

The Assembly met at 13:30.

Prayers

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS

PRESENTING PETITIONS

Mr. Elhard: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, residents of several communities in the southwest have expressed their concern about the possible implications of the EMS (emergency medical services) report and they are very dependent on the ambulance at Richmond, Saskatchewan. Their prayer reads as follows:

Wherefore your petitioners humbly pray that your Hon. Assembly may be pleased to cause the government to not implement the consolidation and centralization of ambulance services as recommended in the EMS report and affirm its intent to work to improve community-based ambulance services.

As in duty bound, your petitioners will ever pray.

Mr. Speaker, this petition is signed by residents of Burstall, Golden Prairie, Richmond, Saskatchewan, and from the community of Hilda, Alberta.

I so present.

Ms. Julé: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, I stand today to present approximately 120 signatures on a petition from people in the Bruno area who would like to become part of the Humboldt telephone exchange. And the prayer reads as follows, Mr. Speaker:

Wherefore your petitioners humbly pray that your Hon. Assembly may be pleased to cause the government to allow Bruno to be part of the Humboldt telephone exchange.

And this petition is signed completely by members from Bruno.

I so present.

Mr. Harper: — Mr. Speaker, today I have a petition signed by good citizens of Saskatchewan expressing interest in maintaining and upgrading of the Saskatchewan road network. And the prayer goes:

Wherefore your petitioners humbly pray that your Hon. Assembly may be pleased to ask the Government of Saskatchewan to continue with its foresight and vision of increasing the funding to \$900 million over the next three years to maintain and upgrade our thoroughfares of commerce.

And, Mr. Speaker, this petition is signed by the good folks from Pelly, Kamsack, and Canora.

Mr. Hermanson: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, I have a petition about the government . . . provincial government's report, the Saskatchewan EMS development project, which calls for provincially run and centrally operated

ambulance services. Mr. Speaker, the prayer reads:

Wherefore your petitioners humbly pray that your Hon. Assembly may be pleased to cause the government to not implement the consolidation and centralization of ambulance services as recommended in this EMS report and affirm its intent to work to improve community-based ambulance services.

And as in duty bound, your petitioners will ever pray.

Now, Mr. Speaker, the signatures on this petition come from the communities of Beechy and Demaine, and I'm pleased to present the petition on their behalf.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Ms. Draude: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to stand today also to present a petition regarding the Fyke report. The prayer reads:

Wherefore your petitioners humbly pray that your Hon. Assembly may be pleased to cause the government to take the necessary steps to ensure that the Wadena health care centre be maintained at its current level of service at minimum, with 24-hour acute care, emergency, and doctoral services available, as well as laboratory, public health, home care, long-term care services for use in our district and beyond.

The people that have signed this petition are all from Wadena.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Stewart: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise to present a petition signed by citizens concerned with the condition of Highway 339, and the prayer reads:

Wherefore your petitioners humbly pray that your Hon. Assembly may be pleased to cause the government to repair Highway 339 in order to facilitate economic development initiatives.

And this petition is signed by individuals from the communities of Briercrest, Drinkwater, Baidon, and Moose Jaw.

I so present.

Ms. Eagles: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, I rise today to present a petition on behalf of citizens concerned about the cuts at Assiniboia Pioneer Lodge. And the prayer reads as follows:

Wherefore your petitioners humbly pray that your Hon. Assembly may be pleased to cause the government to take the necessary action to ensure that, at the very least, current levels of services and care are maintained at Pioneer Lodge in Assiniboia.

And as in duty bound, your petitioners will ever pray.

And this is signed by citizens of Limerick, Verwood, and

Assiniboia.

I so present. Thank you.

Mr. Wall: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again I rise on behalf of people from across southwest Saskatchewan concerned about the hospital. And they have signed the petition, the prayer which reads as follows:

Wherefore your petitioners will humbly pray that your Hon. Assembly may be pleased to cause the provincial government to carefully consider Swift Current's request for a new hospital.

And as in duty bound, your petitioners will ever pray.

Mr. Speaker, this petition today is signed by residents of the city of Swift Current, of Gull Lake, of Abbey, of Eston, Mr. Speaker, and the city of Regina, as well as Waldeck.

I so present.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Ms. Bakken: — Mr. Speaker, I rise today to present a petition on behalf of citizens of southern Saskatchewan who are concerned about the speed at which vehicles can pass emergency tow trucks. And the prayer reads:

Wherefore your petitioners humbly pray that your Hon. Assembly may be pleased to cause the government to include emergency tow trucks in their description of emergency vehicles for Bill 78, section 37(1).

And the petition is signed by residents of Weyburn, Yellow Grass, and Pangman, and Francis.

I so present.

Mr. McMorris: — Mr. Speaker, I too present petitions on behalf of citizens of Saskatchewan regarding the EMS service. This petition reads as follows:

Wherefore your petitioners humbly pray that your Hon. Assembly may be pleased to cause the government to not implement the consolidation and centralization of ambulance services as recommended in the EMS report and affirm its intent to work to improve community-based ambulance services.

And as in duty bound, your petitioners will ever pray.

Mr. Speaker, this petition is signed by people in the Redvers, Wauchope area.

I so present.

Mr. D'Autremont: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I also have a petition to present. The prayer reads:

Wherefore your petitioners humbly pray that your Hon. Assembly may be pleased to cause the government to take the necessary steps to ensure that the Redvers Health

Centre be maintained at its current level of service at minimum, with 24-hour acute care, emergency and doctoral services available, as well as laboratory, physiotherapy, public health, home care, and long-term care services available to the users from our district, southeast Saskatchewan and southwest Manitoba, and beyond.

And as in duty bound your petitioners will ever pray.

This petition, Mr. Speaker, comes from the people of the Redvers, Wauchope, and Alida areas.

I so present.

Mr. Brkich: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have a petition here signed by good citizens concerned about the high rates of SaskEnergy, SaskPower.

Wherefore your petitioners humbly pray that your Hon. Assembly may be pleased to cause the government to use a portion of its windfall oil and gas revenues to provide a more substantial energy rebate to Saskatchewan consumers.

And as in duty bound, your petitioners will ever pray.

Signed by good citizens from Watson, Bladworth, Kenaston, Strongfield, Loreburn, Elbow, Regina, Saskatoon, Davidson.

I so present.

Mr. Allchurch: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise in the Assembly today to bring forth a petition signed by the citizens of Saskatchewan concerned about the cellular telephone coverage.

Wherefore your petitioners humbly pray that your Hon. Assembly may be pleased to cause the government to provide reliable cellular telephone service in the districts of Spiritwood, Medstead, Glaslyn, Leoville, Chitek Lake, Big River, Canwood, Debden, Shellbrook, Parkside, Shell Lake, Duck Lake, and Macdowall.

And the citizens on this petition, Mr. Speaker, are from Chitek Lake, Spiritwood, Shell Lake, and Medstead.

I so present.

Mr. Peters: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have a petition signed by citizens of Saskatchewan concerned with what's happening at Pioneer Lodge in Assiniboia. And the prayer reads as follows:

Wherefore your petitioners humbly pray that your Hon. Assembly may be pleased to cause the government to take the necessary action to ensure that, at very least, current levels of service and care are maintained at Pioneer Lodge in Assiniboia.

Mr. Speaker, the petition is signed by folks from Assiniboia, Crane Valley, and Willow Bunch.

I so present.

Mr. Huyghebaert: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise again with continued and increasing concerns with reference to the cuts at the Assiniboia Pioneer Lodge. And the prayer reads as follows:

Wherefore your petitioners humbly pray that your Hon. Assembly may be pleased to cause the government to take the necessary action to ensure that, at the very least, current levels of services and care are maintained at Pioneer Lodge in Assiniboia.

And as in duty bound, your petitioners will ever pray.

And, Mr. Speaker, the signators on this are from Assiniboia, Mossbank, Hazenmore, Ardill, Rockglen, Lafleche, and Meyronne. I so present.

READING AND RECEIVING PETITIONS

Clerk: — According to order the following petitions have been reviewed and pursuant to rule 12(7) they are hereby read and received.

Petitions of citizens asking the government to continue to fund the province's road network.

And other petitions that are addendums to sessional papers nos. 3, 4, 5, 10, 58, 121, and 137.

INTRODUCTION OF GUESTS

Mr. Kasperski: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, it's my pleasure to introduce to you this afternoon and through you to my colleagues in the Legislative Assembly, 45 grade 5 and grade 6 students from the good school of McLurg in the constituency of Regina Sherwood.

And, Mr. Speaker, it's very special for me because I'd also like to welcome Mrs. Carol Grant and Dorothy Lind, the teachers; and the parent volunteers, Gary Wilmot, Mrs. Zacharias, Mr. Piotrofsky, and Mrs. Lott.

And, Mr. Speaker, this is the sixth year in a row Mrs. Grant has brought classes here and it's a great pleasure to see her again. I'd like to point out to you and to the members of the Assembly, that Mrs. Grant taught both of my sons preschool in a program before, and I taught her son baseball.

Well both of my sons are graduating from university a week from this Friday, here at the U of R (University of Regina), and her son, I notice, isn't playing professional baseball. So that does go to show who the better teacher has been.

Welcome to Mrs. Grant and to her class from McLurg.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Ms. Draude: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm delighted today to stand and introduce to you and through you to all members, students from my constituency who are job-shadowing me today. They're a bright, enthusiastic group of people and we won't have to worry about the future of our province when these young people are in charge of it.

Today we have Caitlin Ponath from Naicam, Jake Berg from Pleasantdale, Briana Pisian from Wadena, Logan Banadyga from Wadena, Koren Wohlgeomuth from Spalding, Stacey Lutz from Porcupine Plain, Derita Ekra from Weekes, Amy Shuya from Porcupine Plain, Stephanie Geenen from Muenster, Heather Moellenbeck from Englefeld, and Lacey Bohay from Englefeld as well.

Please welcome them here today.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Wartman: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As a former member of the Youth Parliament, I'm happy to introduce two young men who are members of Youth Parliament who take an active role in political life in this province. They're both up in the west gallery — Dana Brûlé and Steven Lloyd.

Dana is a former leader of the official opposition in Youth Parliament and he wanted me to assure the members opposite that that is in no way to mean that he has a further association with the opposition at this time.

And the other chap, Steven Lloyd, was former premier, former premier of the Youth Parliament and he wanted me to assure the members that he is still a strong supporter of government.

So welcome to you folks and I hope you enjoy the proceedings.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

Regina Chamber of Commerce Paragon Awards

Mr. McMorris: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, it was a great honour on Saturday night for me to attend the second annual Regina Chamber of Commerce Paragon Awards.

Mr. Speaker, nine different businesses were awarded excellence in their categories. And it was really quite interesting to go through and see some of the businesses that have done so well.

It was also interesting to know that the categories were set up that no government could compete against private industry, a lesson that perhaps this government should know.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. McMorris: — Mr. Speaker, I'm just going to briefly go through the nine different award winners and young entrepreneurs. It was Total Landscape Care for community involvement; it was National Print-It Centre/Signature Graphics on community achievement; Z99 for their telethon that they do for infant care. Marketing and promotion achievement was Access Communications. Export achievement was Off the Wall Productions who does 90 per cent of its work outside the province but is centred here in Regina.

(13:45)

CNT Tours won customer service excellence, and CNT Tours quite often do we have in the gallery showing people the

Legislative Building. New business venture was StoneCreek Financial Group; the Athena award and also the business of the year award was presented to Employment Network Inc.

A job well done by these nine businesses as well as all the other ones that were nominated in those categories.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Important Milestone for North Central Health District

Mr. Wartman: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On Friday there was an event which contained a double dose of good news for the people of Melfort and the North Central Health District.

The Minister of Health, the member from Melfort, the deputy mayor, and the chairperson of the health district all took part in the official opening of the expanded, renovated Melfort Hospital. That was the first dose.

In the hospital, the emergency ward, the outpatient areas, the lab, and the X-ray areas were all improved. And it was fitting that the ribbon-cutting ceremony took place during the health district's staff appreciation event because, of course, it is the medical professionals and support staff who ensure the high quality of health care we have come to expect. This is good news for Melfort and we're all happy for it.

At the same time though, Mr. Speaker, an additional announcement was made. The minister announced that approval has been given for a replacement project which will involve new construction of 105 long-term care beds with support services to replace the current Parkland Care Centre. Construction for this project will commence next spring with a 75/25 per cent cost sharing between the province and local governments. This too is good news.

Another example of people working together to ensure the very best health services possible. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Gantfoer: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I too attended an event this past Friday that I had the pleasure of joining the Minister of Health at in my constituency. And it marked two important milestones in the North Central Health District.

The first milestone was the ribbon-cutting for the renovation and expansion of the emergency, outpatients, laboratory, and X-ray departments at the Melfort Hospital. This million-dollar project will greatly enhance the services that the Melfort Hospital will be able to provide to the citizens of the entire district and beyond.

The second milestone was the announcement by the Minister of Health that the province has granted final approval for the construction of the new 105-bed long-term care facility to replace the aging Parkland hospital.

Both of these milestones are a result of a great deal of effort by many people.

First let me express our community's appreciation to the

Minister of Health for his participation in this event. The minister's interest and commitment to this project is noted and appreciated. The North Central Health District chairman, Dale Link, the board, and CEO (chief executive officer), David Fan, congratulations for a job well done.

I'm sure that the minister will agree that these projects were easier to support because of the excellent preparation and documentation that was done by all.

And finally to all the health care workers in the district, congratulations. It is because of your ongoing commitment to improving health care services that all of this is possible.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Education Conference in Meadow Lake

Hon. Mr. Sonntag: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On May 10 it was my great pleasure to bring greetings from the government and the Minister of Education at the Breaking Down Barriers: Old Challenges, New Solutions Conference in Meadow Lake, a Conference for Storefront and Alternative Schools of Saskatchewan.

Every child, Mr. Speaker, regardless of residence, race, social class, or any other consideration deserves the best our education system has to offer. A school is more than bricks and mortar. It is more than desks and books. A school is a place where teachers and students come together in the creative search for knowledge and truth.

Success in education is measured in the lives of individual children. For those who work in the alternative school settings, the challenges can be enormous. At the Store Front School in Meadow Lake and throughout Saskatchewan, creative and dedicated educators are adapting the education system to the particular needs of their students.

Storefront and alternative schools are a valuable resource in meeting the diverse needs of Saskatchewan students. Storefront and alternative schools represent the flexibility, responsiveness, and local initiative that Saskatchewan Education encourages and supports. A very large thank you to those educators, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you very much.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

National Police Week

Mr. Heppner: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It gives me great pleasure to rise in the House today to raise awareness of National Police Week. Included in this week is International Peace Officer Memorial Day, to be recognized tomorrow, May 15.

Mr. Speaker, National Police Week is governed by four specific objectives: to act as a vehicle to reinforce ties with the community; to honour police officers for the public safety and

security they provide to their communities; to promote the work that the police do in those communities; and to inform the community about the police's role in public safety and security.

Mr. Speaker, next to our health, nothing is more important and sacred than our own safety and security and that of the communities in which we live. Twenty-four hours a day, 365 days a year we depend on the police officers, not only to protect us when we need protecting but also to uphold the laws that we as a peacekeeping society have set down.

In the past decade, Mr. Speaker, we have seen appalling increase in crime statistics, some of these increases occurring right here in Saskatchewan. Residents in all communities are concerned about their own safety and want reassurance that crime prevention remains a priority.

Mr. Speaker, I ask all members of the House to join me in recognizing the important contribution that all police officers make in our province by acknowledging National Police Week here in the province. Thank you.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Honey Bee Manufacturing Ltd.

Mr. Yates: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. More success in rural Saskatchewan. Honey Bee Manufacturing of Frontier is in the middle of a significant expansion project, Mr. Speaker.

For those of you who are unaware, Honey Bee Manufacturing Ltd. is primarily involved in the manufacturing and distribution of products for the farm equipment market. This internationally successful company started on a farm near Bracken, Saskatchewan, Mr. Speaker, through the innovative thought of Greg and Glenn Honey.

In the late 1970s Greg and Glenn designed a rod weeder attachment for tillage equipment. This weeder along with the patent covering the quick-attach mounting concept in 1985 placed the Honeys on the road to success or in this case, the field to success, Mr. Speaker.

Today, Mr. Speaker, construction on an addition to the plant in Frontier has taken place to support the increase in demand. This expansion will allow the Frontier-based business to streamline its operations and increase production capacity significantly.

Honey Bee Manufacturing is one of the biggest employers in southern Saskatchewan, employing about 110 people on the shop floor alone. This company's success means success for Frontier and its surrounding area.

That is why this government would like to congratulate Greg and Glenn Honey on their outstanding achievement. It is people and companies like these that will help this province into a prosperous future, Mr. Speaker. Thank you.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Spiritwood and District Co-op

Ms. Jones: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Even more good news

for the province of Saskatchewan. The Spiritwood and District Co-op had their fourth consecutive record-breaking year in fiscal 2000, topping last year's growth in sales by a phenomenal 33.2 per cent.

Sales of 9,136,003 displayed an increase of almost 1.3 million over 1999 sales. Mr. Speaker, the co-op's net savings also reached a record level, exceeding \$576,000 this year.

In 1961 — its first year of operation — the co-op sales were \$71,580. Now \$71,000 is an average business day in the month of June for the co-op. At a recent conference in Saskatoon the board president for the Spiritwood Co-op said:

The question of what makes one co-op successful and viable while another struggles to survive was discussed. The answers: remain grassroots oriented, do what you do best, increase benefits for the membership, and cultivate membership loyalty.

Mr. Speaker, this government believes in these same principles for success. And working together with rural Saskatchewan and sticking close to our grassroots, this government is dedicated to ensuring the continued prosperity of all its people.

I'd like all members of the House to join with me in congratulating manager, Warner Kabatoff and the staff of the Spiritwood Co-op on a job well done.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

ORAL QUESTIONS

SaskTel Investment in Ontario Company

Mr. Wall: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My question's for the minister responsible for SaskTel.

Mr. Speaker, SaskTel has already lost millions of dollars on its failed ventures into the dot-com industry like IQ&A and Clickabid. But have they learned anything from this, Mr. Speaker? Well apparently not.

Last week the NDP (New Democratic Party) spent another \$8.3 million to buy an Ontario-based company called agdealer.com. This company helps ag dealers and producers buy and sell equipment online. But, Mr. Speaker, there is already a Saskatchewan company that is a recognized industry leader in this area. IronSolutions.com of Outlook, Saskatchewan provides exactly the same service.

Mr. Speaker, to the minister, why did SaskTel spend \$8.3 million to buy an Ontario company to compete with a very successful Saskatchewan company?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Mr. Sonntag: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well the member opposite is exactly wrong when he says they provide exactly the same service. They do not.

I have personally been in contact with the people from ironwork solutions, Mr. Speaker. In fact, what Ag Dealer provides, the

service they provide is complementary to what ironworks provides, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, I've spoken with them directly. It's my understanding they will also be meeting with SaskTel officials, I believe this Wednesday, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Wall: — Mr. Speaker, Mr. Speaker, I'm sure the company will be grateful for the meeting. The government may also want to meet with the Canada West Equipment Dealers who have some questions about this deal.

Mr. Speaker, IRON Solutions is recognized as a North American industry leader. They serve about 6,000 implement dealers in Canada and the US (United States). Their Web site attracts over a million hits a week. They have built this very successful company in Outlook, Saskatchewan. They employ about 20 workers with a \$700,000-a-year payroll.

Mr. Speaker, the Canada West Equipment Dealers Association says, and I quote:

More dealers in Saskatchewan use IRON Solutions than any other service. So it's hard to believe dealers were asking for the services provided by agdealer.com. This announcement comes as a complete surprise (they say).

They go on to say:

We were not consulted by SaskTel as to the existing services that were in place for dealers or whether or not additional services were even necessary.

Mr. Speaker, to the minister: why did the NDP buy an Ontario-based dot-com company to compete with a Saskatchewan company without even consulting Saskatchewan equipment dealers as to whether they'd use the service?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Mr. Sonntag: — Well, Mr. Speaker, in answer to the question why did we do it, we did it because we wanted to diversify the portfolio; we want to bring jobs to Saskatchewan, Mr. Speaker. That's why we wanted to do it, Mr. Speaker. We want to raise revenues outside of Saskatchewan.

Mr. Speaker, let me say again to the member, we are not in competition with this company. I've personally been in discussion with the people from ironworks. Let me lay out clearly what they do, SaskTel through Ag Dealer, Mr. Speaker, provides the hardware, if you will, ironworks solutions, Mr. Speaker, provides the software, Mr. Speaker.

There may be some very small area, Mr. Speaker, where there is overlap, but it is very, very small, Mr. Speaker. We've been in consultation with them. There's a meeting coming up on Wednesday, as I understand it.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Wall: — Mr. Speaker, I'm sure the minister has seen the

open letter that IRON Solutions wrote on this very subject, and they referred to Ag Dealers dot-com as one of their major competitors in this country, Mr. Speaker. They do.

Mr. Speaker, it now appears that SaskTel has spent 8.3 million taxpayers' dollars to buy a service for farm implement dealers that they . . . and they didn't even bother to ask those dealers if they wanted it, Mr. Speaker. The Canada West Equipment Dealers Association says that ag dealers were quite happy with IRON Solutions. They don't want SaskTel's new service, they don't need SaskTel's new service, and very likely, they won't use SaskTel's new service.

They say, and I quote:

We question why the government would form an alliance with a less successful competitor to an independent Saskatchewan-based business.

It's very clear that this investment in Ag Dealer dot-com is, quote, "not in the best interest of dealers in the province."

Mr. Speaker, if it's not too late, will the minister rethink this deal?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Mr. Sonntag: — Well, Mr. Speaker the member says that the dealerships like the work that ironworks provides, and the service that they provide. And he's right — of course they do, Mr. Speaker, they provide very good service to the dealerships of Saskatchewan. And Mr. Speaker, Ag Dealer as well, has . . . we've received a number of calls from different dealers who are very appreciative of this as well.

They are complementary services, Mr. Speaker. Ag Dealer, through SaskTel, Mr. Speaker, provides the hardware, as I've described. Ironwork solutions as the member has correctly described provides the software, Mr. Speaker. They complement each other, Mr. Speaker, very well.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Wall: — Mr. Speaker, a moment ago in justifying the purchase of an Ontario company to compete in part, at least, with a Saskatchewan company, the minister indicated that it was all about diversification and job creation. How does buying an Ontario company create jobs in Saskatchewan? They don't get it over there, Mr. Speaker.

(14:00)

Mr. Speaker, in this particular deal there is no good outcome. If this venture fails, SaskTel stands to lose millions. If it succeeds, in part it will succeed at the expense of a company already in business and operating in the province of Saskatchewan. That's the bottom line here.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Wall: — Mr. Speaker, can the minister explain the public policy behind that, and can he confirm if in fact anybody in the cabinet asked these questions when he brought this deal

forward. What is the public policy benefit of buying an Ontario-based company to compete with a Saskatchewan firm already in business?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Mr. Sonntag: — Well again, Mr. Speaker, they are not directly in competition with ironworks solutions in any way, Mr. Speaker. There will be some small overlap. We've talked about that with the company, Mr. Speaker. I said that in my last answer, Mr. Speaker. We've talked with them; we're going to meet with them on Wednesday, as I understand it.

But, Mr. Speaker, we offer a very different service through AgDealer, Mr. Speaker. It is basically the hard line that is provided through AgDealer, and it's the software package that's provided through ironworks. They complement each other, Mr. Speaker. And SaskTel, through AgDealer, is prepared to work with anyone, and they'll be meeting with them on Wednesday, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Elhard: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, the Minister of CIC (Crown Investments Corporation of Saskatchewan) can't seem to adequately explain how this deal is going to help Saskatchewan, so I'd like to ask the Minister of Rural Revitalization. Madam Minister, how does this deal help rural Saskatchewan?

Now as I understand it, the minister's job is to look at every policy decision through a rural lens. Those are her words exactly.

Mr. Speaker, SaskTel just spent \$8.3 million to buy up an Ontario company. Now that's going to compete with a business headquartered in Outlook, Saskatchewan. I'd like to ask the minister if she looked at this decision, and if she would provide us with her department's analysis of how this deal will help rural Saskatchewan.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I want to thank the member for the question. I had the opportunity to be in Outlook last week and had the opportunity to travel with one of the vice-presidents of ironworks to Saskatoon.

Mr. Speaker, what I can say to the member is that SaskTel last year garnered over \$30 million in dividends that were returned to the people of this province. SaskTel is a provincial telephone company that is competing within a telephone world that is becoming increasingly globalized.

If we are to keep SaskTel and its head office jobs in this province along with the other jobs in rural Saskatchewan, we have to grow SaskTel, Mr. Speaker. Ironworks . . .

The Speaker: — Order, order, order. Order. I would all members to give the minister a chance to give her complete answer.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Mr. Speaker, if we are to keep jobs in this province, we need to keep SaskTel, not only head office jobs but jobs all around rural Saskatchewan. We think that Ag Dealer, along with ironworks which is located in Outlook, Saskatchewan, has the perfect synergy to grow SaskTel and return more dividends and more jobs to the people of this province.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Elhard: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, the minister has no answer because there is no adequate answer to this question. This decision doesn't help rural Saskatchewan. It doesn't help anyone in Saskatchewan, for that matter. In fact, the minister probably wasn't even aware of it. CIC officials didn't think they had to answer questions from their former vice-chair and they certainly aren't going to take any direction from the Minister of Rural Revitalization.

Mr. Speaker, did the minister even know about this deal, that SaskTel was going into competition with a rural Saskatchewan-based company, or did SaskTel fail to provide this information to the minister and the cabinet as well?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. What I can inform the member is that SaskTel has recently purchased Ag Dealer, and as the member or the minister for CIC indicated, we do not believe that this is in direct competition to ironworks.

What we do believe, Mr. Speaker, and that is why the meeting will occur on Wednesday, is that we have the ability in this province to create a synergy between ironworks and Ag Dealer and create the biggest on-line used equipment, farm equipment, and heavy equipment in North America. And that means jobs in rural Saskatchewan; that means jobs in this province. And, Mr. Speaker, we need to grow the economy, we need to create wealth, and we need to return dividends to the people of this province. That's what this government's about, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Elhard: — Mr. Speaker, having spent about 20 of the last years of my life in the farm machinery business, I can tell very clearly that the competition is going to be direct and explicit. And it's pretty hard to believe that SaskTel wasn't aware that IRON Solutions was actually based in Outlook either. After all, this company does \$60,000 worth of business a year with SaskTel.

Now how did SaskTel miss this little detail? Was there due diligence? Mr. Speaker, it took us about 30 seconds on a good search engine to find IronSolutions.com and to figure out that they're in the exact same business as agdealer.com. Now if SaskTel didn't tell cabinet there was a Saskatchewan business in the same business, then they were deliberately withholding important information from the cabinet.

My question, Mr. Speaker, is for the Premier. Mr. Premier, how much longer are you going to tolerate CIC officials withholding information and making end runs around your ministers?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. What I want to say again to the member is that we have a telephone company in this province that is located in this province, that provides services to this province, and last year returned a over \$30 million dividend to the people of this province.

Mr. Speaker, if you look at telephone companies across the globe they are merging and globalizing. If we are to keep head office, good-paying jobs in this province and jobs in rural Saskatchewan, we do not want to privatize SaskTel because that will mean a flight of jobs outside of this province.

We are going to grow SaskTel. We don't believe there is competition. In fact we have assured ironworks that SaskTel will not be in competition with this rural Saskatchewan business. It will not be in competition and in fact, we believe, we believe that there's an opportunity for Ag Dealer and ironworks to grow and provide a leading North America service in the area of used farm equipment and heavy equipment in this country and in North America.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

SaskTel Investment in Nashville, Tennessee Company

Mr. Wall: — Mr. Speaker, the minister says that SaskTel's not going to be in competition with the private sector. She ought to tell that to Access cable; she ought to tell it to Shaw cable; to the North Battleford community co-operative that provides cable there; to all the alarm companies in this province that have to compete with SecurTek; and now to this company in Outlook, Mr. Speaker. The words don't fit with the facts, Mr. Speaker.

My question's for the minister responsible for CIC. An order in council released today shows that SaskTel just bought another dot-com company for \$7 million. This time it's a Nashville-based company called TappedInto.com, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, why is SaskTel spending another 7 million taxpayers' dollars on a Nashville-based dot-com company?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Mr. Sonntag: — Well, Mr. Speaker, I want to answer that question first of all by saying this. Last week or the week before, that member and the member from Melfort said that there were no changes that came out of Channel Lake, Mr. Speaker. And I stood in this spot and said we implemented every change, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, that member would not even know about that investment if the changes through the . . . by virtue of Channel Lake were not . . . had not been implemented, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, it was a direct result of the changes that came from Channel Lake that an order in council like that was even required, Mr. Speaker. That's how that member found out about it.

Why are we doing it? Mr. Speaker, because it's a good investment and it brings jobs here to Saskatchewan.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Wall: — Two things about the minister's answer, Mr. Speaker. One, the government seems to be quite proud of the fact that it's actually telling taxpayers now when it spends millions of their dollars on corporations out of this country.

And the second thing is, he mentions again job creation in Saskatchewan. He ought to explain to Saskatchewan people how buying a Nashville-based dot-com is going to create jobs in the province of Saskatchewan.

Mr. Speaker, TappedInto.com provides streaming audio and video services. But SaskTel already has a streaming audio and video Web site called Club Magic dot-com, although you wouldn't know it from their annual reports. It doesn't receive much mention there frankly, Mr. Speaker, which suggests that SaskTel's probably not too proud of its efforts to date.

But, Mr. Speaker, the question to the minister is this: how much has SaskTel spent on Club Magic to date and how much revenue has Club Magic generated?

Hon. Mr. Sonntag: — Mr. Speaker, the member asks how can an investment like that bring jobs to Saskatchewan? Mr. Speaker, why doesn't he ask the business here in Regina how it will bring jobs to Saskatchewan?

Mr. Speaker, those investments, Mr. Speaker, will bring jobs right here to the city of Regina, Mr. Speaker. Those investments will return dividends to the people of Saskatchewan, Mr. Speaker. Those investments, Mr. Speaker, I predict will bring wealth to this province, Mr. Speaker, will diversify the risk as in insurance, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, these are good investments, Mr. Speaker, and I think the people of Saskatchewan will judge each one on their own merit.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Wall: — Mr. Speaker, if we keep getting dividends from these new dot-com ventures like we got from IQ&A that lost millions; like we got from Clickabid that lost millions; like the millions lost in SecurTek, he's not only going to break SaskTel, he'll break the province in the bargain, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Wall: — Mr. Speaker, once again the NDP appears to be throwing good money after bad. Club Magic doesn't seem to be making any money or going anywhere so now SaskTel is spending another \$7 million to buy out a Nashville company that is apparently doing the same thing as Club Magic within SaskTel.

They did lose millions on IQ&A. They lost millions on Clickabid. What have they learned from it, Mr. Speaker? Apparently absolutely bupkis is what they've learned from it, Mr. Speaker. Why does the NDP keep gambling millions of dollars on dot-com companies when their track record in this area has been an absolute, unmitigated disaster?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Mr. Sonntag: — Well, Mr. Speaker, why is SaskTel doing this, Mr. Speaker? They're doing it to diversify their portfolios and spread the risk, Mr. Speaker, bringing revenues here to the people of Saskatchewan, Mr. Speaker. That's why they're doing it.

And from that member, Mr. Speaker, who used to work as an MA (ministerial assistant) for the minister of public participation, it's clear to the people of Saskatchewan, I hope, that his interest is privatizing SaskTel, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, we are partnering — I emphasize the word partnering — with the private sector, Mr. Speaker, in providing complementary services with them to bring services to Saskatchewan, bring dividends and revenues to Saskatchewan so that we can provide services in the constituencies that those members mostly represent, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Quality of Drinking Water

Mr. Kwiatkowski: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. My question is for the Minister of Environment. As a result of the difficulties of the water supply experienced by the citizens of North Battleford, people across this province are considering their own drinking water sources today, and many municipalities are grappling with aging sewer and water treatment infrastructures.

Hundreds of Saskatchewan communities have applied for federal/provincial infrastructure money only to be turned down. And now the irony of it all is that those same communities are hearing this NDP government has spent \$7 million to buy a dot-com in the United States — Nashville, Tennessee, I believe — and another 8.3 million to buy an Ontario dot-com company.

Mr. Speaker, to the minister: \$15.3 million is the same amount the cabinet decision item says it would take to fix water quality problem in this province. Why are dot-com companies taking priority over safe drinking water?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Mr. Belanger: — This government has a story of success to talk about when working with the different towns and villages across the great province of Saskatchewan that meet the challenge of safe water. Mr. Speaker, on Friday this government announced \$19.4 million in new funding for water and waste water management systems.

Twenty-two of the communities, which received precautionary drinking water advisory, applied for funding. And, Mr. Speaker, they received it. That's 100 per cent of those that applied, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Mr. Belanger: — Now, Mr. Speaker, this government moved very fast and moved very quickly, Mr. Speaker. We talked about the different initiatives that we had over the past five months since the CDI (cabinet decision item) came to

cabinet, Mr. Speaker. This government moved very quickly, Mr. Speaker.

And I can say today that we voted in favour of that budget. And all the measures that we undertook, you guys voted against in that budget. And you have to answer that question . . .

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

The Speaker: — I would ask the minister in his total response to go through the Chair with all statements.

(14:15)

Mr. Kwiatkowski: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is absolutely unbelievable to think that Saskatchewan communities and the people of Saskatchewan, many who don't have the financial resources to repair and build new water treatment facilities — and one of the reasons being there wasn't a single cent of revenue-sharing increase in this last budget — are taking a back seat to the whims of CIC executives buying up fly-by-night dot-com companies. How can this government make that decision?

Let's see, on one hand, safe quality drinking water. On the other hand, two risky dot-com companies. Which is it, Mr. Speaker?

The people of Saskatchewan expect and certainly deserve access to safe, clean drinking water. Yet this government knew about the serious concerns of the department officials and did not act. Instead, they've hidden behind a communication strategy designed to mislead the public and ensure the people of Saskatchewan drinking water is safe.

Why, Mr. Speaker, is wild CIC spending at the cabinet table taking priority?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Mr. Osika: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's unfortunate that the members opposite won't give the whole picture of what the government's been doing.

This fiscal year, Mr. Speaker, cities will receive an increase of over \$8 million in direct funding.

And, Mr. Speaker, what I do want to let people know is that there has been a proactive approach taken to problems that are facing the people in Saskatchewan. Between 1994 and 1998, the federal/provincial governments participated in a tripartite infrastructure program; \$167 million, Mr. Speaker, was provided over the life of that program.

In 2000/2001, the province introduced a municipal component of the Centenary Fund which provides \$5 million per year for a four-year period to support municipal infrastructure, Mr. Speaker.

I think the total story should be told in a chronological sequence of events, the efforts to assist people throughout the province.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Kwiatkowski: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, how do you think the people of this province are going to feel when they hear the NDP government is blowing \$15 million on two risky dot-com ventures?

How do you think the city mayors who have been forced to raise municipal property taxes and put off water treatment infrastructure projects will feel when they hear the NDP government says there is no money but there is \$15 million on Internet ventures?

No more municipal revenue-sharing grants for municipalities, hundreds of Saskatchewan communities turned down for infrastructure grants. Yet high-flying CIC executives can drop \$15 million just like that, to provide services that already exist in this province.

Mr. Speaker, will the Minister of Environment explain why the needs of municipalities and our provincial water infrastructure system are not a priority for this government?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Mr. Osika: — Well, Mr. Speaker, we could do an awful lot over here with \$600 million that unfortunately has to pay for interest on a debt that was accumulated in the last administration.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Mr. Osika: — Let me just continue, Mr. Speaker, with a chronological sequence of events. 1999-2000 and 2000-2001, the province — the province — funded the municipal infrastructure program independent of federal participation. Ten million dollars was provided to upgrade municipal infrastructure each year.

In '99-2000 the city of North Battleford alone received \$133,970 for a sewage lift station, forced main, and gravity sewer project. In 2000-2001 they received an additional 133,000 for water and waste water, storm sewer, and surface drainage projects, Mr. Speaker.

Between '94 and '98 the federal/provincial governments participated again in the tripartite infrastructure program.

There are efforts being made, Mr. Speaker, and I wish the opposition wouldn't condemn those municipalities that are working with senior governments to try and improve their projects.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

INTRODUCTION OF BILLS

Bill No. 30 — The Labour Standards Amendment Act, 2001

Hon. Mr. Trew: — Mr. Speaker, I move that Bill No. 30, The Labour Standards Amendment Act, 2001 be now introduced and read the first time.

Motion agreed to, the Bill read a first time and ordered to be read a second time at the next sitting.

Bill No. 31 — The Saskatchewan Heritage Foundation Amendment Act, 2001

Hon. Mr. Osika: — Mr. Speaker, I move that Bill No. 31, The Saskatchewan Heritage Foundation Amendment Act, 2001 be now introduced and read for the first time.

Motion agreed to, the Bill read a first time and ordered to be read a second time at the next sitting.

Bill No. 32 — The Queen's Bench Amendment Act, 2001

Hon. Mr. Axworthy: — Mr. Speaker, I move that Bill No. 32, The Queen's Bench Amendment Act, 2001 be now introduced and read the first time.

Motion agreed to, the Bill read a first time and ordered to be read a second time at the next sitting.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Introduction of Two New Pages

The Speaker: — Members before orders of the day, I wish to inform the Assembly we have two new pages for the remainder of the session and I would like to introduce them at this time. Sarah Theaker, would you stand please, and Jennifer Simair. And would the members please welcome Jennifer and Sarah.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

The Speaker: — Why is the member on his feet?

Hon. Mr. Goulet: — Leave to introduce visitors.

Leave granted.

INTRODUCTION OF GUESTS

Hon. Mr. Goulet: — Mr. Speaker, I am indeed honoured to introduce special visitors to this legislature.

Over here we have Roy and Gail Peekeekoot. They are travelling across Saskatchewan. They travelled from La Ronge and it took them ten and a half days on Roy's scooter. And they're raising awareness in regards to people with special abilities. They also work with the First Nations network, you know, for disabilities. And I knew that Roy told me that he's also worked with Gary Tinker and Gary Tinker Foundation. So basically, it is an honour to introduce them to the House.

And also along with them is a contingent of family and friends over there. So in the west gallery we have Robert McNeilly, Melanie Albert, Aaron Masuskapoe, Samantha Masuskapoe, Phillip Hyman, Elmer Masuskapoe. And of course, you hear that noise from the special little person, Chakinah Masuskapoe.

Guests, I would also like to say . . .

(The hon. member spoke for a time in Cree.)

So I guess I'll invite all members, to please introduce them to the House.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

The Speaker: — I recognize the member for Humboldt and why is she on her feet?

Ms. Julé: — Mr. Speaker, on behalf of the official opposition . . .

The Speaker: — I take it the member is asking for leave to introduce guests?

Leave granted.

Ms. Julé: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, on behalf of the official opposition I too would like to welcome to the House, Roy and the contingent that are with him, in your very worthwhile work and your efforts to raise awareness for disabilities and the many people in the province who are dealing with them.

So welcome to the legislature and I wish you the very, very best in your work ahead of you.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

The Speaker: — Why is the member from Regina Northeast on his feet?

Mr. Harper: — Leave to introduce a guest.

Leave granted.

Mr. Harper: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, I'd like to introduce to you and to all members of the House, a gentleman who is seated behind the bar who is no stranger to this House, having served in this House during the Blakeney government as the minister of Social Services, Mr. Alex Taylor.

Mr. Taylor is . . . I would say I am very fortunate to have Mr. Taylor as my constituent. I'd ask all the members to offer him a very warm welcome.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

ORDERS OF THE DAY

WRITTEN QUESTIONS

Mr. Yates: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm extremely pleased to stand and respond on behalf of the government to question no. 175 and table a response.

The Speaker: — 175 is tabled.

GOVERNMENT ORDERS

SECOND READINGS

Bill No. 22 — The Assessment Management Agency Amendment Act, 2001

Hon. Mr. Osika: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, I rise today to move the second reading of The Assessment

Management Agency Amendment Act, 2001.

The Saskatchewan Assessment Management Agency — more commonly referred to, Mr. Speaker, as SAMA — is the agency that establishes property assessment policy for the province. As well, SAMA provides assessment services to most municipalities and oversees the assessment process for those municipalities that do their own assessments.

The role SAMA plays in the province is a vital and important one, Mr. Speaker. The proper and accurate assessment of property values for taxation purposes is critical to the ongoing operations of every municipality and school board in Saskatchewan. As such, it is important that SAMA stakeholders, including government, municipalities and the public have access to the information necessary to build a relationship of trust, confidence and accountability.

Mr. Speaker, amendments to this Act address a number of matters that will improve the relationship between the province and the municipalities and SAMA.

I would like to take the next few minutes to just outline some of the key points and the provisions in this particular Bill. Mr. Speaker, SAMA receives its funding from the province and the municipalities. Increased financial reporting requirements being introduced in this Bill will provide SAMA's stakeholders and the public with a greater opportunity to see where funding contributions are spent.

In addition, the provisions will allow for more accurate and timely budget preparation relating to SAMA. These provisions respond to the need for improved transparency and accountability for all organizations that receive public funds.

In the past, Mr. Speaker, some municipalities have expressed concern about how their funding contributions are used by SAMA. As a result of these amendments, they will be able to obtain the information to address these very concerns.

Specifically, the amendments that will ensure increased transparency and accountability include requirements that SAMA prepare and submit three key documents on an annual basis. They are a report on the activities of the agency, a financial statement prepared in accordance with generally accepted accounting principles and a statement of agency public accounts.

Perhaps the most significant of these requirements is the statement of agency public accounts. This is a new requirement. The statement of agency public accounts will be modelled after the municipal public accounts that are required of cities and will be available for inspection by any person.

The amendments prescribe categories of information that must be included in the statement of agency public accounts. They also provide regulation-making authority to allow for potential changes or additions to the content of the statement in the future.

In summary, Mr. Speaker, the increased level of detail in financial reporting and the availability of the statement of agency public accounts will make the accounts of SAMA more

open and transparent.

In addition to the increased transparency, SAMA will continue to be required to appoint an auditor to audit its records, accounts and the financial statements.

(14:30)

Important new provisions will introduce authority for the minister to request that the Provincial Auditor's office review, examine, or audit the records, accounts, and financial statements of SAMA (Saskatchewan Assessment Management Agency).

Although SAMA is an independent agency, provincial funding of SAMA exceeds \$4 million annually. Current legislation has left SAMA outside of the purview of the Provincial Auditor and the provincial Public Accounts Committee. While the amendments do not change SAMA's status as an independent agency, they do certainly enhance transparency and accountability for that agency.

Other amendments to The Assessment Management Agency Act are more technical in nature. They will however, Mr. Speaker, contribute to the efficient operation of SAMA.

One such amendment will require SAMA to provide its budget submissions to the Department of Municipal Affairs and Housing by July 15 of each year. Currently SAMA's budget submission is not due until October 1. The change will give Municipal Affairs and Housing the opportunity to better represent SAMA's budget submissions in the provincial budget process.

The amendments being put forth in this Bill represent an effort by the province to promote open and transparent accounting by SAMA to its stakeholders and the public, thereby promoting a greater understanding of SAMA's role and responsibility within this province.

Mr. Speaker, I encourage all members of the legislature to support these amendments; they are in the best interest of SAMA, municipalities, and all the people of Saskatchewan.

Mr. Speaker, I move second reading of the Bill, The Assessment Management Agency Amendment Act, 2001.

Mr. Weekes: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's a privilege to stand in the House today to speak on Bill No. 22, The Assessment Management Agency Act. As the minister has outlined, there's been serious flaws in the requirements of SAMA in the past, and this Bill seems to be trying to close some of those gaps in accountability and credibility and making more transparent to the public.

One of the items that has come up is concerning the Technical Advisory Committee. The committee is supposed to meet at least four times a year, however, the committee has never met. And this seems to be a breach of the law. And also, if the committee has never met as . . . one wonders why the purpose of the advisory committee.

And the other areas in the Bill really speak to the whole

accountability process. And it goes on to say that SAMA must ensure that its books and records or accounts are kept in a . . . and can be verified. And also it speaks to the appointment of an auditor.

One has to wonder what has been happening in the past. Has there been any accountability in the past whatsoever? And when you talk about having an auditor, it's normal business practice today for both individual, private business, and government to have an auditor look at the books. And it seems very strange that SAMA's been operating like this without an auditor and without proper checks and balances in place to look at its books.

One area where the minister has talked about is changing the budgetary information to July 15 from October 15, which would be more consistent with the provincial budgeting process.

One other item, Mr. Speaker, I would like to speak on is the expanded authority, regulatory authority given to cabinet in terms of its ability to make regulations concerning SAMA.

It seems that the cabinet has taken some control and power away from the legislature and I don't think this is a step forward. I think it's a step back. Items like this should be left in the legislature so the people of Saskatchewan can have a look at items like this and have their own opinions made.

So at this time, Mr. Speaker, I'd like to just . . . I'd like to get back to the stakeholders and do more research and talk to more people in the province about this Act, and at this time I'd like to adjourn debate.

Debate adjourned.

Bill No. 24 — The Urban Municipality Amendment Act, 2001

Hon. Mr. Osika: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Once again I rise to move second reading of The Urban Municipality Amendment Act, 2001.

Mr. Speaker, it is indeed a pleasure to introduce amendments to The Urban Municipality Act, 1984 that will provide municipalities with greater legislative flexibility to explore opportunities for voluntary municipal restructuring.

In large part these amendments respond to the report, Impediments — this is a quote, Mr. Speaker — “Impediments to Voluntary Restructuring; a review of the legislative and financial impediments to voluntary municipal restructuring in Saskatchewan.” This was prepared by the municipal-provincial round table during its spring 2000 talks on voluntary municipal restructuring.

Mr. Speaker, during these meetings, the members of the municipal-provincial round table identified and discussed a number of legislative and financial impediments to municipal restructuring. In their view, these impediments prevented municipalities from talking with their municipal neighbours about consolidating services and administration.

The amendments we are presenting today will remove those legislative barriers and provide municipalities with new options and tools to use when contemplating amalgamation. In addition, Mr. Speaker, this Bill will introduce amendments that will provide municipalities greater independence and will broaden the scope of their authority.

These provisions are in keeping with the coalition government's commitment to removing provincial involvement in local decision making wherever there is no overriding provincial public interest.

Mr. Speaker, I would like now just to briefly describe the key provisions of this Bill. As I mentioned, this Bill will remove a number of legislative barriers and will provide a number of new techniques and tools to municipalities that may be contemplating amalgamation.

For example, authority will be provided to urban municipalities to decide whether they will want to become an organized hamlet when they amalgamate with a rural municipality. This provision is important as it will alleviate concerns related to the potential loss of local autonomy when an urban municipality is dissolved and forms part of a rural municipality.

To facilitate discussions, municipalities will be able to enter into restructuring agreements and determine the terms and conditions under which to amalgamate. The terms of that restructuring agreement, Mr. Speaker, will provide amalgamating municipalities with an opportunity to create their own conditions for amalgamation. We believe that this is important to local people. Therefore the terms of the restructuring agreement will form an integral part of the minister's order establishing the new municipality.

Mr. Speaker, during the municipal-provincial round table talks last spring, stakeholders indicated that urban municipalities were not only interested in consolidating services with rural municipalities, but are also interested in consolidating services with other urban municipalities. The Act already provides authority for urban-to-urban amalgamations.

However one of the biggest concerns expressed with urban-to-urban amalgamations was the issue of representation on council. We have to respond to this concern by providing the necessary authority for these municipalities to ensure their residents are fairly represented on council by permitting all urban municipalities to establish a ward system. Previously only cities had this authority.

Mr. Speaker, this Bill also includes provisions that will enable municipalities to establish community advisory committees. These committees will ensure municipal service levels are maintained or enhanced for specified areas within an amalgamated municipality. In this way local concerns can be made readily known to the municipal council.

These provisions will provide councils with the authority to delegate management of local facilities, such as skating and curling rinks, to local residents so that services are not interrupted as a result of amalgamation.

This Bill will provide authority for amalgamating municipalities

to address local taxation concerns related to infrastructure renewal and the costs associated with it, the mill rate differences, and outstanding debt obligations. Mr. Speaker, municipal stakeholders strongly felt that they needed flexibility to address these issues when considering amalgamation.

Authority will be provided for municipalities to establish special-purpose levies. Thus we enable amalgamating municipalities to give consideration to equalizing mill rates over a number of years, or ensure that those people who are not directly benefiting from the provisions of specific municipal services do not have to incur an increase in property taxes to pay renewal or ongoing operational costs associated with that service.

Mr. Speaker, other amendments in this Act will — I'll just outline a few here — will enhance local government control of local matters and remove unnecessary provincial involvement into the services provided by municipalities. And it will also streamline provincial administrative processes and remove a number of ministerial approvals for municipal actions.

Municipal councils will have the authority to adopt additional conflict of interest rules for members of council beyond the minimum already provided for in the Act. This means that local councils will now be better equipped to determine locally what conflict of interest standards and rules are appropriate for their communities.

Mr. Speaker, a very important feature of this Bill are provisions that will transfer the authority for the administration of the urban Board of Examiners to the Saskatchewan Urban Municipalities Association and the Urban Municipal Administrators Association of Saskatchewan.

This will end the provincial government involvement in this function. These two associations will be required to establish and operate an urban Board of Examiners for the purposes of administering qualification standards for urban municipal administrators. The municipal associations have agreed this transfer of authority will provide their associations with greater control over qualification standards for municipal administrators.

Mr. Speaker, professional standards created in the spirit of responsible, transparent, and accountable governance are imperative to the principles of local government democracy.

Other provisions in this Bill will replace the present requirement for municipalities to prepare their financial statements on a form approved by the minister. The Bill will require that such statements be prepared in accordance with generally accepted accounting principles for local governments.

This responds again to recommendations from the Provincial Auditor. In addition, municipal councils will be required to appoint an auditor that is a member in good standing of an accounting profession recognized by statute.

Municipalities have requested greater flexibility in determining their own records retention and disposal schedules for municipal documents. Accordingly this Bill will provide the authority for municipalities to adopt their own records retention

and disposal schedules by bylaw.

Mr. Speaker, this Bill will provide municipal councils with the authority to define areas within which certain businesses or limited number of businesses can operate. This is an important issue in some municipalities where for economic, social, or other reasons it becomes necessary to regulate certain business activities. This responds to a request from the city of Saskatoon.

Municipal councils will no longer be required to have ministerial approval if they wish to dispose of municipally owned property at a price less than its market value. Nor will municipalities be required to obtain ministerial approval when closing a municipal street or controlling traffic within the municipality.

Mr. Speaker, municipalities will be permitted to set licence fees for direct sellers in the same manner that they have authority to set licence fees for other businesses; to extend statutory deadlines for the completion of certain administrative matters for up to 90 days; and to donate lost personal property to local charities if council so desires.

(14:45)

As well, Mr. Speaker, cities will no longer be required to obtain ministerial approval to establish subclasses of property assessments. Mr. Speaker, most municipal councils manage their financial affairs responsibly. This is a testament to the dedication these people have to ensuring the betterment of the whole community.

This Bill recognizes the responsible manner in which municipalities have operated fiscally. It will provide improved flexibility to manage cash flows by, first of all, increasing the amount municipalities may borrow to meet current expenditures, and removing the requirement for Saskatchewan Municipal Board approval of long-term debt bylaws for all cities.

This Bill will provide all municipalities the authority to create, operate, and manage capital trust funds, and for cities to invest surplus monies in any security deemed appropriate by council. The Saskatchewan Municipal Board will no longer need to approve their actions.

Mr. Speaker, this Bill will update and clarify a number of administrative provisions that are important to ensuring municipalities clearly understand their legislated powers. For example, this Bill will clarify the powers of municipal boards of revision to correct errors in the assessment roll, regardless of whether the resulting value increases, decreases, or remains the same.

As well, clarification will be provided to municipal assessors that where two or more abutting parcels of land are owned by the same person, the assessor may combine the assessment of the parcels into a single assessment. This is a matter of administrative convenience and relates to introduction of Saskatchewan's new electronic land titles system.

From time to time, Mr. Speaker, adjoining municipalities must work together to provide services to their residents.

Unfortunately, municipalities cannot always agree to the method in which to do so. This can lead to some very difficult situations. This Bill will provide municipalities with a formal and voluntary dispute resolution mechanism that focuses its attention on mediation between the parties as the initial step in resolving the dispute.

Should mediation not produce a solution to the problem, the parties to the dispute will be able to apply to the Saskatchewan Municipal Board for a decision in the matter under dispute. The decision of the Saskatchewan Municipal Board will be binding, then, on all parties.

The provisions will remove the minister from the current position of being judge and jury in these cases. Instead it puts the onus for resolving local disputes where it belongs — with the people that the dispute affects.

In summary, Mr. Speaker, this Bill will enhance the decision-making capacity of urban municipalities, remove unnecessary provincial involvement into municipal matters, and remove a number of legislative barriers to voluntary municipal restructuring.

Mr. Speaker, the provisions within this Bill recognize that municipalities require additional legislative capacity to continue their good work in providing municipal services to the people of this great province.

Mr. Speaker, I believe these amendments are in the best interests of all urban municipalities and the people of Saskatchewan and should be supported by all members of this legislature.

Mr. Speaker, I move second reading of Bill No. 24, The Urban Municipality Amendment Act, 2001.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Elhard: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, it gives me pleasure to stand to speak about The Urban Municipality Amendment Act, 2001 this afternoon.

This legislation contains portions that deal with voluntary amalgamation of municipalities. It also contains changes recommended by the municipal round table on operations of municipalities, and appears to take away requirements for ministerial approval for many ordinary operations of municipalities. In effect, it's a Bill which streamlines the operation of municipalities and allows for the voluntary amalgamation of many urban municipalities in this province.

I think in speaking to this Bill, Mr. Speaker, it would be appropriate at this point to rehearse and review some of the history that brought us to this particular Bill. And I think that we don't have to go very far back in the annals of time, frankly, to get the impetus for this particular amendment.

About 18 months ago the Garcea commission was travelling around Saskatchewan looking at the issue of municipalities — the total number of municipalities, the awkwardness of that number — and suggesting, quite frankly, that we could do with a lot fewer municipalities in this province. And while those

recommendations were being put forward, the suspicions of municipalities, both urban and rural, were being raised. And I think that what bothered municipalities and the leaders of the municipalities the most was that it seemed that that whole process was designed to force amalgamation on the various municipalities of this province.

Human nature being what it is, Mr. Speaker, people don't respond very well to being forced to do anything. And I think I can speak first-hand when I say that; and I'm sure that all of us have had that experience at some point in our lives.

But the reaction of municipalities in this province to the concept of being forced into amalgamation with neighbouring municipalities was very strong, almost vitriolic. And I think that out of that process grew an awareness by the government that that certainly was not going to be the way to accomplish what might be a desirable arrangement in some situations.

Hence we had the round table discussions. The government and municipal leaders sat down and looked at the pros and cons of the process, not so much of amalgamation per se but of the process, and came up with ways in which they might ease the transition of municipalities that wanted to merge their operations into a single entity.

The other issue more recently that is going to be addressed, I believe, by this particular amendment is the issue of water, which we've heard so much about in the last week or 10 days. With the many numerous small urban communities in our province, all suffering from a declining tax base, declining population, declining business, they have found it increasingly difficult to afford the infrastructure required to provide the safe water for the residents of their community that is so vital and necessary.

They found it even as difficult to provide the sewer and water mechanisms needed to provide decent infrastructure for their towns as well.

So what this legislation may offer is an opportunity for communities that are under excessive pressure to provide the basic needs and infrastructure for their communities to look at the possibility of joining forces with adjoining communities to provide an opportunity on a cost-effective basis to provide sewer and water services for their towns. So I see an Act of this nature as having some very strong and good possibilities.

However, Mr. Speaker, there are some things about this Act that do cause me to want to have a second look at some of the provisions. And I'll get to those a little later.

But if I might just take a quick couple of moments to review some of the, some of the conditions of this new legislation that may in fact prove beneficial to the urban communities, especially in this province.

I'd like to look at the issue of amalgamation. This legislation will make it possible for a village of less than 100 people to be dissolved by ministerial order rather than an order in council of cabinet. I think that that is something that is probably going to be quite workable and maybe long overdue. It sets in place a process to hold discussions between two or more municipalities

wishing to pursue amalgamation, and it defines the restructuring agreement.

And as the minister alluded to earlier in his comments, this legislation gives all municipalities the ability to divide into wards for electoral purposes.

It gives municipal councils discretionary authority to establish community advisory committees to provide linkages between the council of amalgamated municipalities and the individual communities that made up the amalgamated entity.

It requires certain financial reporting as well that won't be quite as onerous possibly as some of the earlier requirements, but will be effective I believe in the long run.

It gives municipalities the authority for setting fees charged to direct sellers for business licences. And this fee apparently was previously set out in The Direct Sellers Act, but that authority is now being moved to the municipality.

Maybe most importantly it requires municipalities to use a dispute resolution mechanism contained within the Act to settle any inter-municipal disputes related to public utility service and other such entities. This dispute-settling mechanism replaces the need for the minister to settle such disputes personally, and it sets out the need for two sides to appoint a mediator. And if the mediator cannot settle the dispute in time, the matter will be settled by the Saskatchewan Municipal Board.

There is the issue of debt approval, Mr. Speaker. Under this rewrite of the Act, the Saskatchewan Municipal Board approval will no longer be necessary for municipalities entering into short-term debt obligations to meet current expenditures. And I think that particular provision will be greeted with, if not enthusiasm, certainly some degree of pleasure by the municipalities.

But long-term debt consolidation has also been clarified by this Act. It gives the cities the right to create long-term debt without approval of the government as long as that debt is within certain limitations. And I think that gives cities more flexibility and opportunities to deal with their own financial affairs in a way that suits them.

There are several other provisions that the minister alluded to that are going to be important to the eventual amalgamation of urban municipalities on a as-needed, where-needed basis.

One of the other provisions of this particular Act though that has not been mentioned, to my knowledge, is the establishment of a Board of Examiners for municipal administrators. Now I'm not sure how many positions would be open in the province right now, but I frequently hear of communities around the province who are looking for administrators and are having a very difficult time finding qualified people to fit that role in their urban and often in their rural municipalities.

So what we have here is a Board of Examiners established that will be overseen by SUMA (Saskatchewan Urban Municipalities Association) and the Urban Municipal Administrators Association, and this board will take upon itself the duties of certifying municipal administrators. And this same

provision, incidentally, has been added to the rural municipal legislation as well.

The people are no longer — on this board — appointed by the minister. So it is a creature now of SUMA and the Municipal Administrators Association per se. I hope that with the creation of this new board that the shortfall of qualified people for the positions that are vacant around the province will be alleviated to some extent and that they will be able to produce good and qualified candidates for each of the communities looking for that kind of administration.

There was one other issue that kind of caught my attention when I was looking through the legislation, and that has to do with business licences. And I'm a little troubled by this particular provision because it gives authority to a municipality, an urban municipality, which I believe may really go beyond the need for them to obtain. In the area of business licences the Act, as it's been rewritten now, will give municipal authority to limit the number of business licences granted in a certain class and limit the number of like businesses within a municipality.

In a competitive business environment, I don't think there is a need for the municipal authority — either urban or rural, but in this case urban — I don't believe there is a need for the urban authority to have that particular power granted to it. I think that that is solely the prerogative of the entrepreneur or the business operator. If the individual wants to set up a business which is competitive with other businesses in the community, that is his right and I think it's his risk, and that individual should have the opportunity to make that decision with or without the approval of the urban municipal authority.

I don't have any problem with the granting of licences. That's something that I think every municipal government needs to retain. However, I don't know that it's necessary for the government to be able to limit the licence for any given business or class of businesses within their boundaries.

(15:00)

I think there's a danger in giving that authority to municipal governments, in that in some circumstances, individuals who are serving on the town council who may already own and operate businesses, could see a new business of a competing variety a threat to that individual's personal business affairs and turn down any new business as a result of that. And I just don't think that that's the kind of power we want to give to municipal lawmakers or administrators. So I have some reservations about that particular part of this Act.

We spent some time going through the changes and, as I said earlier, the removal of barriers to voluntary amalgamation at the urban government level, I think, are welcome generally by the official opposition. I believe that streamlining of conditions are long overdue and they're certainly necessary and I think this Act goes a long way to addressing much of that.

And I have to recognize the fact, of course, that the round table discussions, which involve the government, the Department of Municipal Affairs, and the representatives of SUMA, have come up with these conditions and, by and large, I find them quite agreeable. I don't think I would want to be in a position

just to disagree with their collective wisdom.

However, having said that, I think we have some reason to be cautious about this government's track record in matters dealing with municipalities, as I mentioned in my opening remarks. And so we're going to have to study all of the municipal Bills rather closely. We haven't been able to go through it clause by clause as yet and we want to check not only as to how they relate to amalgamation but some of the other provisions that are contained herein.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I would move that we adjourn debate.

Debate adjourned.

LEAVE REQUESTED

Mr. Thomson: — Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I request leave of the Assembly to allow members to remove their jackets for the remainder of the day given the temperature in the room.

Leave granted.

SECOND READINGS

Bill No. 23 — The Rural Municipality Amendment Act, 2001

Hon. Mr. Osika: — Mr. Speaker, I rise once again, and this time to move second reading of The Rural Municipality Amendment Act, 2001.

Mr. Speaker, government endeavours to keep the municipal Acts as consistent as possible. Therefore it is my pleasure to introduce amendments to The Rural Municipality Act, 1989 that, as was the case with the amendments I spoke to earlier for The Urban Municipality Act, 1984, have been developed along two primary themes.

One, the removal of legislative impediments to voluntary municipal amalgamation. And number two, removing the province from decision making and involvement in a number of areas that are clearly within the jurisdiction of local councils.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, as noted in my remarks on the urban Act amendments, the amendments regarding impediments to voluntary amalgamation respond to the options contained in a report prepared by municipal/provincial round table. The members of the municipal/provincial round table identified legislative and financial impediments to municipal restructuring that in their view prevented municipalities from seriously considering the consolidation of municipal services and administrations.

The amendments presented today will remove those legislative barriers and provide municipalities with new options and tools to use when contemplating amalgamation.

While the amendments proposed for the rural Act are not word for word the same as those proposed for the urban Act, they are based on the same principles. Taken together, the provisions in the Acts do complement each other.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I would like now to briefly describe the key provisions of this Bill. The options contained in the impediments report focused mainly on urban to rural amalgamations. However, the provisions within this Bill and the Bill outlining amendments to The Urban Municipality Act are designed to accommodate other types of municipal amalgamation as well.

Again, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in order to facilitate discussions between municipalities that are exploring amalgamation, rural municipalities will have the power to enter into restructuring agreements to determine the terms and conditions. The restructuring agreement will provide amalgamating municipalities the power to create their own conditions for amalgamation.

We believe these conditions are important to local people, therefore the terms of the restructuring agreement will form an integral part of the minister's order establishing the new municipality.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the impediments report also recommended municipalities have the authority to establish community advisory committees. These committees will play an important key role by ensuring municipal councils are able to maintain a direct and transparent relationship with the residents and communities within their jurisdiction.

These committees may help former urban municipalities amalgamated with RMs (rural municipality) to maintain their community identity. This was identified as an important consideration at the round table.

Community advisory committees are mechanisms municipal councils can use to maintain volunteerism in local communities. Councils will be able to delegate the management of local facilities such as community halls and recreation facilities to community organizations.

This Bill will provide amalgamating municipalities with the option of incorporating as either a rural municipality or a municipal district. It is intended that the use of the term municipal district will recognize the urban components that may exist within it. Municipal districts will operate under The Rural Municipality Act, 1989 in a similar fashion as rural municipalities currently do.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the impediments report recommended that The Rural Municipality Act be amended to allow the use of provisions from the urban Act so that rural municipalities could resolve any administrative or service delivery differences between these two types of municipalities.

We have responded to this recommendation by providing authority for rural municipalities to declare that any provision within The Urban Municipality Act, 1984 applies to any area within its jurisdiction. This provision will permit rural councils to provide urban-type services to former towns and villages within its boundaries.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the impediments report further recommended that councils should have the authority to create service areas within an amalgamated municipality. This Bill

will provide the authority to customize services to be provided to the residents within that area, such as a former urban municipality, based on need or previous practice.

In addition, it will enable the establishment of a separate uniform mill rate for that area as well as the use of separate tax tools such as the use of mill rate factors.

This Bill will also provide authority for amalgamating municipalities to alleviate concerns related to renewal costs, mill rate differences, and outstanding debt obligations. Municipal stakeholders strongly felt that they needed flexibility to address these issues when considering amalgamation.

Municipalities will now have the authority to establish special purpose levies. This will allow amalgamating municipalities to give special consideration to equalizing mill rates between formerly separate municipalities over a number of years. It will also ensure that those people who are not directly benefiting from the provision of specific municipal services do not have to incur an increase in property taxes to pay renewal or ongoing operational costs associated with that service.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, a number of statutory property-tax exemptions that existed in The Urban Municipality Act have now been included in The Rural Municipality Act for consistency and to alleviate concerns about potentially losing these exemptions should an urban/rural amalgamation occur.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I'll now move onto the second group of the amendments that are being proposed in this Bill. These will remove the province from involvement in a number of local decisions and processes. The amendments for this Act are similar in nature to the amendments we were making to The Urban Municipality Act; therefore I will again speak to the more significant provisions and those that are unique to the rural Act.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, this Bill will enhance local government control of local matters. For example, Mr. Deputy Speaker, municipal councils will be permitted, with the concurrence of the organized hamlet board, to levy a separate, uniform mill rate within organized hamlets to reflect the services provided to these hamlets.

As with urban municipalities, rural councils will now have the authority to adopt additional conflict of interest rules beyond the minimum already provided for in the Act. This Bill will transfer the authority for the administration of the rural Board of Examiners to the Saskatchewan Association of Rural Municipalities and the Rural Municipal Administrators' Association of Saskatchewan.

These municipal associations will be required to establish and operate a rural Board of Examiners for the purposes of administering qualification standards for rural municipal administrators. These two associations have agreed that this transfer of authority will provide their associations with greater control over qualification standards for municipal administrators. Professional standards creating the spirit of responsible, transparent, and accountable governments, Mr. Deputy Speaker, are imperative to the principles of local government democracy.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, this Bill will remove ministerial prescription of financial statement formats. It will enable rural municipalities to work with their auditors, to prepare their financial statements according to generally accepted accounting principles for local governments. Councils will still, of course, appoint auditors that are members in good standing of a professional accounting organization recognized by statute.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, this Bill will clarify in which divisions certain voters are entitled to vote in a rural municipal election.

As well, a new provision will provide clarification to oil and gas well drillers that it will be the owner of the well that will be required to pay the municipal well tax. This change accommodates existing practices in municipalities where oil and gas well owners have typically paid the municipal well tax associated with drilling . . . associated, pardon me, with drilling an oil or gas well anywhere in Saskatchewan. This change responds to representations from the oil and gas industry and has been supported by the municipal sector as well.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, The Rural Municipality Act contains a number of unique provisions that provide rural municipalities with additional tax collection powers. These powers permit municipalities to place a lien on crops grown by farmers and prohibits the sale of grain if farmers owe property taxes to their municipality. Each year councils are required to adopt a resolution exempting crops from these provisions.

Mr. Speaker, these provisions are rarely used today and are becoming impractical. With the concurrence of the Saskatchewan Association of Rural Municipalities we are removing these provisions from The Rural Municipality Act.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, SARM (Saskatchewan Association of Rural Municipalities) members have requested greater flexibility to decide the level and type of discounts given on the prompt payment of property taxes. Presently these discounts are outlined in the legislation however, this Bill will remove those rules and provide rural councils with the authority to establish their own discounts by bylaw.

As is the case with the urban Act, Mr. Deputy Speaker, this Bill will also provide municipalities with a voluntary dispute-resolution mechanism. This mechanism emphasizes mediation between the parties as the initial step in resolving a dispute. Should mediation not produce a solution to the problem, the parties to the dispute will be able to apply to the Saskatchewan Municipal Board for a decision in the matter under dispute. The decision of the Saskatchewan Municipal Board will be binding on all parties.

(15:15)

In summary, Mr. Speaker, this Bill responds to significant concerns in enhancing the decision-making capacity of rural municipalities. It removes unnecessary provincial intrusion into municipal matters and removes a number of legislative barriers too, and provides new tools for voluntary municipal restructuring.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the provisions within this Bill recognize that municipalities require additional legislative capacity to

continue their good work in providing municipal services to the people of this great province.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I believe these amendments are in the best interests of all rural municipalities and the people of Saskatchewan, and should be supported by all members of this legislature.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I move second reading of Bill No. 23, The Rural Municipality Amendment Act, 2001.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. D'Autremont: — Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Mr. Speaker, this is a fairly comprehensive Bill dealing with rural municipalities and how they interact. Traditionally, Mr. Speaker, rural municipalities under this province have had difficulty in joining together with their neighbours or with other municipalities in the urban sense, within their boundaries.

This, Mr. Speaker, will allow that to take place on a voluntary basis, and we support that, Mr. Speaker. But the key word there, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is voluntary — that the heavy hand of government not be driving this either directly, Mr. Deputy Speaker, or indirectly through the starvation through reduced funding from the province to force municipalities to join together.

It has to be done on a voluntary basis that the local people determine is in their best interest, Mr. Speaker. Not in the best interest necessarily of the minister, not in the best interest necessarily of the bureaucracy of Municipal department, but rather in the best interest, Mr. Deputy Speaker, of the people involved in the municipalities that may wish to amalgamate. And that's very critical — may wish to amalgamate, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, it talks in the Bill about municipal districts. Well, Mr. Speaker, in Alberta they also have municipal districts. And sometimes those are accepted by the local people and sometimes they have a great deal of difficulty with them, Mr. Speaker.

The term municipal district is no different than the term county, which is also utilized at various times in Alberta to describe the same type of municipal entity. It's a larger entity, Mr. Speaker, maybe one, two, or more municipalities. But the critical issue here, Mr. Speaker, is that it be done without being forced by the provincial government.

There are a number of things though that are taking place within this Act that I didn't hear the minister speak about. And one of those was the removal of voting rights to people within the municipalities — not just a new municipal district, Mr. Speaker, but municipalities that are already existing and are not joining together, are not amalgamating.

Under this particular Act, Mr. Speaker, as I read it, a person will only be allowed to vote in the municipality where their residence is located or where they designate their residence to be.

Up until now, Mr. Speaker, if you owned property in three

separate municipalities, rural municipalities, you were entitled to vote in those three separate municipalities so that you had representation for your taxation. Indeed, Mr. Deputy Speaker, our democracy in large part is based on that — the old grievance before supply, no taxation without representation, Mr. Speaker. This Bill moves us towards that undemocratic model of not being able to select your representation even though you are forced to pay the taxes.

I disagree with this, Mr. Speaker, and we need to be able to talk to the people around Saskatchewan to determine whether or not they agree to give up, to abandon, Mr. Speaker, their right to vote for the people who will be spending their tax dollars.

In this province, Mr. Speaker, in provincial elections, you get to vote either for or against, as the case may be, the members of this Assembly who will make the determination on how to spend your tax dollars. Unfortunately though, under this particular Bill, that right will be removed for people at the municipal level.

Let's say you have land or property in three different municipalities — they may be adjoining, they may be separated by a hundred miles. Under the current Act, if you wished to, you could travel around on election day and cast a ballot in each one of those separate and distinct municipalities so that you can choose the representatives both of your division and for the reeve, if that's the appropriate election at the time, on how they are going to spend your tax dollars.

Under this Act, you're removing that. The individual or corporation, as the case may be, will have to select one municipality as being the municipality in which they vote. In the other two municipalities, they will pay taxes but have no rights of representation, Mr. Deputy Speaker. They will not have the ability to choose whom they wish to represent them and how that money will be spent.

If there's a referendum within the municipal district, municipality, they will not be entitled to vote on it because their residents may not be designated in that municipality, but rather in one of the others.

Mr. Speaker, that is wrong, and I think this needs to be cleared up in this Act, and I would suggest needs to be removed from this Act so that the current voting rights of taxpayers of municipalities continues, Mr. Deputy Speaker; that they may vote in those municipalities where they pay taxes.

I know this is probably a pull-over from urban municipal law. I know that there has been a number of times when people in the Parks Association, people who have residences in regional parks, have complained that they do not have the right to vote in their village, their resort village, because they have property in some other location.

Well perhaps, Mr. Deputy Speaker, what needs to be changed is not to take the rural municipalities to that model, but rather take the urban municipalities to the rural model where in a municipality you own property, and paying taxes, you have the right to vote.

That is a basic democratic right, Mr. Deputy Speaker, of this

province, of this country, indeed of this Commonwealth, that if you are paying taxes on property, you have the right to vote in that municipality, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, another section in here, the new section 3 under this particular clause, is a long-standing NDP tradition, Mr. Speaker, to change the rules when it doesn't particularly suit them; not necessarily to change the law directly, but rather to allow the minister to deem something to have happened or not to have happened.

In this particular case, and I'll read the sentence involved:

... the minister may, by order, set a further or other time for doing it, whether the time at or within which it ought to have been done has or has not expired.

So under this Act certain things are prescribed to have happened within a particular period of time. But the minister may at his discretion, or his whim, deem that it doesn't have to have been done in that time, it can be done in some other time period.

Well, Mr. Speaker, if there are time limits put in place in the municipal Act to carry out certain functions, I have to assume that that has been done for good reason, that it has been done in a manner that has worked in the past. Otherwise we would simply be changing it to either shorten or extend that time period.

But rather what the minister has done is simply said no, if it doesn't happen in the time period that it says under the law, I'll just change that and you can do it whenever you want. That's not good enough, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

We have those rules in place for a reason, and those rules should simply not be circumvented because the minister wants to. I would suggest, Mr. Speaker, that the minister take a very serious look at that and make the determination whether that is a valid reason for making these changes.

Because while it gives the minister the ability to make those changes on his time schedule, whatever time he wants, it also continues to put limits on councils. It says:

No council shall pass a bylaw pursuant to subsection (3) extending the time fixed by or pursuant to this Act by more than 90 days.

So the council is restricted, but the minister isn't.

The minister, Mr. Deputy Speaker, isn't the one paying taxes there. The council represents the taxpayers. And if anybody should have the ability to extend the time, it should be the council, not the minister. But no, the minister has it in reverse order — gives him lots of privileges and restricts the council, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, it talks in here, under incorporations, alterations of boundaries, of division 1. Well for those people who know about rural municipalities, Mr. Speaker, there's divisions 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6. Well what happened to those in this particular Act? Why are these sections only related to

division 1?

Again, Mr. Speaker, I think the minister needs to give a better explanation than what he did today on what is happening with this particular Act. Is it an omission, an error, that it should say all divisions? Or is there something peculiar about division 1 that will be outlined or clearly designated in this Act for special considerations, Mr. Speaker?

Mr. Deputy Speaker, it talks about the restructuring agreements between two or more municipalities that may wish to amalgamate or restructure. But in reading this over, I don't see any place here where it deals with responsibilities or the accountabilities of the councils involved to talk to their ratepayers.

No place in here does it mention anything about having a meeting of the ratepayers to determine whether or not they're interested in amalgamating with another municipality. And it certainly doesn't say anything in here, Mr. Speaker, about a need for a vote of the ratepayers to agree to do an amalgamation.

There may be value for the individual council members to join with another municipality. And if we go back to the idea of the vote in each municipality, if people on council have large portions of land in another municipality but their residence is in, say, municipality A and their land is in B, certainly an incentive for them to try and join A and B together so that they get to vote on what's happening to their property, what the tax structure is on their property in another division.

So while it may be to their benefit, it's not necessarily to the benefit of all other ratepayers, Mr. Speaker.

There is a need to have the municipalities, the ratepayers in each municipality that may be amalgamating hold a vote and make that determination, not just simply the councils, Mr. Speaker.

There are a number of difficulties that may arise through amalgamations, and these are all to be set out in an agreement between the two councils. That's good, Mr. Speaker. But that agreement should take place after the ratepayers in all of the municipalities involved have given their okay through a vote.

Those would include agreements on equalizing the municipal mill rates. Some municipalities may have a higher mill rate, some may have a lower mill rate, some may have different municipal infrastructures — more roads, less roads, as the case may be.

(15:30)

Or a very contentious issue, Mr. Speaker: contaminated sites. Places where they have stored, perhaps, their chemicals. Places where the town dump has been. Those kind of situations, Mr. Speaker. Some municipalities have them, some may not have them. It's going to be a cost to all of the people within the new district if an amalgamation takes place. Those kind of things need to be settled.

A very contentious issue, Mr. Speaker, is any surplus funds that

may be . . . have collected up by a municipality. What happens to those?

Tax tools are a critical issue. While assessments may be the same, based on the same formula, the amount of the taxation, the actual dollars paid, is based on whatever tax tools that municipality decided to employ.

We saw an example, Mr. Speaker, of a large change related to tax tools and the amount of money collected as between Saskatoon and Regina when it came to the education tax. Within the city of Saskatoon, they knew how much money they needed. They set . . . they used their tools, the tax tools available to them to set the assessment percentages. And what that meant, Mr. Speaker, was that their education tax for the formula was lower and so they could collect more grants from the province.

In Regina, they didn't use the tax tools in the same manner so they were paying more education tax. What we saw happen when those were more equalized, Mr. Speaker, was that the property taxes collected in Saskatoon have had to rise for education, and Regina now gets more grant from the Department of Education.

If you have two municipalities side by side that have been using their tax tools differently, that means there'll be a reallocation of the tax dollars collected between the two municipalities. And those items need to be agreed to before it happens.

The most contentious issue, Mr. Speaker, or one of the most contentious issues when it comes to the amalgamation of municipalities, is who gets the office. That is a very critical issue, Mr. Speaker, and one that definitely needs to have the input of not just the councils but all of the people involved within the district, Mr. Speaker, that may be formed — and not just the people who are on the council at present time.

I've already talked, Mr. Speaker, about the need to have the ability to vote in more than one municipality. I believe that is critical. It's part of our democratic base, and the government of today is trying to circumvent that, Mr. Speaker.

It also talks, Mr. Speaker, about forming community advisory committees. Now I need to know a little more about that, Mr. Speaker, before I can make a determination whether that's good or bad.

On the surface it looks to me like it's an opportunity to try and deflect responsibility away from the municipal council by putting up a straw dog to go and do whatever measure it is that it's in place for — to hold hearings, carry out a function — so that the ratepayers will be angry at the Community Advisory Committee rather than being angry at council.

So I'm not sure exactly what the minister's intention is on this particular issue — why it's important, what he sees, what the useful purpose of it is. But clearly my initial reaction to it is negative; that it's simply a means such as was used by the provincial government in setting up the district health boards to try and deflect responsibility from the people who were actually making the decisions, who were providing or restricting the tax dollars available to carry out a project. Whereas the districts —

or in this case the Community Advisory Council — doesn't have the authority to actually do anything but is there to be a buffer between the community and the council.

This also talks about being able to vary the discount rates given for prompt payment of taxes. And I wonder whether or not the minister and his department actually consulted the Department of Education on this because I know that is an issue with every school division in the province.

They set their mill rate based on the assessment on what they believe they will be able to collect . . .

The Speaker: — Excuse me. Why is the member for Swift Current on his feet?

Mr. Wall: — Mr. Speaker, with leave to introduce guests.

Leave granted.

INTRODUCTION OF GUESTS

Mr. Wall: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member for Cannington for yielding.

It's a great pleasure to introduce to you and through you to the members of this Assembly a group of visitors in the east gallery, Mr. Speaker. This is a group of students from the Cypress Hills Regional College, an excellent advanced education institution in my constituency, Mr. Speaker.

There are seven students in the gallery as well as the instructor, Ms. Bula Ghosh. And these students are taking English as a second language. And, Mr. Speaker, I'd just ask all members of the Assembly to join with me in welcoming them here today to the Legislative Assembly.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

SECOND READINGS

Bill No. 23 — The Rural Municipality Amendment Act, 2001 (continued)

Mr. D'Autremont: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, I wonder if the minister or his department discussed the discounting of taxes with the Department of Education, with the SSTA (Saskatchewan School Trustees Association). I know that in the past this has been a bone of contention for them because it reduces the amount of tax revenues that they generate off of the assessment. They've made their mill rates based on that assessment and their estimate of how much they're going to collect.

When the municipality adjusts, Mr. Speaker, the discount rates on this, it varies the amount that the Department of . . . not the department, but the education school district receives in funding, and at times can be an imposition on that education district division in how they can deliver their programs. If everybody goes in in September and the municipality is giving a 10 per cent discount, that means that the school division receives 10 per cent less than what they had budgeted for.

Now I know it doesn't happen, Mr. Speaker, that everybody goes in on September 1, but it could happen. And I think that the minister needs to talk with the SSTA on how this is going to affect their budgeting and the determinations that they will be making.

I have given the minister a number of suggestions, Mr. Speaker, that I hope he will take to heart and discuss with the various interests. Therefore, Mr. Speaker, I would move we adjourn debate.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Debate adjourned.

Bill No. 25 — The Northern Municipalities Amendment Act, 2001

Hon. Mr. Osika: — Mr. Speaker, I move second reading of The Northern Municipalities Amendment Act, 2001.

And, Mr. Speaker, if I may just make some comments. This Bill introduces amendments to The Northern Municipalities Act that will reduce provincial government involvement in local decision making, remove unnecessary provincial involvement in northern municipal affairs, clarify political accountability, and streamline administrative processes allowing the provincial government to focus its attention and resources on provincial interests.

As well, it will enhance the decision-making capacity and autonomy of northern municipalities and implement changes to respond to specific procedural or approval issues which have arisen over this past year.

Earlier, Mr. Speaker, I outlined amendments being proposed to the urban and rural municipal Acts. As I noted during those remarks, the provisions in the three municipal Acts are similar in many respects.

Some of the amendments address issues brought forth in southern Saskatchewan. They call for greater municipal autonomy and less provincial prescription in matters that can and should be decided at the local level.

Some of these suggestions are applicable to northern and rural municipalities as well as urban municipalities. That is because they contribute to the overall strategy of reducing provincial involvement in matters that are clearly of a municipal nature.

We bring these amendments forward, Mr. Speaker, because we believe in our northern communities. We want to ensure that northern communities are provided with the same legislative tools that are available to municipalities in the southern part of our province.

Mr. Speaker, the changes proposed in this Bill relate primarily to extending council's authority and autonomy to decide administrative issues and matters of a local nature. They will improve the ability of local governments to manage their own affairs.

Mr. Speaker the following are the key provisions of this

particular Bill. Authority for municipalities to adopt stricter conflict of interest rules and guidelines. Authority for municipalities to extend the deadlines prescribed by the Act for the completion of certain matters. Authority for municipalities to set licensing fees for direct sellers in the same manner that they have authority to set licence fees for other businesses. Authority for municipalities to dispose of lost personal property in order that such property can be donated.

As well, provisions that clarify that municipalities have the authority to define areas within which certain businesses or a limited number of business can operate. And provisions that provide northern municipalities with the same authority for inspection and enforcement procedures as is found in the urban and rural municipalities Acts.

Other amendments reduce provincial involvement in municipal decisions. The key provisions of this Bill in this regard include the following, Mr. Speaker: replacing the requirement for municipalities to prepare their financial statements on a form approved by the minister with a requirement to prepare such statements in accordance with generally accepted accounting principles for local governments.

Next, removing the requirement for the minister to approve records retention and disposal schedules, but authorizing municipalities to set their own schedules by bylaw.

Next, removing the requirement to submit municipal traffic bylaws to the Highway Traffic Board for approval. Removing the requirement for a capital works plan to be in a form approved by the minister and removing the requirement for the statement of mailing of tax notices to be in a form approved by the minister.

Other amendments, Mr. Speaker, address specific procedural or approval issues, including removing the requirement for an order in council and replacing it with approval by a minister's order when altering boundaries of northern municipalities and settlements. Provisions which provide a voluntary dispute resolution mechanism for inter-municipal disputes. Provisions which permit the minister to request financial data respecting municipal operations.

Provisions that clarify where two or more abutting parcels of land are owned by the same person, an assessor may combine the assessment of the parcels into a single assessment and provisions that clarify that a board of revision may order the correction of errors in assessment and amendments to the assessment roll regardless of whether the resulting value increases, decreases, or remains the same.

In summary, Mr. Speaker, this Bill responds to significant concerns in three areas: enhancing the decision-making capacity and autonomy of northern municipalities; secondly, removing unnecessary provincial involvement in municipal matters; and thirdly, implementing changes for specific procedural or approval issues which have arisen over the last year.

The provisions within this Bill, Mr. Speaker, address all these concerns. These provisions clarify and improve the provincial-municipal relationship and contribute to a more transparent, streamlined, and accountable process in order that

all may have confidence in Saskatchewan's system of local government.

Mr. Speaker, these amendments should be supported by all members of the legislature. They are in the best interests of northern municipalities, their communities, and all Saskatchewan residents.

Mr. Speaker, I move second reading of Bill No. 25, The Northern Municipalities Amendment Act, 2001.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Stewart: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's my pleasure to speak to this Bill, An Act to amend The Northern Municipalities Act.

As I understand it, Mr. Speaker, this Act contains provisions that make boundary alterations subject to ministerial order rather than cabinet approval. We would question that.

(15:45)

It also puts in place conflict-of-interest disclosure provision, which sounds positive on the surface, clarifies the appointment of auditors, and requires financial statements to be done in a manner consistent with standard accounting procedures.

Mr. Speaker, the Bill establishes that the minister has a right to request financial information at any time and that the council must provide that information. It also, Mr. Speaker, establishes requirements for record keeping.

The Bill allows municipalities to limit the number of business licences of a certain class that will be issued, and allows municipalities to establish fees and charges to direct sellers for licences just as it does for any other business. These fees were previously set by the province, Mr. Speaker.

It outlines plans for . . . there is a provision where plans for capital works no longer have to be submitted to the minister for approval. But as I understand it, such plans are still necessary.

It more firmly establishes that the board of revision has the right to lower or raise assessments on appeal. Previously, Mr. Speaker, there was some confusion over this. It does put in place a dispute-settling mechanism between municipalities.

And, Mr. Speaker, it gives council power to extend deadlines for such things as compiling the tax role or publishing financial reports.

All in all, Mr. Speaker, some provisions of this Bill appear at first blush to be quite positive. On the other hand, some of the provisions may be controversial and we'll be looking for feedback from municipalities before we'll be in a position to debate this Bill in detail.

Accordingly, Mr. Speaker, I move to adjourn debate on this Bill until we have had an opportunity to confer thoroughly with municipalities regarding some of these provisions.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Debate adjourned.

Bill No. 26 — The Hearing Aid Sales and Services Act

Hon. Mr. Nilson: — Mr. Speaker, I rise today to move second reading of The Hearing Aid Sales and Services Act.

This statute will regulate private hearing aid businesses in Saskatchewan in response to consumer concerns. These concerns have focused on the marketing practices of some hearing-aid dealers, as well as on the competence of those providing hearing tests and fitting hearing aids. Many consumers of these products are seniors, and they have felt particularly vulnerable.

Mr. Speaker, as part of our government's commitment to quality, accessible, and responsible health services for our seniors and for all people of Saskatchewan, we believe it is important to address these concerns.

We have, over the last year, worked closely with the Saskatchewan Hearing Instrument Practitioners Society and the Saskatchewan Association of Speech-Language Pathologists and Audiologists on this Act. These organizations support our move to regulate this sector by requiring businesses to be licensed to employ qualified staff to provide hearing aid services.

We have also consulted with Veterans Affairs Canada, the Workers' Compensation Board, and health districts. All support this initiative.

Saskatchewan Health will continue to work closely with these key groups as we develop regulations that establish staff qualifications and standards of practice. As audiologists are already regulated by the Saskatchewan Association of Speech-Language Pathologists and Audiologists, only those audiologists who operate private hearing-aid businesses will need to be licensed. A business, which is not licensed to provide hearing-aid services, may be fined under the Act.

Mr. Speaker, Saskatchewan Health will administer the licensing program and provide a contact for consumers who have questions or complaints about hearing-aid businesses. We will be able to investigate those complaints and, if warranted, take action against the company. This would include suspending the licence or ordering a consumer refund.

There are some other significant features of the Act which will provide a positive benefit for consumers. Those who have ordered a hearing aid will be allowed three days to reflect on their order and, if desired, cancel it and receive a refund.

In addition, consumers will be allowed to receive a copy of their hearing test so that they may then choose from which outlet they wish to purchase their hearing aid. This is quite similar to receiving a copy of eyesight test results.

Hearing-aid businesses, unless operated by audiologist, will also be restricted from providing services to minors. This is because audiologists need to work closely with the education sector and with speech-language pathologists to ensure our children receive integrated, remedial services such as those

provided by health districts through the Saskatchewan Hearing Aid Plan.

Mr. Speaker, this is a first critical step in regulating this sector. We will continue to consult with our industry partners in developing the necessary regulations, and deciding on an appropriate time frame for proclaiming the Act and the regulations.

Mr. Speaker, I'm pleased to move second reading of The Hearing Aid Sales and Services Act.

Mr. Weekes: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd like to stand today and speak to Bill No. 26, An Act respecting Hearing Aid Sales and Services.

The minister outlined the Act and what the Act intends to do as far as licensing and regulating, and talks about the Health department looking after this area.

The first thing I'd like to comment on, I haven't heard or our caucus offices and constituency offices hasn't heard many or any complaints concerning this area of marketing and business. And so I'm not aware of an overwhelming need to change the laws. But if the minister and the government has had those requests, I suppose that would be an appropriate step to make.

A couple of points I'd like to make is concerning other associations and businesses who self-regulate. They look after their own industry, their own businesses. They provide the licence or recommend the licence to the government agency that looks after this area. And I'm just wondering if what the minister is stating here is just a duplication of what is already going on in consumer and corporate affairs.

And also it seems to me that there are many other areas that are already running on their own, a self-regulated industry, and we already have laws on the books concerning consumer protection. And I'm just wondering if this again is a duplication of those same laws and protection that consumers already have.

I believe it's important that various industries and especially in health care are licensed and have professional standings of practice. But again I think it's probably more appropriate to have a self-regulating industry which would look after this area.

One thing that businesses right across the province have spoken to the official opposition is concerning the amount of red tape and regulation in this province which is hindering investment, hindering the private investors in this province. And I'm just concerned that this is another layer of bureaucracy and regulation that is added on to the businesses in this province which will stagnate the industry and really hold back the professional services that are provided.

And at this time I'd like to take this back to our caucus and talk to the stakeholders in the province and have more discussion with them. And at this time I'd like to adjourn debate.

Debate adjourned.

ADJOURNED DEBATES

Bill No. 4

The Assembly resumed the adjourned debate on the proposed motion by the Hon. Mr. Nilson that **Bill No. 4 — The Registered Nurses Amendment Act, 2001** be now read a second time.

Mr. Gantefoer: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, it's with a great deal of pleasure that I rise to enter into the debate in regard to Bill No. 4, The Registered Nurses Amendment Act, 2001.

Mr. Speaker, there are many people involved in the health care system and they all play an integral part in the delivery of health care services in our province and in our communities.

And, Mr. Speaker, increasingly it is apparent that there are individuals who have the ability to have an extended scope of practice that would be very beneficial in many aspects of health care delivery in the province. And I speak of nurse practitioners or advanced clinical nurses or whatever designation exactly you want to give to these individuals.

Mr. Speaker, as we look across the future mosaic of health care delivery in this province, I think everyone would agree that it's extremely important that each of the individuals involved are able to fulfill their scope of practice for which they were trained. And it is important and necessary that legislation be set into place to appropriately come up with a set of rules and guidelines so that that can happen in a professional and effective way.

And, Mr. Speaker, I believe that this legislation goes a long way in defining the scope of practice and the terms of reference for advanced clinical nurses in the province.

Increasingly, Mr. Speaker, there is nurse practitioners or advanced clinical nurses beginning to function in our province even though these guidelines have not been clearly defined. And they're forced at this stage to still operate under the auspices of a general family physician or a medical doctor for some of the procedures that they are actually trained to be able to do. And, Mr. Speaker, this legislation potentially is going to clarify those issues and I think that that is an important prospect for nurse practitioners in the province.

The nature of the legislation will put this under the auspices of The Saskatchewan Registered Nurses' Association and they will engage in the process of setting up bylaws and guidelines for the advanced clinical nurses.

There are two main areas where these individuals will be able to function more independently than currently is the case. And that is firstly that they will be able to write prescriptions off the formulary for a limited number of medical pharmaceuticals. And we think that that's appropriate, because some of the clients that these individuals see that a range of pharmaceuticals that they could write prescriptions for would be appropriate.

And the second area is that they would be able to also independently call up for a certain number of medical tests that are required in the conduction of their practice.

Mr. Speaker, I believe that there was some initial testing of the use of advanced clinical nurses in the province. And from what I understand these initial trial runs, if you like, have come back very favourably received by the people in the communities where advanced clinical nurses have practiced.

In my constituency, certainly, and in the neighbouring constituency under the auspices of the North-East Health District, there is an advanced clinical nurse practising in the communities of Carrot River, Arborfield, and now Zenon Park in my constituency. And everything that comes back from people that have used this individual is very positive.

In addition, in my health district they are now under the process of hiring an advanced clinical nurse to set up practice and to assist physicians in the communities of St. Brieux and Naicam, and I think that that is a step in the right direction as well.

However, I think that there has to be some obvious cautions placed up in when we look at this practice, because I think we don't want to create a situation where we indeed are alternating for advanced clinical nurses where family physicians have been adequately putting in a service and a practice to the community. And I think that when we define the role of advanced clinical nurses in our communities that this has to be done with a great deal of consultation.

(16:00)

I note in discussion with various official agencies in the health care field that there has been a reasonable amount of negotiation on the official level between a number of the people in various associations. For example, the Saskatchewan Registered Nurses' Association has had an opportunity to look very closely at this legislation and are satisfied with it. The Saskatchewan Association of Licensed Practical Nurses, as well.

The Registered Psychiatric Nurses of Saskatchewan, the College of Physicians and Surgeons, the Saskatchewan Medical Association, the Saskatchewan Pharmaceutical Association, and the Saskatchewan Association of Health Organizations have had discussions about this legislation, and I think that that is an appropriate avenue to take to make sure that there aren't some pitfalls that we may be stumbling into with this legislation.

In addition, we as the official opposition have been undertaking to make connections and contacts, not only with these official associations as the Department of Health has done, but also to talk to people that are actually in the field, in the profession, not only in advanced clinical practice, but also in regular registered nurse, licensed practical nurse, registered psychiatric nurse, and the medical profession to see if individuals have concerns about how this legislation is being crafted.

And so, Mr. Speaker, in principle I'm pleased as the official opposition Health critic to say we are very much supportive of the general thrust of this legislation. We certainly think that it is going to be another small piece in the very large puzzle about health care delivery in this province. And as such, we think that it has some real merits.

However I have to also report, Mr. Speaker, that a number of the people that we have requested their reaction to this

legislation from have been unable to give their submissions to us at this time, and so we certainly feel it important that this legislation be given due care and attention and proper process. And so, Mr. Speaker, we certainly require some additional time for those individuals to respond to our queries as to their perspectives about this legislation.

So at this time, Mr. Speaker, awaiting that information, I would respectfully like to adjourn debate.

Debate adjourned.

Bill No. 5

The Assembly resumed the adjourned debate on the proposed motion by the Hon. Mr. Nilson that **Bill No. 5 — The Dietitians Act** be now read a second time.

Ms. Draude: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to stand today to The Dietitians Act that has been brought forward by the government. Overall we're encouraged by the contents of the Bill, which will formally put in place a regulatory body for dietitians across the province.

Public accountability has been strengthened by expanding the number of public representatives on the council. There will be a requirement for open disciplinary hearings and for the filing of an annual report. All of these objectives are something that we see as a positive move.

Obviously as health care and health care delivery has changed over the years, it has been necessary to effect those changes within the professional bodies that are represented.

For those who are not aware of just how far reaching a dietitian's work is, it's important to note that they are employed in various sectors in the health care field serving in such areas not only as food services, but clinical dietitians, public health, community dietitians, nutritional supplementary programs, and even specialized clinics like pediatrics.

One of the primary roles that the dietitians play in health care is to improve and maintain health and well-being.

Interesting to note that when the NDP implemented its so-called wellness model in 1992, they were so concerned about closing down hospitals and consolidating services that they didn't make changes where changes were obviously needed. So while dietitians saw their roles expand and change, amended legislation did not accompany that.

Unfortunately it's what we've come to expect from this government. In its usual style they decide to wait and see. Then when it looks like they might be in trouble, they decide to do something. But that's better late than never — it seems to be their motto especially when it comes to health care.

We now know Saskatchewan has the longest waiting lists in the country. Not only are residents waiting to access health care, they're sick enough to need to access it. Clearly health needs and health matters are not being addressed in this province.

Hopefully this Bill not only recognizes the important

contributions that dietitians make to health care delivery, but that it also ensures they have the tools and resources needed to deliver their programs and services to more people in a more timely manner.

We are pleased to see the discussion took place over a two and a half year period with the dietitian association. Through discussion and consultation, input and suggestions for this Bill were provided. This allowed for the Bill that the dietitians throughout Saskatchewan can be proud of.

One of this government's 1999 election promises was to hire 500 more health care providers. Last summer it was announced that over 200 health care positions would be lost. We know that a majority of these positions were nurses but we're also wondering if dietitians were included as well.

In fact the University of Saskatchewan has indicated that it will likely be hiking tuition fees this year by an average of 15 per cent, something that will no doubt impact the number of dietitians who will be able to afford to take their training at the U of S (University of Saskatchewan).

And when we talk about the lack of access, while this Bill finally gives some long overdue respect to dietitians throughout Saskatchewan, it doesn't address the more serious issue of increasing funding to universities or increasing the number of seats in the various health care programs. In fact only 24 seats are available in the dietitian program at the University of Saskatchewan.

Another lack of access for dietitians in this province that isn't addressed in this Bill is regards to the student financial aid. We know this government has a bursary program in place that will allow students going into health-related fields to get help with their tuition costs if they promise to work in rural Saskatchewan.

While this is good news for rural Saskatchewan, it's bad news for students studying dietetics because from what we've seen these bursaries are going to students in physical therapy, occupational therapy, speech and language pathology, ideology, public health inspection, respiratory therapy, and early childhood psychology.

We also know the continued lack of funding to health districts has forced health boards to cut back even more on critical programs and services, which has negatively impacted the access and delivery of health care to many communities.

There is a great demand for dietitians across the province. In many instances one dietitian is forced to do many things, which again speaks to the serious state of working conditions in the health care area in Saskatchewan. We've been told there's a two-year shortage of dietitians — very similar to the problem facing nursing.

This Bill does not begin to address these very extreme important issues.

There is no denying that hospitals are necessary to treat the sick and the injured, but it's also important that people understand and take responsibility for their own personal health. This is

where the dietitians come in. Unfortunately we haven't seen much initiative from this government that will address a disappointing and overall lack of vision that it has regarding health care in Saskatchewan.

Mr. Speaker, we're well aware this Bill has the support of dietitians and that it has been contemplated for a number of years. But we've also had calls from people who have other input issues that they would like to discuss with us and with due diligence we feel it would be necessary to adjourn this debate on this Bill for now and garner any further information that may be coming to us. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Debate adjourned.

COMMITTEE OF FINANCE

General Revenue Fund Health Vote 32

Subvote (HE01)

The Chair: — I invite the Minister of Health to introduce his officials.

Hon. Mr. Nilson: — Thank you, Mr. Deputy Chair. It's my pleasure today to be here in this very warm place and see if we can't add a little bit of heat through some answers to some questions.

But I'm very pleased to have with me today a number of officials from the Department of Health. Right to my left is Glenda Yeates, who is the deputy minister; and to her left is Lauren Donnelly, who is the executive director of acute and emergency services. To my right is Lawrence Krahn, who is the assistant deputy minister.

Directly behind me is Bert Linklater, who's the executive director of district management services; and beside him is Duncan Fisher, the assistant deputy minister. And to my right . . . behind me to my right is Wanda Lamberti, who is the director of budget and financial planning.

And I also have with me today Kimberly Wihnan, who is the assistant to the deputy minister; Eric Young, the deputy chief medical health officer; and Tim Macaulay, who is the environmental health consultant.

Mr. Gantefoer: — Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker. And first of all, to the minister, welcome, and to your officials, welcome to the beginning of the estimates process. I think the minister can well appreciate that what we don't want to generate today is more heat. I would rather have some light. So let's try to make it happen.

Mr. Minister, as you can appreciate, the Department of Health budget is very significant in the province, and I would like to outline a little bit of groundwork in terms of my approach to the Committee on Estimates in terms of the different departments.

I think that you and I have the opportunity to travel in the health circles with a great deal of intensity, and I think that we have a

responsibility to make sure that we properly scrutinize the estimates and the requests for the Department of Health. But not to just do that in light of our interest but to do it for the greater interest of people who are out in the province who are watching these proceedings through the television channels, etc. So I think we have an obligation, first of all, to a larger audience than those of us immediately into the Chamber.

And so through the course of this process, I certainly intend to direct the process from our prospective so that answers that may be obvious to you and I may not be so necessarily obvious to people who would be wanting to know what's going on in the Department of Health and with this very significant budget.

The process then would go through these various stages over time. And over the next weeks and months, or whatever it's going to be, we're going to have a lot of opportunities, I hope, to delve into the various departments and areas in some depth.

I've been seconded or whatever by one of my colleagues in terms of some issues this afternoon because they're time-sensitive, and there has been a request that the member from Watrous would like to ask some questions of your department, particularly concerning a situation in her constituency and particularly in light where there are decisions that are ongoing as we speak; that she feels it's important that there will be some clarification from yourself and your department on these issues.

So, Mr. Minister, with those very brief opening statements, I would like to defer to my colleague and look forward to the next opportunity when we have to start on the general health topics.

Ms. Harpauer: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. I too would like to welcome the minister and his officials for being here today.

And for the first question, I would like to know what protocol, if any, is in place for the Health department to track the staffing statistics throughout each of the province's health districts.

(16:15)

Hon. Mr. Nilson: — Thank you for that question. Basically what happens within Saskatchewan Health is that the health system is managed on the basis of dollars and services provided to patients. So that's the key factor. But on an annual basis there is a Health department survey of all employers within the Saskatchewan Health system and that data is then basically like a snapshot for the year.

And so this process takes a number of people to do it obviously, and the most recent data available is from 1999 — December 31, 1999. The information for the year 2000 will be available later this year.

This data is then checked against some other indicators. One of the key areas is the SAHO (Saskatchewan Association of Health Organizations) benefits eligibility system. It basically has a record of who has pensions, who has the various benefit plans that are there.

We also have a check on a regular basis against the health

district information.

And finally, we also have the SAHO payroll system as well as information from East Central and Swift Current Health Districts, because they're not on that same payroll system. And so you have a number of different places where this information is taken. But the most accurate one in retrospect is always the employer survey.

Ms. Harpauer: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. In the past I have asked questions about the Living Sky Health District and problems that they are facing, and in those questions you knew that there was a problem. So who reported the tentative nursing shortage at the Lanigan Hospital to your department?

Hon. Mr. Nilson: — Perhaps I didn't understand your first question about the protocol around information.

Basically there are staff within Saskatchewan Health who are responsible for different districts. And they have two, three, or four districts that they're responsible for and they're in regular telephone contact, sending information back and forth.

And so most likely, the kind of information that you're asking about would be part of a regular daily or every other day conversation with the health district management staff in Regina.

Ms. Harpauer: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. So if I'm understanding you correctly, the administration staff of a health district reports to another body who then reports to you or your department?

Hon. Mr. Nilson: — The process I just described is a liaison role because practically the staff within the health district and the CEO report to their health board. But they also give that information to us in Regina, because there are different issues that sometimes take involvement of information from everywhere.

But primarily it's a liaison role and the board of the health district is the one that has the ultimate responsibility.

Ms. Harpauer: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. So if there is a possibility, say, of a hospital closure, the one who would report to your department would be the CEO of the health district in question?

Hon. Mr. Nilson: — The normal procedure would be that they would notify the staff in the department, but they don't have to do that. But if they're actually going to close a facility, then they do have to provide that information to the minister's office.

But often some of these decisions are discussed or made, and they don't notify us before they do that.

Ms. Harpauer: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. So I'm going to return to a question that I had asked earlier. Was the tentative nursing shortage of the Lanigan Hospital reported to your department?

Hon. Mr. Nilson: — The department knew that they were having some difficulties recruiting staff, but I think that was the

extent of it.

Ms. Harpauer: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. So you knew that there was recruitment problems for the district as a whole, which also includes the Lanigan . . . or the Watrous and the Wynyard hospitals.

Are you now aware of the recruitment problems that they're having? And if so, are you aware of the number of shift shortages that they're having in both of the Lanigan and the Watrous hospitals? If so, what shift shortages are you aware of?

Hon. Mr. Nilson: — At this stage we haven't been following it on a regular basis because that's the kind of information we wouldn't normally hear about in the department in Regina because it's a local management issue. But our understanding is that, at least in the Lanigan situation, they've been able to cover the shifts for the summer.

But basically those kinds of issues around the shift management wouldn't be something that would be normally part of the liaison function unless they were having major troubles. And obviously in this situation, when they went to the point of announcing that they thought they were going to have a summer change in how they provided the coverage, well then we asked some more questions.

Ms. Harpauer: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. Now that you are aware that there is some problems in this health district, have you discussed it with the administration of the health district? And do you know of any plans that the health district is taking in order to cover the shift shortages in the Watrous Hospital for the summer months?

Hon. Mr. Nilson: — We don't have specific information about the other facilities within that health district, but we do know that the whole health district is having some challenges around recruitment. And that is an ongoing situation, I think, that we're working at throughout the province.

But as to specific other facilities that have shortages or not, I'm not aware of that, and department people aren't aware.

Ms. Harpauer: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. When I asked questions during question period pertaining particularly to the Lanigan Hospital and the proposed closure for the summer months, you had answered that the Living Sky Health District was working with the stakeholders to try to solve the nursing shortage issue of the Lanigan Hospital. Who would have given you that information?

Hon. Mr. Nilson: — This information would come to me from the department through the district consultants that are the ones that do the liaison, and basically they receive that information from the administration in the health district.

Ms. Harpauer: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. And I'm assuming the liaison, again I'm asking if that's the CEO, and you can correct me if I'm wrong in assuming that. Were you aware that there was a workshop held where the Living Sky Health District Board members were present — the CEO and all the stakeholders of the Lanigan Hospital were all present at the workshop — only six days prior to the board announcing that

there was going to be a summer closure of the Lanigan Hospital?

Hon. Mr. Nilson: — I was aware that they had had a meeting where they ended up discussing with the community some of the issues around the health district, but that was information that I received after they made their announcement.

Ms. Harpauer: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. One of the topics of the workshop that I was told about was communication is essential.

Has the minister been made aware that there was no mention at that workshop of the potential summer closure of the Lanigan Hospital? Even the board members themselves did not know of this problem, and yet the chairman of the board called the board members that night after the workshop to call an emergency meeting for the following Tuesday evening. Have you been made aware of those facts?

Hon. Mr. Nilson: — I have some basic understanding of that information, but all subsequent to it happening. Because basically there was a concern that after a meeting of the discussion that we then needed to have an emergency meeting with the staff around the closure issue. So basically I know about that, but only subsequent to it all happening.

Ms. Harpauer: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. On Tuesday, April 17 the emergency meeting did take place, and the board members were given a handout that described the staffing difficulties that the Lanigan and Watrous hospitals are facing for the summer months. Has the minister been given a copy of this document that was discussed at the board meeting?

Hon. Mr. Nilson: — No.

Ms. Harpauer: — Okay. I have a copy if we can get someone to pass it to you.

The interesting thing to note on this document is that it begins with the title in bold print, "Board Decision." This was the first time that the board members were made aware of how serious the summer nursing shortage was going to be, and yet the document does not open with the title, board discussion; nor does it list any options or other possibilities for the board to discuss.

Does the minister still believe that the Living Sky Health District Board explored every possible avenue before they made such a drastic decision?

Hon. Mr. Nilson: — Well I think the situation here is obviously that this board was trying to work with a particular problem. They set out a plan — and I'm just speaking from what's happened now — that June 15 was a day that they were planning to go into some kind of a summer change in hours. And that once they presented that information to the community, there were many other suggestions that came forward as to how to resolve this.

So I guess the issue only came to be after this particular discussion took place.

(16:30)

Ms. Harpauer: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. You have said that the board has been trying to work out the problem, but in fact at the emergency meeting that very night, which was the first time they knew that there was a problem — as drastic as it was — and it's the first time that they were handed this paper that says, "Board Decision." They passed the motion to close that hospital that very night, so there wasn't a whole lot of time that they gave to try to work out the problem.

By now I know that you have received a great number of letters from concerned citizens who value the Lanigan Hospital, from staff who work at the Lanigan Hospital, and from the stakeholders at the Lanigan Hospital.

And I know not everybody who wrote you has sent me a copy, but I do have copies from Dr. Saxena, from Marlene Pollock who is an RN (registered nurse) at the Lanigan Hospital, the RM of Wolverine, the towns of Lanigan and Drake, and quite a number of citizens. The RMs of Osborne, Jansen, and Prairie Rose, and the town of Jansen have also assured me that they've written to the minister.

All of these letters say the same thing, and that is that the Living Sky Health District Board did not consult with anyone at all before they made their motion to close the Lanigan Hospital.

After reading all of these letters, does the minister still believe that the Living Sky Health District was working with all of the people to figure out how to solve the staffing difficulties that they were facing?

Hon. Mr. Nilson: — Well the simple answer to your question is that there have been difficulties around the retention and recruitment of RNs and LPNs (licensed practical nurse) in this district for quite a period of time. A number of people retired and some moved away, so that that issue has been in discussion with the local people.

We know that they met with the town council, with other people. Whether they talked to every individual in that whole area, I don't think that's the case, but they did talk to many of the people there as they attempted to recruit people and figure out how to deal with this.

One of the processes that they obviously used was to say, look, this is a serious situation around retention of staff and if we don't sort some of this out, we'll pass a motion that basically says we'll go into summer hours on June 15. The community rallied around the health district and they've sorted out some of the problems, and I think now they're putting together a plan for the summer.

Ms. Harpauer: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. I believe you should maybe talk again to your liaison on this health district. All of these letters are not just citizens. A lot of them are stakeholders; in fact most of the stakeholders have written you. They have all told you the same thing — that there has been no communication, there has been no discussion on the shortage of nurses; you are being sold a bill of goods here.

And I think there are a number of very credible citizens who

have written you now to say that this is true. They have no other way of recourse if they're being misrepresented and they're going to lose their health care facility.

The CEO of the Living Sky Health District, Jill Johnson, met with the administrator of the town of Lanigan, Jack Dvernichuk. And she told Jack at that time that she may encourage the board to rescind their motion if the community and the stakeholders were able to recruit three nurses to fill the vacant nurses' shifts. She gave them five days in which to accomplish this and then stated that the nurses' names and their credentials would have to be on her desk by 8 a.m., Monday, April 30.

The stakeholders and the community did rise to the challenge and in only three working days and a weekend, they identified nine nurses, one LPN, a health administrator, and an experienced scheduler who were willing to work the summer months.

The CEO was very gracious when Mr. Dvernichuk handed her the list and she, as she lounged on her couch in her office, thanked Jack for the list and commended the stakeholders on their efforts, and then she said she would need at least 10 days to check out the health care workers' credentials and then she would present it to the board.

I found it rather interesting that the stakeholders were given five days to recruit their own nurses and the CEO needs 10 days to check out their credentials.

It has now been 14 days since the list of health care workers was given to the CEO of the Living Sky Health District. The people and the stakeholders are still waiting for the board to make a decision if they will rescind their motion. The chairman of the board, Mr. Wayne Busch, has stated that such a decision does not warrant calling an emergency meeting of the board.

So can you, as the minister, tell the people from Lanigan today that their efforts has not been in vain and that the Lanigan Hospital will remain open this summer?

Hon. Mr. Nilson: — It's my understanding that the board is meeting tonight around this very issue.

I think practically though, many of the questions that you've raised here are really ones that you should raise with the health board and the various board members there, as they do relate directly to how the health board operates and the responsibility of the CEO.

Ms. Harpauer: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. The stakeholders of the Living Sky Health District are looking to you now for some guidance because they're not getting a great response from the board of the Living Sky Health District.

When the Living Sky Health District was first formed the Lanigan Hospital had over a million dollars in their surplus funds. And the facility in Lanigan is the model of what this government is encouraging everyone to move towards, because it is the ultimate in integrated services. The seniors' lodge, the hospital, the lab, the X-ray, the dietary departments are all under one roof. And in fact, even one of the doctor's clinics was located under the same roof until just recently when the CEO

decided to convert that area into administration offices.

And then last year in the initial budget proposal and again this year in the summer months, the CEO and the board chair seemed determined to close the Lanigan Hospital and to alienate the stakeholders of that hospital.

The board chair was just on the radio this morning and he implied that the reason that the stakeholders were able to recruit nurses was because they pressured them — something that the board is not about to do. And I've already received numerous phone calls from Lanigan, who are saying that they by no means pressured the nurses and they find the chairman's comments offensive.

Surely you must understand at this point that this community is becoming very bitter and angry towards the Living Sky Health District and the CEO. Many believe that there is another agenda behind the board's decisions and that they are just using the summer closure as a way to start the process of closing the hospital for good. Could this possibly be true?

Hon. Mr. Nilson: — Well unfortunately, you've described a community that's having some difficulty sorting out exactly how some of these issues should be resolved. And I have a great deal of concern and empathy for the people.

I did talk to a number of people that I know in that area last week and I know that there are concerns that people have just about the whole process, which are the same concerns that you've raised. And I guess what I would say is that locally people will have to sort this out in the sense of working with each other. They'll have to work with each other. That includes the board, but it also includes other people in the community.

But they also need to know that the process of closing any facility includes making a recommendation from a board to the Department of Health and to the minister. And given the kind of discussion that we know has gone on in that community, there has to be, I guess, a much clearer case for any change to what's happening there.

And I agree with you, their operation, which includes the integrated facility and the long-term care and all of these other things is a model for how we want a health care system to be and so practically I would encourage the people to try to sort out some of these things. We will provide assistance such as we can but basically my understanding is that if they have the staff issue worked out, they can at least then keep the facility going out over the summer.

Hopefully we can continue to have more people graduate or be recruited to work in that particular area and that we can then end up sorting out some of the issues between the board and the local community, and between the CEO and the local community.

Ms. Harpauer: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. And that is the most encouraging comments I've heard for a while. I do caution you that Lanigan isn't the only community that's contacted me. There's other communities within the health district that is not content.

Moving on to a different area, could the Health minister please tell us here today what the rule of thumb is when calculating the amount of monies paid out in a severance package for a health care administration position. For example, how many weeks are calculated for severance each year for each month of service?

Hon. Mr. Nilson: — Well thank you for that question. It kind of makes me go back to my role as a lawyer where, you know, there are some basic rules at common law, which relate to severance packages.

I think that SAHO itself has some basic guidelines that they have set as an organization for all of those things. I don't know what those are, but basically it works out to something based on the number of years of service, kind of the possibility of getting another similar kind of job, and all of those factors that are put into there.

But I don't have that information off the top of my head and basically I think it's one where you should get good legal advice.

Ms. Harpauer: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. The reason why I asked that question is I've also had numerous phone calls on this issue because the emergency meeting that was called by the chairperson of Living Sky Health District for April 17 was twofold in nature. The chairperson called the meeting to tell the board about the closure of the Lanigan Hospital but he also wanted to discuss increasing the CEO's severance package.

The proposal was to increase her package to 18 months pay, even though she's only been employed by the Living Sky Health District for approximately five years. So does the minister believe that the CEO severance package is reason to call an emergency meeting first off, and does he not believe that this is quite an excessive package?

Hon. Mr. Nilson: — I don't think it's appropriate for me to make a comment on that. Basically this would be within the purview of that board. And as I said before, I suggest they would get some legal advice, or work with SAHO which has guidelines around these particular issues.

Mr. Bjornerud: — Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. And I'd also like to welcome your officials here today, Mr. Minister.

I'd like to talk a bit today, Mr. Minister, about the East Central Health District and I'm sure you're quite aware of the situation out there. Our local health board was disbanded and replaced with an appointed administrator or CEO. And I've talked to the previous minister of Health about the situation in Yorkton. And I'm sure you're well aware — maybe far more familiar with it than I am — but I think once again we have to talk about the area that that hospital covers out there.

And as you probably know we go far into Manitoba — I believe into the Swan River area, Roblin, down in that area — but we go into the Canora-Pelly constituency, a way up, Preeceville, Sturgis, Canora, and take the overload from that area and the serious cases from there before they get to the point where they come to Regina and Saskatoon.

We also go south and we cover my whole constituency along

the Manitoba border. And I guess why I feel this is so important, Mr. Minister, is that I've met with doctors out there in the last few years, I've met with nurses, I've met with LPNs, and number one, morale is not high in that area. And I think it hurts the care that, actually, patients receive out there.

And in saying this, Mr. Minister, I'm not pointing my fingers at nurses, doctors, or LPNs because they are the first ones to say that they are giving the best care possible. And many that have used the facility out there say that once they've got into the system, they have received very good care.

An example I could use, this summer my mother had a heart attack and the care that she's received out there at the time she's been in the hospital has been excellent. The problem being is, number one, we're short of nurses in that area, as many other areas are. But I think the other problem is, is that we're short of beds, Mr. Minister. The doctors, when I meet with those doctors out there, I think ICU (intensive care unit) are down to four beds; and this is a tremendously big area that we're covering with that hospital.

(16:45)

Pediatrics, we have probably, Mr. Minister, one of the best pediatricians in the province and, for that matter, possibly in the whole country. And I guess one of our concerns out there is if we stay — and I believe we're at eight beds right now, but at one point we were down to four; I think the feeling is that they would like to be up to 12 but because of the shortage of nurses can't go back to 12 — that we may lose this pediatrician.

And I know my constituents — and I can't speak for the member from Canora-Pelly — but I know for a fact that people in his area are also concerned that we may lose this pediatrician. People in Manitoba are even concerned. And I know that's not our responsibility, but in some respects it is because those people are coming into Yorkton for care and are taking beds that would be Saskatchewan people using them if they weren't in there.

Mr. Minister, I guess what I would like to hear from you today is where are we with our health board out there? It was disbanded, a CEO or administrator was appointed, and nothing seems to have changed. Where are we in this situation right now, Mr. Minister?

Hon. Mr. Nilson: — Well I appreciate your comments. And I guess I would echo the same comments, which is that when you have a good doctor and other good staff you want to try to make sure that we get a system that supports them so that they can provide the care that we know is well provided when people get into the facilities.

As far as the East Central District is concerned, they have been dealing with a number of difficulties and concerns. We know that last week they did have a public meeting where the administrator and the CEO and the financial people laid out some of the plans that they have and had what I understand was a pretty good discussion around the plans that they have for that community.

I know that we're looking at how to get back to the regularized

situation where we would have a board like all the other areas and try to do that in an orderly fashion, because we know there are many good people out in that area who would be reflective of the community and would be happy to help build even a stronger district and institution.

So that's clearly on the agenda in the very short time frame over the next number of months.

As far as the whole issue of the specialists and the service area, it is very clear that that particular health district does have a broad base of people coming from many places, including from Manitoba. And I think that role is going to continue and we just need to work with them from the department here and with the local people to figure out which are the services that are needed and make sure that they get sufficient staff right across the board.

We know that the Commission on Medicare has looked at a number of the issues around how to provide care in sort of regional areas as well as in Saskatoon, Regina, P.A. (Prince Albert). And my sense is that the local people have a pretty good sense of what kinds of things they need out there.

We're going to listen very carefully to them as they give us their ideas, and then we hope to meld that together with the resources that we have as a province so that we can provide the long-term kind of care that I know that you are advocating for them.

Mr. Bjornerud: — Well thank you, Mr. Minister, and I'm glad to hear that you share the same concerns. I believe that we both have genuine concerns and I think we want to get to the same end.

Some of the concerns I've had brought to me lately — and I know we don't deal and we don't make decisions based on rumour, but sometimes rumours end up becoming fact down the road — and I guess one of my biggest concerns right now is I think the possibility of a new long-term care facility in Yorkton is being considered and that's fine. I believe they possibly need that facility.

But I think some of the rumours coming out of some of the meetings that they've had out in our health district, Mr. Minister, is that possibly some of our smaller centres where we have long-term care facilities — such as Saltcoats and there's others within the Central Health District that are not in my constituency — I think have the fear that possibly some of these may be closed to cater to one large one in the city of Yorkton. And I have no idea if there's any fact to this, but I guess again I reiterate that sometimes these rumours end up being true, Mr. Minister, and there's a great deal of concern out there.

Part of my concern is that many of these local, and by local, I mean in the smaller communities care homes that have been around there and I believe ran very, very efficiently. I know the one at home I think is actually . . . could be a model for some of the ones in the province. We have nothing but compliments coming out of that. And it would really worry me that we seem to be in a transition time in health care, whether health care reform is going to take place from what Mr. Fyke has proposed.

And I guess my concern is, Mr. Minister, and I'd like you to comment on it, is we have an appointed CEO out there right now with no health board. We have the Fyke Commission going to be studied one way or another. We have a number of things happening in health care. And I guess my concern and many out there is that: how many of the decisions are going to happen out there and be made before we deal with Fyke and we do all . . . I guess my concern is will some of these decisions be made before we deal with Fyke and people have had time to put input into what really happens? And I guess, Mr. Minister, that's one of my major concerns right now.

Hon. Mr. Nilson: — Well I think the simple answer to the question is that we're going to have to work with the local community people around these decisions because that's the only way that we can make all of this work. And so it may be that some of the projects will go ahead, and I guess I point to Weyburn and Melfort on Friday where people have been working for literally years on those long-term care projects. They are now going on to the next step in that process.

And so presumably the Yorkton project is in the process and will continue as far as the capital and the local fundraising. But I think the important thing is, for the other places that you talk about, that the people there end up having to be part of any decisions that we make, either with the local officials or on a province-wide basis. And so the plan here is that we want to listen to the people.

My basic experience is that when you ask, people have very good ideas, and let's figure out how to fit those into an overall plan.

The committee reported progress.

The Assembly adjourned at 16:56.