Madam Minister, is if you have changed the equalization factor by 2 mills from 68.4 to 70.4 — if that's the new number — and the assessment remains the same as it did in 1996, you are now asking the boards of education to contribute an additional \$12 million recognized in comparison to last year. Is that not true?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — What the member needs to know is that regardless of whether we lowered it raised it or kept it the same, boards are spending the same amount of money, the government is still distributing \$363 million worth of grant. This is about distribution, this is about equalization, and we don't share your notion that boards have to raise an extra \$12 million.

Mr. Krawetz: — I guess, Madam Minister, we'll see the results of that when we look at the budgets of boards, and indeed if we find out that the total amount of money that boards will be spending this year has increased by \$20 million, then we will know that 8 million came from the Department of Education and 12 additional million came from the taxpayers. That will be seen when we see the finalized budgets.

One question, Madam Minister, about shared services — and there has been some change in there — and I note from individual printouts for various school divisions that significant changes occurred to the amount of money for shared services, and I understand that's for the provision of some additional people. Could you explain what benefits will occur for students in the province of Saskatchewan as a result of the change to the shared services program.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Well it's quite simple. We know that there are certain parts of Saskatchewan where a core curriculum was not being fully implemented. We knew that school boards, for whatever reason, did not have the resources to ensure that teachers were implementing the curriculum in all parts of the province.

What we have done is, we've moved to put in a resource-based learning position into each of the shared service districts — there are 17 of them. And the idea here is to have a resource-based learning personnel in place to assist school boards and teachers in implementing core curriculum, which we have spent literally tens of millions of dollars to design, pilot, implement. Now what we have to do is ensure that it's being implemented across the province, and it's being implemented in the way that core was originally designed to be implemented.

Mr. Krawetz: — Thank you for that response, Madam Minister. One final question, Madam Minister . . . or series of questions about a different area, and that's the small schools factor. Could you explain the department's reasoning around the minimum to maximum as far as the mileages . . . or I shouldn't say mileage, but the distances that occur between schools and why you have different factors for different schools, that is the different grade levels of different schools?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Well the maximum and minimum distances are: K to elementary education, 30 kilometres is the max., 10 kilometres is the minimum; middle years, 40 kilometres is the max., 15 kilometres is the minimum; and secondary or high school, 50 kilometres is the max., 20 kilometres is the minimum.

Mr. Krawetz: — Madam Minister, I'm sorry. You didn't understand my question. I knew those numbers but I don't understand why you've put in place varying degrees of numbers for the different grade levels.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Quite simple. What we want to do is ensure that small children are not on a school bus for hours trying to get to school. I mean I've heard many times in this legislature, and when I was certainly in opposition, the concern that we need to keep small children — elementary school aged children — as close to home as possible. We don't want them on these long bus rides. Some middle years students and certainly high school students are in a better position to take the long bus rides but young kids aren't.

And so it's a matter of social policy. We want to ensure that younger kids are educated as close to home as possible. And for those small, isolated schools we are supporting those school divisions by making sure that funds are available to support students in various age categories and grades.

Mr. Krawetz: — Thank you. Have you had any reactions from boards of education regarding the change to the small schools factor — either positive or negative?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Well what we did was we put \$8.3 million into small, rural, isolated schools. You know I heard the members opposite talk about this government's commitment to rural Saskatchewan. This is a commitment to those small, rural, isolated schools. And we put an extra \$8.3 million into those rural school divisions with those small schools.

In fact we increased the rates from \$440 per kindergarten student to \$1,000 and for all other students from \$800 to \$1,000. And this is to support rural communities with small schools that have to go great distances in order to get to the next closest school.

Mr. Krawetz: — Thank you, Madam Minister. I guess here's where we start to develop some confusion. And I know what you're saying in terms of supporting the small schools, and I know many small schools and communities are very appreciative of the fact that there's been significant recognition for the fact that it is more costly to provide a program in that kind of a school, that that's true.

The problem though, Madam Minister, is you've just indicated that you've put \$8.3 million into that area. Now that's recognized expenditures. We know that there are salary-teacher costs of about \$8 million. And the question that I asked you a few minutes ago was that the department has an additional \$8 million worth of grant. Now if you've now indicated that 8 million additional dollars went into small schools, and 8 million went to teachers, and now you've indicated shared services received millions more, we end up in a situation where you're talking about expenditures that far exceed the grant commitment that you have given and to the boards of education, which was an \$8 million increase. How do you make the balance?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — You've just reinforced my point — you've just reinforced my point. This is about distribution. This is about how we distribute the \$363 million. A public policy priority is to support small, isolated schools in rural Saskatchewan. That is a public policy position of the NDP (New Democratic Party) government.

Second point I want to make is that we have heard from you and some of your colleagues on numerous occasions about rural school closures. We wanted to ensure that rural school divisions had a recognized cost for small, rural, isolated schools. I would assume that as a member from rural Saskatchewan that you would be supportive of that.

Mr. Krawetz: — Madam Minister, either you weren't listening to my response on the last question . . . I said that small schools were very appreciative and communities were very appreciative of what you did. And I for one indicated that. So don't confuse the issue here and say that I was somehow condemning the fact that you have recognized small schools.

My question was: you have indicated an expenditure of 8 million here and 8 million there and 8 million there, and I'm wondering who's paying for it? That was my question.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Well there's \$363 million that's coming from the province, and the rest of the money is coming from school divisions across the province.

Now just so you understand this, this is \$8.3 million that's not going to Saskatoon. It's not going to Regina. It's not going to Moose Jaw. It's not going to North Battleford. It's not going to Weyburn. It's not going to Prince Albert. It's not going to Estevan. It's not going to Lloydminster.

It is going to those school divisions with small, isolated, rural schools, those school divisions that have seen their property assessment go up. And had we not done this, they would have lost a lot more money from the province because of property reassessment. This was a mechanism for the province — the NDP government — to support those rural school divisions with small, isolated, rural schools.

Mr. Heppner: — Good evening, Madam Minister, and welcome to your officials this evening. First question that I have is, have you received the PC (Progressive Conservative) caucus global questions to your office and to your department,

and when can we expect an answer to those questions?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — I'm sorry, member; we have not yet received the official package. But when we do, we'll provide you with the answers to the questions that you ask.

Mr. Heppner: — Thank you. We'll try and ensure that they get there fairly quickly. Question on your activities as minister and the question is, what sorts of trips have you taken over the past year and the staff that accompanies, like department officials, and what cost to the taxpayer that would have been?

(2200)

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Okay, I was to Edmonton to attend the second national consultation on education. It was the Council of Education Ministers from across the country, had a national consultation with various people. The people that attended were myself, Ken Horsman, Brij Mathur, Rene Archambault, Stan Frey, and Gillian McCreary — all people from the department.

I then attended the council of ministers meeting in St. John's, Newfoundland. My expenses were paid for by the council of ministers. Craig Dotson attended, as did Bev Cardinal, who was my chief of staff at the time. Then I was to Victoria and Vancouver and what I was doing was meeting with the B.C. (British Columbia) minister and the deputy minister, as well as school trustees, school council people, teachers, regarding their educational restructuring initiative that had occurred in British Columbia. And the person who accompanied me was Craig Dotson, the deputy minister. Those are my only out-of-province travel.

Mr. Heppner: — Thank you, Madam Minister. It's a little amazing when we hear other members of the cabinet saying that education is one of those two or three key things that your government is spending money on and that the rest of them travel so much and you're kept close to home. So maybe education isn't quite as high up as some of the other ones.

Madam Minister, Saskatoon (East) School Division is among the hardest hit in the province by the new education grant structure that you outlined on April 11. And as a result of that particular statement, the school division will see a million dollars cut from approximately 4 million they had received last year. Because of reassessment the division would have lost an additional, I believe, 1.4 million if you hadn't placed that 25 per cent cap on the total amount which could be cut in any division. According to the division's director of education, and I'll quote here, "A higher portion of the division's budget will have to be borne by property taxpayers." And that's from *Star-Phoenix*, April 12.

Madam Minister, your government promised there would be no tax increases, yet those particular cuts to the K to 12 over the past five years on top of reassessment will mean big hikes in property taxes for many communities. How can you continue to say there are no tax increases when I think as we're getting our tax notices, we're seeing just the opposite happening.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Well let me just say this to the member. As you know, this is the year for reassessment, and as you

know, based on market value, some of us are seeing our taxes increase. I can say on my home in Saskatoon I will see my taxes increase fairly significantly because of reassessment. It's not because the city of Saskatoon is going to raise more taxes from its collective ratepayers. It's not because the Saskatoon Catholic School Board or Public School Board is going to raise more taxes from its collective ratepayers. It's because of reassessment.

In the case of the Saskatoon (East) School Division, their assessment increased 7.15 times. That was much above the provincial average. What that means is that property owners in the Saskatoon (East) School Division have seen their property increase in value on average some 7 times in comparison to the provincial average of some 4.9 times or 4.8 times.

Our educational foundation operating grant is based on the principle of equalization of distribution. The higher your assessment the lower the amount of money you get from the province. The lower your assessment the higher amount of money you get from the province. So in the case of Saskatoon (East), they would have seen their grant drop by some \$2.14 million had the province not moved to put a cap on it, an assessment-related cap that stays flat for three years.

I can report to you that I received a very kind letter from the Chair of the board, along with the director of education, that expressed their appreciation for the work that the Government of Saskatchewan did along with our departmental officials for listening to our concerns about the loss of grants caused by reassessment.

So I would say that . . . they also say that the way that you and your officials listened and responded in such a considerate and timely manner was much appreciated. So while you can raise this in the House, I think that they understood that this is reassessment related, it is not because of anything the Department of Education did. It is because 1997 is the year of reassessment.

Mr. Heppner: — On that same thing, you just mentioned the cap, that basically I believe you said is going to be there for three years. What do you see happening when those three years are over and this cap comes off?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Well it will be the year 2000, and you know, once again we will see municipalities across the province engaged in reassessment. I suspect that what we will see is an increase in the assessed value of property in Saskatoon and Regina, that it will go up, because we've had some significant economic activity between 1994 and 1997. And I suspect that it's possible that we may get back to some of the balance that we had prior to this assessment year, 1997.

Now I don't know that, I'm just speculating. But I can say that we were quite surprised that Saskatoon and Regina came in below the provincial average of 4.8. They came in at 4.2, 4.1, and we got that information shortly before the budget. And that really had some significant impacts upon some of these divisions who were way above the provincial average and the grant. That's why we moved to cap it for three years until 2000, and I think maybe the system will have settled out. And I don't

know if farm land is going to increase significantly in value between 1994 and 1997. But certainly if you look at property assessment in the cities, I think you'll see some pretty phenomenal growth in value of properties. When assessment comes in the year 2000, then we're looking at 1997 values.

Mr. Heppner: — The assessment increase, I think you said it's a little over seven times in Saskatoon (East), I would believe Sask Valley probably had something fairly close to that. And I would suspect that those areas close to Saskatoon would increase at the same rate because the housing booms and the acreage trend seems to have been reawakened again.

And so I would suggest that the next time reassessment comes around, those particular divisions may be hit as hard, if not harder, again. So in case that happens I would hope that we're looking at something, a plan for that contingency, because it will likely happen and we'd hate to get caught scrambling again.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — I understand the member's point. I guess one of the things that struck me when we sat down and took a look at the grants based on assessment, or reassessment, those school divisions that ring cities like Sask Valley, Saskatoon (East), Saskatoon (West), Buffalo Plains around Regina, Thunder Creek, P.A. Rural, the Battlefords, Battle River, I mean these are areas that are growing.

But if you look at a place like Arcola, its assessment was below the provincial average and so consequently they see a significant increase in the grant.

So the grant sort of worked both ways. The west side of the province saw some fairly significant increases in their grant because their assessment was below the provincial average. And then there were places that surrounded some of the larger centres that saw a significant increase in their assessment. And they are obviously becoming quote: "wealthier" communities based on assessment. And they saw a decrease in the grant.

But you raise a good point, and it's something that we're aware of.

Mr. Heppner: — You mentioned becoming wealthier, and I guess in terms of reassessment they are. It's just highly unfortunate because your assessment goes up, doesn't really put any extra dollars in your pocket to pay the extra taxes.

Twenty school divisions have seen their operating grants cut by approximately 25 per cent this year. And I think we just talked about Buffalo Plains, I believe, which was cut by approximately 1.4 million compared to '96. School divisions are either going to have to basically close some schools . . . And I think that's a thing that's being looked at. And having met with some of the school divisions, I know that's a concern that's out there and some of the activities that they'll be involved in.

Again, Madam Minister, how can you be promising no tax increases when taxpayers, I guess, are going to just be having to pay a whole lot more than they've been in the past?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — I think the point here is that . . . and I'll

just use this example. I'll use the example of a house in my constituency that's assessed at \$100,000. And then I use the example of a house that's assessed at \$100,000 in Martensville. It seems to me that we should pay a similar amount in education tax. I think in the past that was not the case. That if you were in a particular community, you did not necessarily pay the same amount.

The principles behind reassessment is that regardless of where I live in the province, if my property is worth a similar amount of money, I should be paying a similar amount in the area of education tax and municipal tax. And I think what reassessment has done for those people living in various parts of the province that maybe weren't paying as much as other people in other areas of the province, they now will be doing so.

And it's not unlike myself in my own home. I was paying taxes that were much lower than other people that had property that wasn't worth as much as mine. It just happened to be because of where I lived. And the area has rejuvenated and increased in value significantly in the last 20 years, and now I'm going to pay more. Reassessment is something that all of the various interest groups agreed to, and it's something that we're dealing with in 1997.

Mr. Heppner: — Thank you, Madam Minister. At least I guess the one little bit of silver lining with all that cloud is the fact that there's nothing self-serving about this thing in your case.

A couple of specific questions dealing with grants and those sorts of things. What are the total operating grants for the K to 12 system in the years '91, '92, '93, '94, '95; like how have they changed, specific numbers.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — If I was up at my computer, I could tell you that, but we don't have that information in the House. But we'll get it for you. I can tell you that they were more than they are now. The grants in 1991-92 are more than they are now, and I think the grant now, we're starting to move back up. We cut grants in '92-93, '93-94, '94-95; there were no increases, I think, in '95-96. Last year there was an increase of \$2 million, and now we're hopefully on our way back to some levels that we saw in the early 1990s.

Mr. Heppner: — The increased pay and benefits to teachers has added some cost to the boards as well, as I believe you are aware. What has been the increase in salary or benefits since '91, and can I have that figure in dollars?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — We'll get you that.

Mr. Heppner: — Another question on tax and tax shifts. What sorts of tax shifts, if any, have there been between Regina . . . for example, Regina Catholic and Regina Public?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — I just want to remind the member that reassessment is revenue neutral. I mean there are people that will see their taxes decrease significantly and others that will see their taxes increase significantly. And some municipalities have moved to have the decreases and the increases phased in over a three-year period. So I just want to make the point, reassessment is revenue neutral.

In terms of Regina Catholic, Regina Public, they set the identical mill rate.

Mr. Heppner: — Okay — just shifting gears here substantially — approximately a year ago we had some good discussions on what was happening in Scenic Valley. And I'd like a comment from you on where you see what's happened in Scenic Valley, where we're at with the success or failure or whatever with that program.

(2215)

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — What I can share with the minister is that on March 27, 1997 I approved a further one year in terms of the four-day school week. When I made the approval the interim report that was being prepared by the external evaluator had not yet been completed. Scenic Valley asked for a one-year extension and we accommodated their request.

Mr. Heppner: — Okay, you mentioned an external evaluator. Is this Scenic Valley's evaluator or someone that you've set up?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Scenic Valley set up the external evaluator and we have someone sitting on the committee.

Mr. Heppner: — I would imagine that the report will probably come in fairly positive and I'm basing that on the sorts of information that I've been getting out of Scenic Valley.

And I'm wondering, if that does come in the way it likely will come, is this an option that will then become . . . some of the other schools in the division in Saskatchewan can operate on, just as in the city systems, when we're talking about the new semester ideas — that sort of an option that will become available in general?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Well just in terms of the balanced school year, it's also available. It will be available in the Buffalo Plains School Division, which is a rural school division. In terms of Scenic Valley four-day school week, it's too early to tell. We have not yet got a final evaluation; so I'm not in a position to indicate to you one way or the other whether or not we will, at the end of the day, approve a four-day school week for school divisions across the province.

Mr. Heppner: — Thank you, Madam Minister. Still missed part of a question that we had about two or three questions ago and that was, obviously you've been watching Scenic Valley fairly closely on a personal basis rather than just waiting for a report. And I'm wondering where you see Scenic Valley going and how you feel about what's happening there?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Well I think it's fair to say that there are 119 school divisions in the province, and I've been at this job for practically four years. Someone wrote me a memo the other day that I'm the third longest serving Minister of Education in the province, and will soon be the second longest serving if I can get to February 1998 or something. So I can just say that . . . (inaudible interjection) . . . oh, perhaps.

All I can say is that after awhile you become familiar with

various school boards across the province. You know who the individuals are that are involved. And when you say I'm familiar, I'm no less familiar with Scenic Valley than I am with Sask Valley or Battleford or North Battleford or Buffalo Plain or Canora or Kamsack or Davidson or whatever.

I think it's too early to tell, and I'm not in a position to indicate to you one way or the other. I want to wait for the evaluation. And obviously based on the evaluation, we'll make a decision.

Mr. Heppner: — Thank you. I like that part of the answer where it says that you'll use the evaluation in making a decision, which means if the evaluation is good I'm assuming that that will be an option that will be able to be used by other schools if they wish to do that.

I'd like for you to comment on what's happening, or what advantages you see, now that we've been into amalgamation for a number of years in a number of different school areas. As this is moving along, what advantages are there now that you see? Obviously that may be different from what you had hoped to see. What do you see as being the advantages at present?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Well we only have one real restructuring in the province, and that's Blaine Lake, Sask Valley, Hafford, and Battleford. I think it's fair to say, having had some discussions with the people that live in Blaine Lake — not having had discussions with Hafford — I can say that people in the Blaine Lake area feel as though their teachers now have access to more services because Sask Valley is a larger school division with a number of services that support students and support teachers. As well, the students in Blaine Lake now have access to computer technology and their teachers have access to personnel at Sask Valley who is familiar with instructing in the area of computers and technology.

So I would say that for the restructuring that I've seen, certainly the Blaine Lake, Sask Valley School Division, I would say that the students now have access to more services as a result of that restructuring. And the teachers have access to more support because of the educational infrastructure that is available in Sask Valley. In terms of the other initiatives, we've not yet seen true restructuring, so I'm not in a position to respond to the other part of your question because I think it's too early to tell.

Mr. Heppner: — Okay, interesting answer, part of that, because I haven't been a very great supporter of that particular amalgamation situation that you discussed for the following reason.

You mention that there was some advantage to these particular students, and I believe the number of students there is probably a few hundred. That particular amalgamated school division, if I'm right, did not increase its support staff to teachers by one individual, which means that the other 4,000 students are now suffering because they have to thin out the amount of support they get out of those individuals.

So what you've really done is you've sacrificed 4,000 students to some extent for the benefit of 3, 400. And I think that's a rather unfortunate choice when those sorts of things happen. And I'd like to hear your comments on that.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Well I guess what I could say is that we no longer have a director of education in Blaine Lake. We no longer have a secretary-treasurer, and we no longer have a support staff. That means that the money that is saved can go into other support services for students.

So I guess I would say, from the people that I've spoken to both in Sask Valley and Blaine Lake, that they see this as a win-win situation; that Sask Valley obviously has the infrastructure to support those — I think — 200 students. And the benefits certainly from the involvement of the teachers in Blaine Lake . . . I believe there's one other school as well; it's not just Blaine Lake, there's one other — Lestock? Leask, I'm sorry. And from Sask Valley's point of view, there are some funds available from the savings that can then be used for their services and their students.

Mr. Heppner: — Your answer seems a whole lot more rosy than I think what's actually happening out there. A teacher from Blaine Lake, Marie Dandet-Predushewski stated a couple weeks ago, and I'll quote from that:

Amalgamation of school divisions can pay dividends for students if it's done right, but the provincial government may not find any savings in it (she said). The Blaine Lake School Division amalgamated with their southern neighbour Sask Valley last year, with better services for students, but the stress of a larger bureaucracy and additional committee work has been wearing on teachers.

And she ends with saying she didn't think this process is going to save any money in the long run. And I think that was one of the underlying rationale behind amalgamations, was to save some money on that.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — I can assure the member that we have never said that restructuring was going to save the province money. What restructuring might do is redirect existing resources into services to students. And I think that for the purposes of Sask Valley and Blaine Lake and Leask, I would say that what this has meant is that we can redirect funds that were being spent on the Blaine Lake Division office and all the support staff and directors of education and so on. We can redirect those resources into services for students, and I can't see how anybody would be opposed to that.

Mr. Heppner: — If it worked out that way, probably correct, but I don't think it is.

Madam Minister, there seems to be some discrepancy about school bussing grants for Regina. Regina School Division is counting on about, I think it's \$326,000 in additional funds to come from the province. And that, I think, played a part in some of the recent school closures. You stated recently that because grant calculations were complicated and assessment information was still being collected, you couldn't guarantee that the Regina School Division would get that total amount. And they might get a very small amount, and they might get nothing.

Madam Minister, have you turned down the request of the

Regina school board, and where does the bussing grant stand as of today?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — I'm advised by my officials that this does not affect this school year because the grants are based on the 1996 numbers as of the end of September, and we won't be in a position to answer your question in a detailed way until next year.

Mr. Heppner: — One other question on the Regina situation and those school closures. I had a number of parents call me up from one of the schools that we would say is in a socially critical area. And they're quite concerned that their students now are going to have to be in a bussing situation. And some other concerns that come along with that because that community has really sort of grouped around their school for some programs within the school and for the kids.

And I'm a little concerned that what's happening here is that we're going to get . . . these schools are going to be . . . and the kids are definitely going to be hurt by that. And it might be a good idea for a re-evaluation of that and for you to come onside and request Regina to take a look at that, because I think there's situations where a community area is suffering.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Well I just want to share with the member, if you're talking about the Regent Park School — is that the school you're talking about? Yes, I thought you were. I'm familiar with that situation in that two of our members on the government side of the House have also met with those parents. And my understanding is the Regent Park parents are meeting with the school division tonight.

What I can say to the member is that this is a really difficult issue. And it's difficult in this sense. The Minister of Education, when you look at The Education Act, doesn't have any legal authority or even moral authority to involve themselves or herself or himself in the discussion at the division level. We, under various administrations, have given that authority to the local school division to make those decisions.

Our grants, for the most part, are given to school divisions in an unconditional way. School divisions are in essence a local level of government. They have the power to tax. They have authority under The Education Act. And so when I'm asked these kinds of questions in the legislature . . . And I have to share with you; I used to ask the same questions when I was an opposition critic. But I've now come to understand that it is impossible, legally impossible, for a Minister of Education to involve themselves in those kinds of discussions that legislatively are left to local school boards to decide.

Mr. Heppner: — Thank you, and I'll end this evening's questioning probably with a comment rather than a question.

It's too bad that the money that was going to Regina didn't come ahead of time so that the boards would have known how much they had. I doubt in that case they would have made this decision because it's not socially good for that community, and it is a painful situation.

With that I'd like to thank the minister and her officials for the

answers they provided this evening.

Item 1 agreed to.

Items 2 to 4 inclusive agreed to.

Vote 5 agreed to.

(2230)

**Supplementary Estimates 1996-97
General Revenue Fund
Budgetary Expense
Education
Vote 5**

Item 1 agreed to.

Vote 5 agreed to.

Mr. Krawetz: — Thank you, Mr. Chairman. To the minister, thank you for sharing your answers with us tonight. I look forward to receiving the information that I've requested. Thank you to all your officials for assisting in providing Saskatchewan residents with that information.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — I want to thank the Leader of the Opposition, the Education critic, as well as the Education critic for the third party, for their thoughtful questions and the respectful way in which I think we handled the Education estimates. As well I want to thank the various officials that are here tonight to assist me in our spending estimates.

The committee reported progress.

The Assembly adjourned at 10:35 p.m.

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