



FIRST SESSION - TWENTY-FIFTH LEGISLATURE

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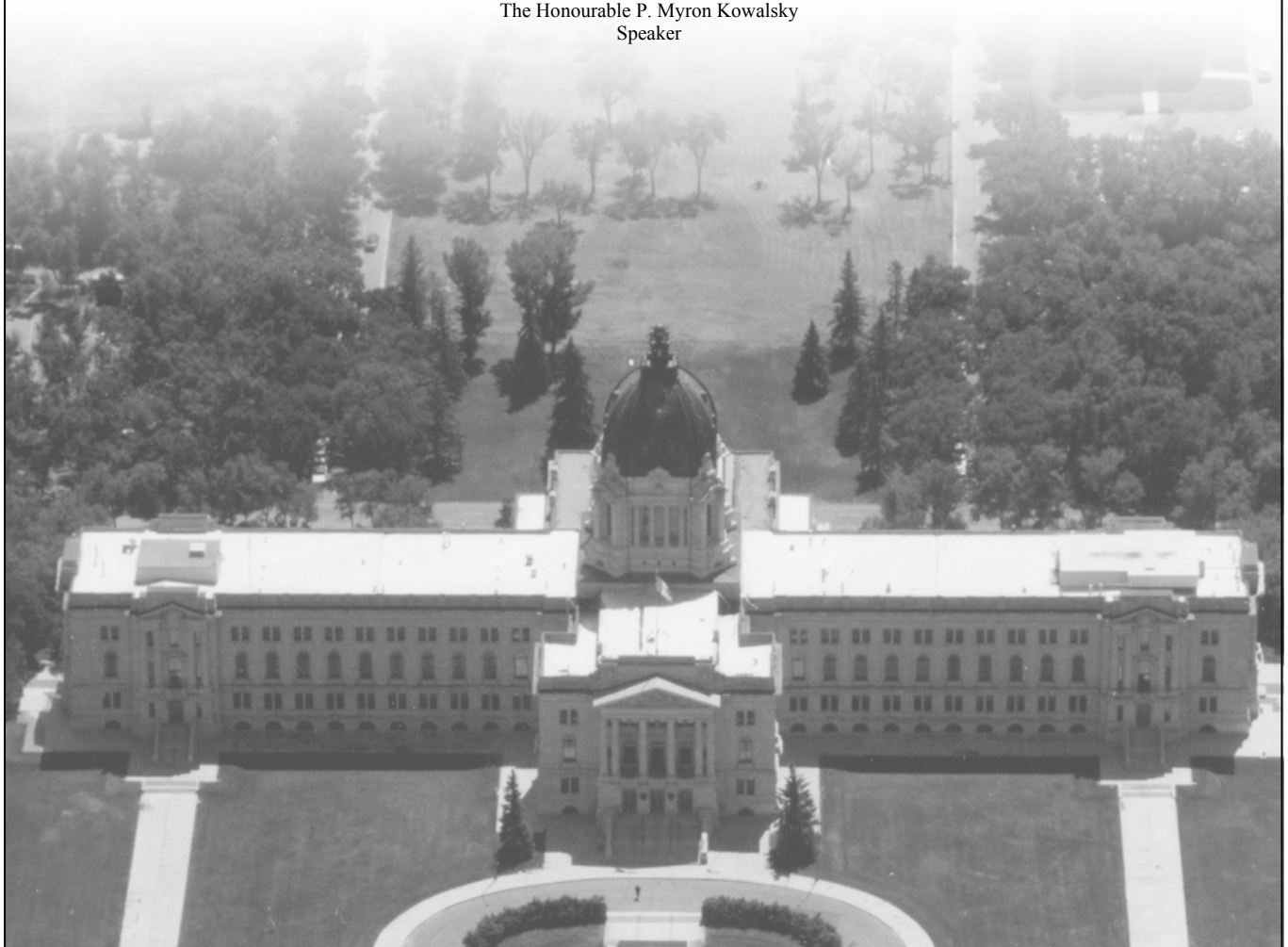
Legislative Assembly of Saskatchewan

**DEBATES
and
PROCEEDINGS**

(HANSARD)

Published under the
authority of

The Honourable P. Myron Kowalsky
Speaker



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EVENING SITTING
COMMITTEE OF FINANCE

General Revenue Fund
Government Relations
Vote 30

Subvote (GR01)

The Deputy Chair: — The first item of business is estimates for the Department of Government Relations. Can the minister introduce his officials.

Hon. Mr. Taylor: — Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I am pleased today to be back in front of Committee of Finance.

The officials with me today include deputy minister of government relations, Dr. Harvey Brooks. To my right, Maryellen Carlson, assistant deputy minister, municipal relations. Behind Maryellen is John Edwards, executive director, policy development. Directly behind me is Russ Krywulak, executive director, grants administration and provincial municipal relations. Next to Russ is Wanda Lamberti, the executive director, finance and management services. And directly to Wanda's left is Paul Osborne, who is the assistant deputy minister, trade and international relations. Seated at the back of the House with Government Relations are Florent Bilodeau, director, Office of French-language Co-ordination; Doug Morcom, director of grants administration; and Ralph Leibel, acting executive director, community planning.

The Chair: — I recognize the member from Rosetown-Elrose.

Mr. Hermanson: — Thank you, Mr. Chair, and good evening to the minister and his officials. We want to take this opportunity to ask a few questions, particularly about intergovernmental affairs.

First of all I would appreciate just a brief update from the minister's department about Saskatchewan's involvement/intervention in the ongoing BSE [bovine spongiform encephalopathy] situation. This does involve other governments, both the federal government and the Americans, and I'm not looking for a long answer but just a quick update as to what role Saskatchewan has been playing in this issue.

Hon. Mr. Taylor: — Thank you very much for that question. I think the member from Rosetown-Elrose is aware the lead agency on our BSE activity is Agriculture and Food. The Minister of Agriculture and Food works through the provincial, state agriculture group on the issue and basically carries the lead for it.

Intergovernmental relations has a number of other forum areas where we are involved in these discussions. We provide advice as well to the Premier in his discussions with the federal officials and, most importantly, support the Premier's activities with regards to the Western Governors' Association and the meetings that take place there.

Intergovernmental relations also has a very good relationship through the Midwest Legislative Conference. And it's through our contacts there that we promote Saskatchewan interests. As well I think the member opposite is also aware that personally I and other members of the government, including members of the opposition, have travelled on several occasions now to the United States — Montana, North Dakota — and even today as we speak, we're entertaining a guest from South Dakota.

We use every opportunity we can in visiting with governors, state representatives, state senators, to lobby on this issue on our behalf.

But essentially the really short answer is the specifics of the negotiations lie in the . . . are the responsibility of the Minister of Agriculture.

Mr. Hermanson: — I thank the minister for the answer. We do recognize that many departments of government . . . I mean Executive Council is involved, Department of Agriculture. Also because there is a legal issue before the United States, I suppose Justice would be involved, but I could see Intergovernmental Affairs playing a coordinating role.

Has your department at all investigated and made recommendations to Justice or Agriculture regarding the status of the pending court case in the United States? And have you considered seeking intervenor status at the, you know, at this hearing that's going to occur in July?

Hon. Mr. Taylor: — Mr. Deputy Chair, the question as I understood it was the activities of the Department of Intergovernmental Affairs in a broader range, specifically leading up to or including an intervenor status with the US [United States] court. Again the very short answer to the question is that because this is primarily a national issue, in other words, it's a federal government, the federal government's issue, it's the Canadian government dealing with the federal US government overall on opening the border, that we've relied very heavily on a relationship with the federal government, the federal Department of Agriculture and including the Prime Minister's office, in developing our relationship with regards to formal status in the US.

The federal government had made inquiries with regards to this friend of the court intervenor status and the federal government was turned down. Saskatchewan felt therefore no ability to, if the federal government had been turned down for this status, of attempting any intervenor status.

We are aware that a number of others, including federal MPs [Member of Parliament] individually, have made some claim in this regard. We would certainly be very interested in supporting their activity in that regard. This is an important issue for Saskatchewan producers.

But the Saskatchewan government to a certain extent, as I say, has no intervenor status that we can see, no legal basis for entering into this at that state court level. It was a federal court in the state of Montana that made this decision.

The USDA [United States Department of Agriculture] does not

support the closure of the border; in fact they want it open. It appears that this matter is in front of the court and it will be dealt with in front of the court and the Canadian government is providing the US government with considerable amount of evidence to support our side of the argument with their side of the argument.

Mr. Hermanson: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. And while, Mr. Minister, your report is accurate, I think Canada followed the amicus status request to be involved in this legal case. Others are following the intervenor status route.

My thoughts, and I think the thoughts of producers in the industry in Saskatchewan, is that anything we can do to put pressure on the Americans and help them to realize that they are required and there is a commitment and a need based on science and good government to reopen the border, that that should be followed. And anything that Saskatchewan can do to lend support is not to be taken lightly.

[19:15]

And I know that while this is primarily a federal initiative, we agree with the minister on that. Nevertheless in World Trade Organization talks and in many international trade issues, provinces have been involved either as an adjunct to the federal government or they make their own presentations. And I would just encourage the minister to spare no effort in letting the Americans know that this is a serious matter and that they are on shaky ground and Canada is on solid ground, and this issue needs to be resolved quickly.

Just on some other trade issues, could the minister give us again a brief update on where we're at with the softwood lumber dispute? I know some good things have been happening there. Also wheat and pork and again I think some good things happening there. I believe that there should be some money coming to Saskatchewan in some of these industries. Could the minister indicate what kind of remuneration would be received by the Saskatchewan players in these industries as a result of some recent rulings that have gone in Canada's favour?

Hon. Mr. Taylor: — Mr. Deputy Chair, first with regards to softwood lumber, I think the member is aware and the public should certainly be aware that on these issues, softwood lumber and pork, Intergovernmental Affairs is very active on these files. We are involved in direct, face-to-face meetings. We are involved in regular conference calls with other provincial ministers and the federal folks in this regard. So we are very much active on those files.

On the softwood lumber file, indeed we have made some significant progress, but on the other hand we haven't seen any results of that progress. I think the member is fully aware without me enumerating all of the numerous cases that we have been successful at with regards to both NAFTA [North American Free Trade Agreement] and WTO [World Trade Organization].

But I think it is important to note that the next big legal case, challenge, comes out in June, and we are very hopeful that this will again spur the negotiating side of this to another level. We are very optimistic about softwood lumber, but at the same time

we're also participating with the federal government on their challenge to US industry in terms of retaliatory action. And in fact just a couple of weeks ago, retaliatory action took effect on American goods moving into Canada in regards to this file.

On the pork case, indeed I can't give the member specific numbers although we will try and bring them forward. The number on pork is in fact the deposits that the industry has made plus interest.

We have every reason to believe that this will be expedited quickly, but on the other hand these trade irritant matters with the US always seem to have a life of their own. And we tend not to get too excited even when we win, simply because the US trade people always seem to have another card up their sleeve, which is why on the lumber file the federal government decided to take some retaliatory action to indicate how serious it is — how serious Canadians regard the whole issue. We are talking tens of millions of dollars on pork. And in terms of softwood lumber, well it's considerable. We're in the billion dollar range. Is that right . . . [inaudible] . . . Okay. In any case, I don't know if that answers your question, but we're very involved in both those files. The producers in Saskatchewan, both pork and softwood, certainly are consulted regularly in the moves that we're making on their behalf.

Mr. Hermanson: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. I wanted to get that update on the record.

Now I want to move to another area, and that is to do with equalization. As you are well aware, the federal government has established a panel to deal with equalization, and the provinces were to place two members on that panel. The provinces, including the province of Saskatchewan, failed to do that, and so the provinces aren't represented on this panel.

Can the minister tell the people of Saskatchewan why we failed to reach an agreement with the other provinces to put two members on this panel and what the consequences will be?

Hon. Mr. Taylor: — Mr. Deputy Speaker, and again thank you very much for the question. The Department of Intergovernmental Affairs is of course very active on the equalization file. We are providing advice to the Premier's office. We are attending all of the meetings that are taking place and again, as I say, consider this to be a very important file.

On the review panel, of course that is the . . . the development of the review panel and obviously the work that will result from the review panel is very important to the future of this province, and we spent a considerable amount of time on this panel development.

The problem is, as the member will realize, is that of course this is a very complicated file, and finding the right people with the right knowledge base is a important and complicated matter. There's only a handful of people in the country that can do this work.

I guess in order to answer the member's question fairly, the only real answer is at the end of the day the provinces — collectively in this instance — the provinces were unable to agree on a common set of panellists and that was it. We had to

move forward. There was no consensus or agreement on the panel as put forward by the provinces, and as a result the provinces did not name the panellists.

Mr. Hermanson: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. To the minister, could the minister tell me which nominees the Government of Saskatchewan proposed for this panel who were subsequently rejected by the other provinces?

Hon. Mr. Taylor: — Mr. Chair, it's not the simplest of questions to answer. There are some confidentiality issues involved.

There were names presented by a number of provinces, names presented by the federal government. Names were discussed; characteristics, skill levels, knowledge, all that was discussed. I would say it's not fair to the individuals involved to name the panellists that were brought forward. I don't believe the other provinces have done so. And I guess at the end of the day it's just . . . To be fair to the 10 parties that were involved, we should probably not be bringing forward our list of names.

Mr. Hermanson: — Well thank you, Mr. Chair. I think it's unfortunate that the people of Saskatchewan are denied the knowledge of who was proposed because this may have some fairly serious ramifications for the provinces since they don't have representation on this panel, and Saskatchewan's interests are certainly not being presented within the panel on behalf of the people of Saskatchewan.

Just getting to the budget for intergovernmental relations, I notice that the budget, the estimates have increased by, oh, approximately three-quarters of a million dollars from 2004-05 to 2005-06. Can you tell me what value the people of Saskatchewan are receiving for the additional monies being spent?

[19:30]

Hon. Mr. Taylor: — Okay, Mr. Deputy Chair. Sorry. It took me a minute to . . . it took . . .

The Deputy Chair: — Order.

Hon. Mr. Taylor: — I'm sorry for the delay in getting the answers here. But it took me a minute to remember where part of the assessments were because there's a crossover between a number of departments and ministerial offices. Before I get to the specific question about the intergovernmental budget, I do simply want to remind the members opposite that this government has been firm on its equalization position from day one. And the department and the office are doing everything that it can to represent Saskatchewan's interest very strongly.

And I think that the member opposite would know that were this government the only one at the table, the only one making any decisions about appointing people to the review panel, we would have had a panel sooner than we did. And we would have had a panel that was only representing Saskatchewan interests.

There's a lot of different interests at that equalization table. We're just one small player in the big picture. We are doing all that we can to represent the strength of Saskatchewan interests.

On the intergovernmental estimates in front of us, I want to indicate that actually the majority of the additional money has gone to support the immigration side of the estimates package. And the Minister of Immigration is here, and members opposite will have an opportunity to discuss some of the new initiatives under her file shortly after the questions to me are complete.

But essentially we have new money under the intergovernmental relations file for the federally cost-shared, enhanced training initiative and for the implementation of an immigration internship pilot project and of course the additional seats under the nomination program. But I would ask the members opposite to perhaps ask for more details from the Minister of Immigration.

We also have a few thousand dollars that's supporting an office that's been set up by the federal government to support provincial interests in Washington. There are a number of issues that the member opposite has raised earlier whereby provincial interests need to be represented in front of Washington decision makers — the softwood file, the swine file, the BSE file, the wheat file. So the federal government has created an office of provincial interests in Washington, and the provincial governments are each anteing up a few thousand dollars each in order to sustain that office. And I think that pretty much covers the overall cost increases in the file that the member is asking about.

Mr. Hermanson: — Thank you. And, Mr. Chair, to the minister, obviously it seems very counterproductive for the funding for immigration to go through your department, the department you are the minister of, and yet you have a separate Minister Responsible for Immigration. Perhaps that explains why extra money is being spent and yet only about, you know, only a couple of hundred or maybe 200 or maybe 400, an extremely low number of immigrants are coming to Saskatchewan.

Perhaps you should be looking at a better structure and more coordination there because obviously what you are doing now is costing more money, and it's not working because the number of immigrants coming to Saskatchewan is pitifully low compared to the number coming going to the province of Manitoba next door where it's in the thousands rather than just a few hundred.

Just a final question on the estimates, we have the full-time equivalent staff complement for Government Relations which is estimated at a hundred and eighty-one and a half. What would be the intergovernmental relations portion of that FTE [full-time equivalent] number?

Hon. Mr. Taylor: — Mr. Deputy Chair, in answer to the question, the intergovernmental relations FTE number would be 25.8.

Mr. Hermanson: — It should be FTE, I would imagine, not FTA. But thank you, Mr. Minister, for that response. And just a final question. I think I heard, read in the media somewhere, that oceans and fisheries is relinquishing some of its responsibilities or duties or you might say interference in the province of Saskatchewan.

Can you confirm what the new status of Fisheries and Oceans will be in Saskatchewan if they have any status after the new arrangements come into being?

Hon. Mr. Taylor: — I would ask the member to save that question for the Minister of the Environment. They are certainly the lead agency currently dealing with the federal government on the fishery and oceans and environment files. And although obviously we have a significant interest in this, this is a developing story.

They're on the front lines. And perhaps when they have an opportunity to discuss this, when you have an opportunity to discuss this further with the minister, you can take that opportunity.

The Deputy Chair: — I recognize the member from Wood River.

Mr. Huyghebaert: — Thank you, Mr. Deputy Chair. Well on intergovernmental affairs, I just have a question that I would like to ask the minister. And I know it borders on other departments but because my question relates with agreements with United States I think it should come under Intergovernmental Affairs. And what I'm concerned about is agreements that we have or maybe agreements we do not have with the United States on topics. I'm just going to list some topics that are of interest I think to all people in Saskatchewan: trade corridors for an example; the environment, water, transportation, and border security. Now I know the minister may say to ask these questions under another department but in fact if there are bilateral agreements I would gather that they should come under Intergovernmental Affairs.

The status of our highways from the border crossings in a lot of areas is absolutely deplorable. And so I'm wondering what kind of agreement could be set up or is set up that would deal with issues such as that. We all I believe understand the environment issues, and the United States is not a signatory to Kyoto. And if we're pushing ahead with Kyoto, what kind of an agreement would we have or do we have or will we have with respect to that?

We also know water is a huge, huge resource that we have and if we're not going to use it, we may lose it. And I know that comes under Environment but again I'm looking for an international agreement between Saskatchewan and the United States. So I would like . . . and border security obviously too with the enhanced security that's going on on the border, what kind of agreement we have from the province of Saskatchewan. So if the minister would answer those please.

Hon. Mr. Taylor: — Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. A number of subjects raised by the member opposite. I think that it would be fair to say that Saskatchewan is active and interested in all fronts raised by the member opposite as well as others. But we have to work within and respect various jurisdictional circumstances and within our interdepartmental divisions of authority.

First of all provincial jurisdiction and state jurisdiction are not always identical. Federal government has certain jurisdiction in Canada over some areas that does not coincide with federal

jurisdiction in the US. So overall there can be some complications.

We use border security, for example. Border security in the US is primarily a state jurisdiction but in Canada it's a federal jurisdiction. We will be at the table with our Justice officials, our Public Safety officials in working with US states, but we have to bring federal government to the table for any discussion on border security issues.

[19:45]

On water, obviously our Department of the Environment and SaskWater, maybe even the watershed board, is very active on that file in Canada. But transboundary issues are primarily federal, whether it's interprovincial waterways or international waterways. We do have a treaty in place. I think it's called the boundary water treaty — federal jurisdiction between the federal governments — that we work within.

On trade corridors and highways, obviously the Department of Highways is the lead agency here. But again we are very active, particularly with the northern states, in talking about what do we need to do to further within our own jurisdictions the interests that trade corridors represent.

Weights and measure are primarily the most significant barriers to the development of trade corridors. And in fact weights and measures discrepancies affecting long-haul truck drivers probably affect the circumstances in the northern states more than they do so in the northern provinces, or the central provinces — Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba — at this point in time. But we're working on those things.

Again, this government is facilitating and supporting the Midwestern Legislative Conference here in just a month and a half, two months time. We will have representatives from the Midwest states here in Regina. Members of the opposition and members of government will have the opportunity within the confines of that conference to discuss on the agenda with American legislators, members of state assemblies, members of state senates, all of these issues. And in fact they have been on the agenda of MLC [Midwestern Legislative Conference] for a number of years where Saskatchewan has participated and will continue to be held at this particular conference.

I also might add that on the trade corridor issue, Department of Highways, when we were last down in the US northern states — Montana and North Dakota — just a few months ago, established a working protocol. And in fact we will be entertaining in the month of June representatives again from the northern states to discuss weights and measures issues in particular on these trade corridor issues.

So the member raises a number of very interesting subjects, each one of them subject of discussion at international conferences. We consider these to be important issues and we'll continue to work with the members opposite as well as other Saskatchewan interests to further Saskatchewan interests on these subjects.

Mr. Huyghebaert: — Well I thank the minister for the answer, but I take from your comments that the answer to my question

is no, we do not have any agreements on these topics, provincial to United States.

Hon. Mr. Taylor: — Where there are opportunities to be doing some work, we've established some working protocols. If you want to call that . . . if you don't want to call those agreements, I guess they're not agreements.

We have with the state of Montana, an accord. I don't know if the member wants to call that an agreement or not, but we have an accord with the state of Montana that allows us to work on numerous issues, bring our officials together, bring our members of government — that includes members of the opposition — together to discuss and work on ways to facilitate in our best interests or our collective interests a resolution to some disputes.

Now we're very fortunate, especially with the northern states, that we don't have considerable dispute outside of the BSE question. Most of what we have to deal with there are practical matters that we can work out with discussion and understanding each other's circumstances. So I do consider the approach that we're taking, with the jurisdiction that we're allowed to have by constitution of our federal state, we're making some very good progress.

The Deputy Chair: — I recognize the member from Weyburn-Big Muddy.

Ms. Bakken Lackey: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. Mr. Minister, I would like to ask a few questions about SAMA [Saskatchewan Assessment Management Agency]. I received an email from a constituent who is very concerned about his assessment. He received his assessment notice for the year 2005. He lives in the hamlet of Parry, and I'll just read from his email:

Assessment for the lots have doubled or in one case tripled which will mean my property taxes for living in the Hamlet will double this year. A couple of the lots I purchased for less than 50 dollars and they are [now] assessed at 200 to 400 dollars.

And he puts in brackets:

(I would gladly sell these lots at that price)

We do not have any services in the town. Water for hygienic purposes only. No firetrucks, no snowplows . . . no garbage pick up, crumbling street of asphalt. Nearest grocery store is 20 miles away, not on a main or secondary highway [We have a] grid road [which] connects us to highway 6, [which is] 8 kilometres East.

What he would like to know is how this can be justifiable in this hamlet when none of the conditions have changed, yet his assessment has doubled and tripled.

Hon. Mr. Taylor: — Mr. Chair, and I thank the member opposite for her question. Assessment can be as simple or as complicated as you want it to be. Assessment in Saskatchewan and North America-wide is simply a process of valuating property.

Assessment by and large is one part of, but not the property tax system. Many Saskatchewan residents equate their assessment with their taxation, which is kind of what the letter that the member opposite is telling me; if assessment goes up by two times, property tax will go up by two times. That's not necessarily the case. And I'm assuming that the resident has not yet received a property tax notice. Because what happens with assessment — which is really simply an evaluation of the value of the property done on a model that has been created on a province-wide basis by the Saskatchewan Assessment Management Agency, an independent, arm's-length body with rural and urban municipal representatives, as well as school board and provincial representatives working to create assessment models for the province — at the end of the day, assessment should simply tell the resident the approximate value of what that property is.

Municipalities then base their taxation on assessed value. There's mill rate factors, there's provincial percentages of value that get attached to that, and there are exemptions for property that municipal governments are provided. So at the end of the day the taxation may not have any resemblance whatsoever to the assessed value of the property, depending on what the municipal government does with the tools provided to them.

But the property owner should know that if they're not happy with the assessed value assigned to their property, there's an appeal mechanism. That appeal mechanism is reviewed at the local level and it can also be reviewed at the provincial level to determine whether or not that evaluation was fair and reasonable. At the end of the day all we want is a fair and reasonable assessed value of property in the province so that municipalities and school boards can set mill rates based on a common denominator province-wide.

Ms. Bakken Lackey: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. And certainly we do hope that the local municipalities take that into consideration and lower their mill rate accordingly so that the taxes do not go up.

However when I look at this . . . And it has been stated that there is a plan to standardize the mill rate across the province in order to address the education property tax issue in the province. So if we have an increase in assessment and there is a standardized mill rate across the province, those that have the higher assessed property will pay more. Am I correct?

Hon. Mr. Taylor: — In addressing the question directly, there's no attempt to create a standardized mill rate across the province, so I can't really comment on the rest of the hypothetical circumstance that the member raises. But there is no attempt to standardize the provincial mill rate across the province.

Ms. Bakken Lackey: — Well thank you, Mr. Minister, for clarifying that for me. I was with the understanding from some of the comments that had been made by the Education minister that there was . . . or the Learning minister. So I'm glad to hear that that is not the plan to standardize across the province.

However there will be a standardization of the mill rate within each new school division which is going to take in a large area. We're going to move from rural and urban, from land that is

now already more highly assessed. And if we're increasing the assessed land in small places like Parry, those people are going to pay more, and that money is going to flow out of their area, and it's going to flow into a larger area. Is that correct?

Hon. Mr. Taylor: — I'm glad the member clarified the question because I think it is important that we're talking very much specifics and not general in this case.

There is certainly some thought of standardizing the education mill rate within larger school divisions. There's no doubt about that. The implication could be indeed some increased costs but depending on what happens in a lot of other areas.

The Boughen Commission which looked at education financing separate and apart from the rest of government, looked at education financing . . . and the Boughen report made some very specific suggestions with regards to restructuring, with regards to assessment, and with regards to the vast difference between assessments in one part of the province to another part and the way in which education was financed. So Boughen did suggest some very specific matters relating to education financing. And of course one of those suggestions was to shift costs off of the property tax.

Now I think the member opposite is very much aware that this government, together with representatives from SUMA [Saskatchewan Urban Municipalities Association], SARM [Saskatchewan Association of Rural Municipalities], and the school board are looking at ways in which we can change the foundation operating grant. I just wanted to say FOG [foundation operating grant], but in the interests of those who are watching who wouldn't know what that means, the foundation operating grant is the way in which government has financed part of the education system up to this point. We're reviewing that. We're also reviewing the long-term cost on the property tax base. We expect both of those issues to be resolved within the next year so that we're in a position for 2007 to make budgetary decisions.

But the member is right. If nothing changes, assessments rise and there's a standardized rate in a larger school division, there could be some shifts within the school division, and some people could be seeing some additional taxes if nothing changes. And it is our intention to provide some change to the system.

I also want to say that the minister of Education has said repeatedly that any money raised in a region will stay in the region. It won't be shared with other regions. So it's very important to know that money raised locally should be used within that local environment and not shifted to some other part of the province.

[20:00]

Ms. Bakken Lackey: — Thank you for that response. I guess the issue is that to date the Boughen report, which did recommend a shift of the burden off of property tax, we have not seen that happen. And with an increase in assessment, which I've already stated, it will do exactly the opposite of shifting the burden from property tax. It will increase the burden to property tax owners, and it will lessen the onus on the

provincial government.

And this is the great concern, especially in my area of the province and in other areas where there is already highly assessed land because of the minerals. And if more burden is going to be put on these industries and those dollars are shifted out of our area and across the broad region — which is my fear which will eventually be across the province — it's going to be very detrimental to investment. It's going to be very detrimental in enticing new business to the province and keeping what we have. And certainly if there is more money taken out of rural Saskatchewan — and I'll just speak about in my area — if there is more money taken out of the rural area around Weyburn, there is going to be less money to spend in the city of Weyburn by those same people. So we all lose at this.

So I would like a response to you. You know, if things stay the same, there is going to be less money that will have to be paid by the provincial government to support education because more money is going to be coming from property owners. So when can we see . . . You said that there is plans to change this. When will that happen?

Hon. Mr. Taylor: — Mr. Chair, the members opposite have failed on numerous occasions to acknowledge the steps forward that this government is making on the education property tax relief file. On numerous occasions the members opposite have referred to the \$55 million we're putting into relief this year and next year as nothing, as not having any value.

Mr. Chair, I think the members opposite acknowledge individually — but they're not acknowledging publicly — that 8 per cent relief on your property tax bill, education property tax bill this year, is 8 per cent that you otherwise would not be paying. That is significant relief, 8 per cent. Fifty-five million dollars contributed this year and next year is a significant contribution to the reduction of education property tax across the province.

Now also I think we have to address this issue about the assessment increases versus what the tax is. Again I want to come back. Assessment is simply an evaluation of your property; that's all it is. And what has happened this year on the request of rural municipalities across this province, there was a change in the way in which agriculture property was assessed. It resulted in a shift on agriculture property in assessment values from the west side to the east side of the province. So there are properties as a result of reassessment protocols requested by Saskatchewan Association of Rural Municipalities, there is an increase in assessment that takes us back actually to the formula that was in place in 1997 because in 2001 the west side under the old calculation received a greater percentage of assessment increase than the east side.

We have, at the request of SARM . . . SAMA, I shouldn't say we. SAMA rebuilt the assessment system and a result shifted it. On the west side of the province, the result of this will be that rural municipal and school property taxes are expected to shift further to commercial properties from agriculture properties. So the west side of the province under a shift from market base to production base has an advantage on the east side. There's a shift to the agriculture property.

All of this was well known two and a half years ago when SARM made the request to the SAMA board. The SAMA board responded to the SARM request and made the shifts. This is what has happened as a result of those shifts, and it's been well known since the request was made.

The Deputy Chair: — I recognize the member from Last Mountain-Touchwood.

Mr. Hart: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. Minister, I listened with close attention to your answers to the questions from my colleague, member from Weyburn, and dealing with the assessment and the large school divisions that will be put in place by your government.

I have some concerns about perhaps some soft spots in the assessment system and particularly some of the problems I understand some of our small urbans are having, our smaller cities. I am told that the small urbans are spending in the area of \$20 per parcel of property on the assessment and that area of their responsibility. And cities like Regina and Saskatoon are spending in excess of \$40 per property because they understand that it's important they have capacity, the large urbans have the capacity to do an assessment that property owners can have confidence in.

Whereas I understand in some of the smaller urbans and particularly Prince Albert, I understand this year there is some problems with a significant increase in their value of commercial property. I understand that they may have lost some of their data to support their values and so on because they just don't have the fiscal capacity to devote the dollars required to do the assessment in the fashion that SAMA would like to see and that larger urbans are doing.

So what this does, Minister, is you've got an assessment system used within a city or a municipality. So if there are some problems with the assessment, well as far as the municipal taxes are concerned, the municipal levy mill rate is applied within the boundaries of the municipality. So even though there may be some problems if you're comparing this jurisdiction to another one, the municipal tax portion of the property tax bill is not a huge problem for the property owners.

But now when we go to these large school divisions where you're using assessments done by SAMA in rural municipalities and small urbans, and then you put in a smaller or medium-sized city such as Moose Jaw or Prince Albert or Swift Current who perhaps due to lack of funding . . . I mean their revenue sharing was frozen, and they have great needs and so therefore they're only able to put, you know, not the dollars that maybe are required, and their assessment base is perhaps not as firm as it should be.

I guess that causes me concern about the overall integrity of our assessment system when we look at these large school divisions. I believe you alluded to that in one of your questions. My question to you is, do you have full confidence in the assessment for 2005?

Hon. Mr. Taylor: — Mr. Chair, the simple answer — and I know that the members opposite know that I can't give just a simple answer — but the simple answer is yes; I have complete

confidence in the assessment in Saskatchewan currently.

I want to stress again that assessment works at arm's length from the government. The Assessment Management Agency — set up in 1987 actually under a different government, set up in 1987 — was designed to ensure that we have a fair system of property assessment across the whole province. And what has happened, transpired over the years is that the system allows some communities to provide their own assessment services, and some buy the services of the Assessment Management Agency.

But SAMA, the board has a manual and an audit system that applies to everybody. Whether you provide services for yourself within your own municipality or you purchase the services through SAMA, the same rules apply to everybody. The audit system ensures that there's a fair application of the system regardless of who provides the assessment services. And the appeal system is in place to support and back up any questions that might arise after the assessment is done and the information is provided.

Most recently there has been concern from the commercial sector that in fact the commercial sector was not well represented in the decision-making process within SAMA. I used one of my government appointments to put a representative of the commercial sector on to the SAMA board so that now there are two urban representatives, two rural representatives, two school board representatives, and a representative of the commercial sector all operating on the board to prepare program, policy, and implementation of the assessment system in the province. And as a result of that, I have complete confidence in the system to be able to move forward.

I should add that that board is currently working on the plan for the 2009 assessment which is the next four-year period. I would suggest to all residents of Saskatchewan to be thinking about the 2009 and discovering how things are changing. There's been pilot projects about moving to the market system. They're taking a look at that as a board. And the board is also looking at, instead of a four-year cycle, perhaps a two-year and ultimately a one-year cycle.

Government takes a look every year at percentages of value which has an impact on the tax side, and we are also doing a review of the — we've completed now — a review of the tax tools available to municipalities for ultimately creating the final tax bill for municipalities. And as I indicated earlier, we are reviewing the whole education financing package and government's involvement in that. So I think we are a year to a year and a half away from putting all of this stuff together, tying it up nicely with a nice big ball of string, and being able to move forward hopefully in the interests of all Saskatchewan property taxpayers.

The Deputy Chair: — The committee asks the Minister Responsible for Immigration if there are any new officials that will be joining her.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Yes. Joining me along with Mr. Brooks and Ms. Lambert is Eric Johansen who is the director of immigration branch of Government Services.

[20:15]

The Deputy Chair: — Do you wish to make any statements? Go ahead.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. As Minister Responsible for Immigration, I'd like to briefly summarize the achievements and current priorities of the immigration branch of the Department of Government Relations.

Over the last year we have negotiated a significant expansion of the Saskatchewan immigrant nominee program, skilled workers category, so that it now directly covers approximately 200,000 jobs in the province of Saskatchewan. This took place in January. And this is compared to our previous year's coverage where approximately 10,000 jobs were covered by the government immigrant nominee program.

We completed extensive research, assessment, and design work on an enhanced language training initiative for immigrants needing assistance in our labour market.

We implemented a new graduate foreign students category under the SINP [Saskatchewan immigrant nominee program] for students who've studied and found employment in the province. We've signed an MOU [memorandum of understanding] with Citizenship and Immigration, federal government, to allow graduating students an extra year of temporary employment that will help facilitate their immigration. They'll now after two years have employers nominate them under the program.

We nominated 242 people under the program and including family members this brings about 726 people to the province. And right now, including nominees and their family members, 791 people are in the process of becoming landed immigrants in our province.

We completed a major recruitment initiative with a Saskatchewan employer and an employment and training institution based in the Ukraine, or in Ukraine, that is bringing 18 families to Tisdale. And this initiative holds promise of a very useful model for other Saskatchewan employers and communities.

We nominated our first 23 long-haul truckers under a pilot project developed with the Saskatchewan Trucking Association that will bring 240 long-haul truckers to the province. And we established a minister's business advisory group on the immigrant nominee program that will help promote awareness of our program among Saskatchewan employers, and advise myself and the department on how the program can more effectively meet the needs of employers.

For 2005-06, our priorities for the upcoming year will be to continue to expand the program. Obviously it's an important tool to support the province's economic and labour market objectives. And we have a number of budget initiatives that will assist us in effectively settling immigrants and refugees.

We have been able to fund three initiatives this year. We have \$400,000 to deliver a cost-shared arrangement with the federal

government for enhanced language training. This will be significant because the initiative will provide a client-centred employment intake assessment and referral services that will help identify immigrants' transferable knowledge and skills. It also will lead to more advanced workplace-related language training than is currently available. And it also provides immigrants with the necessary Canadian work experience.

As well, this program will assist individuals within the workplace because they will have access to mentors. Other services will be provided to support career opportunities such as specialized assessments and orientation to the Canadian labour market and workplace.

We also have in this budget an immigration pilot internship program for immigrants that aren't eligible for the ELT [enhanced language training] services. And services to clients under the project will include those available under the enhanced language training initiative as well as training for occupational accreditation or immediate employment opportunities. We also have an enhancement to our settlement agencies to help with assessment and referral services.

According to Doug Elliott and the demographic trends in our province, we expect that we will require by 2017 an additional 50,000 workers to replace those workers that are retiring. And this will only be partially offset by our increasing Aboriginal labour force. So we are going to require people from away in order to meet our labour market objectives.

The key immigration actions in 2005-06 that will help us address some of the issues include increasing Saskatchewan employers' awareness of the immigrant nominee program and international recruitment opportunities, including emigration fairs and overseas training or employment institutions.

We are going to expand the immigrant nominee health profession category to include all skilled health occupations. We're going to rearrange some of the criteria under the business category in order to increase the types of businesses eligible and to make our category more immigrant friendly. We are going to expand the Saskatchewan Trucking Association project for long-haul truckers. And in response to industry sector interest, we are also considering including a number of other semi-skilled occupations.

In addition, we are working with our communities to develop greater community capacity to attract and settle skilled immigrants because we had this wonderful experience in Tisdale where they had a community support plan that has made the immigrant from Ukraine most welcome.

Projecting nominations for the coming year is not an exact science. However we anticipate that we will fully meet the 400 nominations in this fiscal year because we are going to expand the nomination category to include family members of immigrants that are already here. And those families will be able to nominate those immigrants under this category.

In conclusion, immigration, we believe, can contribute to meeting Saskatchewan's labour market needs, its economical development, and its diversity. We've taken some important steps over the past year in building our capacity to attract more

immigrants to Saskatchewan and to effectively settle and retain them. We know that we have some work to do but we're confident that we are going to continue our building of the capacity in this province to support newcomers to our province.

The Deputy Chair: — I recognize the member from Biggar.

Mr. Weekes: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you to the minister and welcome to your officials. That was very interesting what your plans for the upcoming year.

I had the opportunity to take part in the presentation made by your official a week from Thursday to the Ukrainian Canadian Professional Business Association out of Saskatoon, and also other groups like the Saskatoon culture diversity and race relations committee. I've got information from the Saskatchewan German Council and I've talked to many individuals. And the number one issue is first getting the immigrants here.

And you have said, you have quoted Doug Elliott's report saying we need another 50,000 workers by 2017. And we certainly agree that the Aboriginal youth should make up the big part of that and other citizens of Saskatchewan.

But at the rates that this program is working you're going to fall far short of that goal. And I wonder. The number of nominees that have been coming in are just a trickle, quite frankly. Going back to '98-99, five; and every year after that increasing slowly — 23, 20, 25 — 52 in 2003; 180 in 2004; 242 as you mentioned, 2004-2005. I guess I have a number of questions around that. Why such a low threshold for nominees to date?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Thank you for the question. In order to be nominated you have to have an employer who is prepared to nominate you, and that's why I set up the business advisory category — to have business people in the province who have used the immigrant nominee program to go out and work with other employers so that they know that this nominee program is available.

We have done some good work with the trucking industry. They obviously are in various parts of the world recruiting long-haul truckers to the province.

And if people want to go out and find people to nominate, we are ready and able to assist them in processing the application. We can get the application ready to send to the federal government in about a three-month time period. The federal government takes about nine months and three-quarters to process the application because they have to look at criminality, security, and health risks or health checks associated with the individuals that are coming.

But employers have to make the nomination and they have to find the people. And that's why we are attending immigration fairs in various parts of the world and we are working with employers to attract people here.

So it's up to employers to go out and find people and then nominate them. It's not the province of Saskatchewan that does the nominations; it's the employers.

Mr. Weekes: — Thank you. And that leads me to my next question. You spoke about getting information out to the businesses basically advertising the fact that the immigrant nominee program exists, and I think that's very important. But talking to employers that have taken part in the immigrant nominee program, they find many hurdles. First, it's costly. Some individual companies have done that work on their own. Some community-based organizations have done that as well but it's mainly volunteers that do that and costly for them.

Where do you see the private consultant's role in attracting people to apply for the immigrant nominee program?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — The department do not act as immigrant consultants. If employers want to enter into a contractual relation with an immigrant consultant or if immigrants enter into relationships with immigrant consultants, that's up to them. But our department is not involved in the consulting business.

Mr. Weekes: — Thank you, Minister. To the Chair, the second item of importance with all the businesses I have spoke to and the community-based organizations is really the lack of a community support plan, retention of immigrants that we do have coming. And they have found that it's vital. It's one thing to get the people here, but it's certainly another to have the infrastructure in the community to integrate immigrants into Saskatchewan life.

And many of them have community-based organizations that they rely on — the Ukrainian group, the German group, and so on — but we are also attracting immigrants from countries that really don't have any support here. And they say, well the situation with community-based organizations is that it's basically all volunteer work and they have very limited funding.

And they want to do their part to keep immigrants here and integrate them into Saskatchewan life, but they're very strapped for funds and person power really to do the job. And each case that I've talked with they're looking to the provincial government for some help on really developing a community support plan and looking at the retention of immigrants that arrive.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — The member makes a very important point and this was a point that I have been making for some time, even when I was minister of Rural Revitalization.

I have met immigrants in this province that have lived in communities for decades, and they have never been invited to a non-immigrant's wedding. They have never been invited to a non-immigrant's home for supper. They have never been invited to a non-immigrant's anniversary. They have never been invited to participate in the kinds of things that you and I take for granted because we've been here for a long time. And they become quite lonely.

And so what I'm saying to people is that when immigrants come to your community, it's incumbent upon you to make people to feel welcome and to become part of the community. And if we're not able to do that, they're not going to stay. So it's not just good enough to look to the province and the federal government for more money. Communities have to become and

must become welcoming places for newcomers or newcomers are not going to stay.

In terms of your issue around settlement agencies, there are presently four settlement agencies in the province. The majority of the funding for settlement agencies comes from the federal government because the federal government has jurisdiction over immigration. This year we have some funds in our budget that we are going to be sending to the settlement agencies to assist them in helping newcomers in our province.

[20:30]

Obviously at this point, we are working very hard to expand the immigrant nominee program. We know that the enhanced language training will be extremely important in terms of helping newcomers integrate into our workplaces because they need those enhanced language skills in order to be successful.

So this year we're focusing on our internship program for newcomers in the province as well as the enhanced language program. And we have some money available for the settlement agencies, and we've expanded our immigrant nominee program from 300 to 400. And as I said earlier today in question period, I expect that we will have some major announcements come fall.

Mr. Weekes: — Thank you to the minister. I appreciate what you've just said, but I think it has to be emphasized the real concerns in the community and in the businesses that have brought immigrants into Saskatchewan about the lack of support for these individuals once they get here. And I believe the community-based organizations are working hard at doing that, and they are naturally welcoming these people into their communities and into their homes, but they can't do it all. They can't do it all on their own. They can't do without any resources.

And each time this has come up, they're looking to the provincial government. And I don't think they're looking for tremendous amounts of funds, but they need some help, and they find that a real challenge to get the resources and the funding in place to make this work. And they feel that, you know, we're moving in the right direction. Everyone wants more immigrants in this province because of the lack of . . . the shortage of workforce in this province is only going to get worse in the future.

But each time I talk to one of these groups or individuals or businesses, that's the biggest problem . . . is retention to keep them in Saskatchewan — not only keep them in Saskatchewan, from going back to their home countries. And I make the point if they ever lose an immigrant that has come to Saskatchewan and they go back to their home country, that's going to ruin the whole program in that community where they come from for a generation. And they say we can't afford to let that happen.

And the other part of that is not only losing immigrant workers to their home countries but losing them to Alberta. Unfortunately we also . . . not only our young people move to Alberta, but our immigrants move to Alberta too. So there's a two-fold aspect to that. And I just can't emphasize the importance of retention and the support that's needed by

community-based organizations naturally but some help and direction from the provincial government.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Could you be more specific in terms of which groups you're talking to that are having . . . so I can understand precisely which groups feel as though they are not being supported.

Mr. Weekes: — Well it came up at the Ukrainian . . . which group, the Ukrainian group that met the week from Thursday. And that was one of the topics that came up during the meeting and also during the meeting and in private. They just emphasized that was the real concern. It was just not the Ukrainian people that had the problem. There were businesses from Croatia and other ethnic backgrounds that settled in Canada, and they also emphasize that that's the major concern with them . . . is retention of immigrants. And once again I can only emphasize how important that is.

Just looking at some of the material that I received from the Saskatchewan German Council, now they have talked about receiving some funding from Sask Culture. Is that funding still available for this type of work, or is there another avenue for funds to help with the retention of immigrants?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Well the German council came to see me, and what they're interested in doing is becoming the immigrant consultants as a way to fund their cultural organization. This is not something that we are moving towards at this moment where we will fund various ethnic organizations in order that they can take on the role of immigrant consultant and then be able to fund their councils.

In terms of community support plans, we had a very good experience with the Northern Steel in Tisdale where the company, the community, the Ukrainian congress, and our department worked in tandem to ensure that the people that were coming from Ukraine had a positive experience. And they've done it very incrementally where a group of people came initially; a couple of weeks later another group came. And we think that with the support of the community . . . in particular they had a welcoming evening. They outfitted the homes that the newcomers are living in, getting everyone settled in, and then their families will come. That has been a positive experience.

Now we do have people that work here on work permits, and the federal government will have people that will come to Saskatchewan or come to Canada for a short period of time and they go back. I think it's fair to say that one of the things that I am not worried about, but I just want to be assured of, is that when newcomers are coming here under the immigrant nominee program that what they're told by the employer is in fact what happens. They're paid what they're told by the employer, the conditions that they've been told are in fact the conditions that they have. Because the worst thing that can happen is that we have a nominee that comes to Canada, moves their family, gets here and finds out that what they've been told isn't in fact what is in fact the case in their workplace. And then if they go back, we've got problems.

And so we are monitoring what's happening very carefully so that . . . And certainly saying to employers, it's very important

that what you tell people is in fact what they're going to be met with when they get here.

Mr. Weekes: — Thank you. You brought up a point. Through your monitoring, have you come across businesses that are not being upfront with their workers, and what is the government doing about those particular cases?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — I think it's fair to say that we've had a few examples of difficulties, but we've been able to sort those out. But when employers are going overseas or going to South Africa or wherever we're going, we're sort of saying — well we're not sort of saying; we are saying — whatever you do, be totally upfront with the nominees so that when they get here, they know exactly what's going to greet them in terms of wages, benefits, working conditions, and so on because we don't want them to come here with one set of expectations and find out that it's quite different than what they were told.

Mr. Weekes: — Well I certainly agree with that, because that would be disastrous for the province and the program if that was taking place.

In my discussions, I was told that Saskatchewan's going to need 1,000 truck drivers. Basically right now, there's a need for 1,000 truck drivers, probably long haul drivers or medium to short as well. And I just state that as what they've been saying.

The one point that was brought up was the temporary work permits and the problem with the temporary work permits, it's fine for the workers but the spouses can't pull down a job. They're not allowed to work and what they're asking for is basically an open work permit so the spouses can work while their spouse is here working in Saskatchewan. Could you comment on that? Is that something that the federal government has influence over or something Saskatchewan can do about that?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — As you've identified, work permits are federal jurisdiction; the federal government gives out work permits to people. And you're absolutely correct, if you have a work permit the spouse can't work, but as soon as that person is nominated under the immigrant nominee program the spouse can work.

And we understand the federal government isn't at this point at looking at changing work permits and allowing the spouse to work. But under our program if you come here on a work permit, then you're nominated. As soon as you're nominated, your spouse can go to work.

Mr. Weekes: — Thank you. Somewhat on more or less the same topic, considering foreign students, and I understand the same situation is there, that the foreign students cannot take work while they're in Saskatchewan or in Canada. Could you comment on that, and is there any plans in place to get these foreign students in a position where they can work and help pay for the tuition? Because they're paying the full rate, it's not being subsidized.

And that certainly is a pool of talent that Saskatchewan business can nominate to continue to stay and live and work in Saskatchewan.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Well as I said, we were able to successfully negotiate an amendment to our arrangement with the federal government where international students can now stay here two years after they graduate from school, and then they can be nominated under the immigrant nominee program.

We had been working hard with the federal government to enter into an arrangement with the federal government where foreign students would be able to work off campus. Minister Volpe about two weeks ago announced that all international students now will be able to work off of their campus all across the country. And he has not yet signed the documents to allow that to happen because they have to enter into a sort of a tripartite arrangement between the universities, the technical schools, and the federal government, but that is certainly in the works. And we're hoping by fall international students will have the opportunity to work off campus.

It was interesting. Because the University of Saskatchewan leases its land to the big-box stores out on Preston Avenue, students were able to work there because they were basically working on university property. It was a bit of a stretch, but now with Minister Volpe's recent announcement, we anticipate by fall our students who come from away will be allowed to work off campus while they're here.

Mr. Weekes: — Thank you. Next question is directed more to farm labour immigrants and from your news release dated December 6, 2004, that there's a pilot project, a three-year pilot project. And I would just like to get an update on how successful has this program been to date.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Member, we're having a difficult understanding what you're talking about. So can you give us a little more information in order that we can respond to it?

Mr. Weekes: — Thank you. I just assumed you would know. The program is administered through the Human Resources Development Canada as a pilot project with the active participation of Sask Agriculture, Food and Rural Revitalization. And it's got some information here about . . . The plan was expected to bring in between 30 and 40 workers from Mexico in the coming year. I guess I was just wanting to know how this has worked, and how does one apply for bringing in farm labourers.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — This is the program that is an arrangement with Ag and Food and HRDC [Human Resources Development Canada], and it's a program for migrant workers. And they anticipated that they would bring in 30 or 40 people, and I would suggest that we . . . Our branch deals with the immigrant nominee program, some of the settlement issues, the accreditation issues. But we don't deal with temporary workers, and you would need to direct your questions to Agriculture and Food.

Mr. Weekes: — Thank you. As you know, Minister, especially rural Saskatchewan is having troubles retaining doctors, and I note that there's a category for health professionals under the immigrant nominee program. In Biggar we're in the process of attracting a doctor from South Africa, and I believe it's through the immigrant nominee program.

Again is there any active support or active work done by the government to go out and look? I guess you've already answered that question before, but I'm wondering concerning health care professionals, is there any part on the department or the government to actively source doctors and health care professionals to help rural communities and rural doctors attract partners and doctors into their communities?

[20:45]

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Generally when it comes to recruiting physicians in the province, the health regions are involved in recruiting physicians to various regions of the province. As well the Department of Health has had arrangements with a recruiting agency that assists them in recruiting health professionals to the province.

I can tell you that we have expanded our health professions category to include all health professionals in the province. And just for the member's information, I can say that we can expedite this situation very quickly. They can come on a work permit. That can be arranged fairly quickly, and then they can be nominated under the immigrant nominee program. So it doesn't have to take a long time.

I should also tell you that in the Department of Health's budget there is a million dollars this year for international medical professionals such as physicians that are already in the province. And it looks as though there is going to be a partnership worked out between the Department of Health and the College of Physicians and Surgeons and hopefully the College of Medicine where we will be able to assess foreign-trained physicians that are already here.

Most of them that are here have come here as refugees. And they obviously are not working in their profession. But this is a pool. I think we have about a hundred IMGs [International Medical Graduate] in the province that could be assessed in terms of their capabilities and the criteria that the need to hone up on in terms of adding additional skills. And we are looking forward to trying to implement a program that's quite similar to what is happening in Manitoba for instance to support IMGs that are already here. As well there are some spaces for residencies for IMGs so that they can do their family medicine residency.

Mr. Weekes: — Thank you. I'm being told that we're over our time limit, so I'll ask one more question. But thank you to you and your officials for being here tonight.

But my last question is on that same topic. It seems to me that doctors in particular, physicians, they basically have to rewrite the Canadian medical exams before they're accepted. Are there countries that Canada or . . . I assume Canada . . . but accepts that the health care professionals don't have to rewrite the exams and their standards from their home countries . . . are acceptable in Canada? And in countries that are not, I guess the question is, why are they not?

I know that the South African doctors have to rewrite the exams before they're approved, and I'm just wondering why is their . . . I'm told their training is as good as Canadian doctors get, and they're as skilled and as learned as our doctors. And I'm

wondering how all that process is working out, and is there any other avenues to speed up that process to get qualified doctors into Canada?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — In Canada we have a number of self-regulating bodies that govern various occupations in the country, and so Saskatchewan is not unlike every other place where we have a regulatory body for physicians. It's called the College of Physicians and Surgeons, and they set the standard that people have to attain in order to practise medicine in this province. Now the College of Physicians and Surgeons has been excellent at assisting the province recruit people to the province and also being somewhat more flexible than other colleges across the country.

We're looking forward to this partnership between the college and the Department of Health because we know we have about 100 IMGs in the province. They're not practising medicine; in fact some of them are working at the Saskatoon Co-op on 8th Street because they haven't been able to practise their profession. We're hoping that we'll be able to have their skills assessed, identify gaps, and then put further training in place so that we can get these IMGs into various parts of the province.

You know, obviously we need to pay attention to what the College of Physicians and Surgeons has to say because they are much more knowledgeable than we are in terms of the kinds of skills necessary to meet the standard in Saskatchewan.

So I think that's all I can say but — I know that our time is up — but I'd like to thank all of the Government Relations officials for being here tonight to support myself and the member from North Battleford.

The Deputy Chair: — I recognize the Government House Leader.

Hon. Mr. Van Mulligen: — Mr. Chair, I move the committee rise, report progress and ask for leave to sit again.

The Deputy Chair: — The Government House Leader has asked to report progress and leave to sit again. Is that agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Deputy Chair: — Agreed.

The Speaker: — The Deputy Chair of committees is recognized.

Mr. Iwanchuk: — Mr. Speaker, the committee has asked that I report progress and ask for leave to sit again.

The Speaker: — When shall the committee sit again? I recognize the Government House Leader.

Hon. Mr. Van Mulligen: — Next sitting, Mr. Speaker.

The Speaker: — Next sitting.

ADJOURNED DEBATES

SECOND READINGS

Bill No. 88

[The Assembly resumed the adjourned debate on the proposed motion by the Hon. Ms. Higgins that **Bill No. 88 — The Health Labour Relations Reorganization Amendment Act, 2004** be now read a second time.]

The Speaker: — The Chair recognizes the member for Rosetown-Elrose.

Mr. Hermanson: — Well thank you, Mr. Speaker. And I'm pleased to rise and speak to Bill 88, An Act to amend The Health Labour Relations Reorganization Act, Mr. Speaker — a rather long title that somewhat covers up an issue that's been around a long time and which the NDP [New Democratic Party] government has not been able to deal with.

Mr. Speaker, really what this Bill does is just extend the Dorsey report for recommendations for yet another year while this NDP government is trying to figure out what to do about negotiating contracts with health care workers.

Mr. Speaker, it is particularly frustrating for many of them that the government has interfered and dictated how they are to negotiate their labour agreement. You'd think that a government that claims to be considerate and friendly to labour would have resolved this issue a long time ago rather than keep bringing it back to the Legislative Assembly and asking for another year extension to try to finalize this issue.

Mr. Speaker, it just seems like the NDP, they make a mess and then they see how long they can wallow in it. They've done it many, many times, and here we are dealing with this Bill yet again.

And quite frankly, Mr. Speaker, we can't go on letting this happen, propping up an NDP government and allowing them to muck along in the dark year after year, piece of legislation after piece of legislation. Sooner or later we need some conclusion and some progress to be made in regards to some of these issues.

Mr. Speaker, this Bill, Bill 88 reminds me of the additional hours legislation. That's been on the books for 10 years, and the government still can't get its act together on that. Today they brought forward a Bill to repeal the legislation, and they began to filibuster it. We wonder if they are going to filibuster Bill 88 as well. Do they know really what they want and what they're trying to do?

We see in Bill 88 similarities to the Forest Fire Contingency Fund — something that they had to have to fight forest fires. Had it for a few years, now they don't want it any more, so they've rescinded the Forest Fire Contingency Fund.

Mr. Speaker, Bill 88 is like the PST [provincial sales tax] in Saskatchewan. We just can never decide where we want it. You'd think it was a yo-yo rather than a sales tax. The NDP raised it from 7 to 9 and then down to 7 and then down to 6 and back up to 7.

Mr. Speaker, people of Saskatchewan want to see some clarity and some direction from their government. And certainly when

they see things like this Bill, Bill 88, which again extends the Dorsey recommendation for one more year, while health care groups like the lab techs are denied the right to choose their own union to negotiate for them, you wonder why in the world the NDP don't show more leadership and more direction.

Mr. Speaker, it reminds me of an old cat that got into the gasoline. And for some reason this cat liked the gasoline and drank a little bit. And the cat was going every which way — up the walls and across the floor and it was turning circles. Finally after a long time the thing just fell down right in the middle of the floor and stayed there and didn't move. And after a long time somebody asked, what happened to the cat? Well, Mr. Speaker, the cat ran out of gas. This NDP government has run out of gas, doesn't know where it's going, doesn't know what it's doing — just has to keep putting on band-aid solution after band-aid solution. Here we have Bill 88, one more band-aid solution.

Well, Mr. Speaker, I think we need to move this legislation along. Let's give the NDP one more chance. Let's see if they can do something better next year. Let's see if they can get their act together next year. I doubt it very much. I've become a real skeptic when it comes to the NDP. They never can seem to get their act together. But, Mr. Speaker, unless the NDP decide to filibuster this Bill, I recommend that we move it on to committee and see where it goes. Thank you very much.

Some Hon. Members: — Hear, hear!

The Speaker: — The question before the Assembly is the motion moved by the Minister of Labour that Bill No. 88, The Health Labour Relations Reorganization Amendment Act, 2004 be now read a second time. Is the Assembly ready for the question?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Speaker: — Is it the pleasure of the Assembly to adopt the motion?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Speaker: — Motion is carried.

Clerk: — Second reading of this Bill.

The Speaker: — To which committee shall this Bill this be referred? The Chair recognizes the Government House Leader.

Hon. Mr. Van Mulligen: — Mr. Speaker, I move that Bill 88, The Health Labour Relations Reorganization Amendment Act, 2004 be referred to the Standing Committee on the Economy.

The Speaker: — It has been moved that Bill 88 be referred to the Standing Committee on the Economy. Is it the pleasure of the Assembly to adopt the motion?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Speaker: — The motion is carried. This Bill stands referred to the Standing Committee on the Economy.

Bill No. 95

[The Assembly resumed the adjourned debate on the proposed motion by the Hon. Mr. Forbes that **Bill No. 95 — The Ecological Reserves Amendment Act, 2005** be now read a second time.]

The Speaker: — The Chair recognizes the member for Last Mountain-Touchwood.

Mr. Hart: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, it is certainly a pleasure to enter into the debate on Bill 95, The Ecological Reserves Amendment Act, 2005. Mr. Speaker, a number of my colleagues have already spoken to this Bill, and so you would know and I'm sure most people who have an interest in this Bill would know that this deals with an area of the Great Sand Hills down in the southwestern part of our province. And what it does is it enlarges the ecological reserve that's already in existence, but it takes it a step further.

This Bill requires that any changes to the boundaries needs to be done by legislation and would be dealt with by the legislature which is . . . The minister said this is to strengthen the protection for that fragile area, and it certainly would strengthen the protection. But, Mr. Speaker, I think if we just step back for a moment and look at this in a calm and logical way, it may complicate changes in the future, changes that would be beneficial for the area but would mean that it would have to go through the whole legislative process before any changes to boundaries or land use could be incorporated in future changes.

[21:00]

We have a study that the government is undertaking for that region of the province, the Great Sand Hills. That report or that study is just now barely getting under way. It's funded in this year's budget, and so we don't know what the findings of that committee that is set up to study the area will bring forward. Yet we are enshrining in legislation boundaries of an area in that part of the province.

There's no arguing that that area, the Great Sand Hills, are an ecologically sensitive area of our province and need to be protected. I guess the question, Mr. Speaker, is how we go about doing that.

I listened with interest to the minister's second reading speech where he had commented that the amendments would allow for activities such as exercising treaty rights, ranching, hunting to continue. However gas development would not be allowed, Mr. Speaker.

And then I noted with interest, Mr. Speaker, a letter in the *Leader-Post* shortly after the Bill was introduced. And it's a letter by the chief of the Carry the Kettle Reserve at Sinaluta. Apparently that First Nations community was looking at an area in the Great Sand Hills in this region that's being affected by this Bill. And they were looking at that area as treaty land entitlement land that they could use to fulfill the land, their treaty land entitlement. And they also talked about . . . In his letter, Chief Kennedy talks about the fact that his band was looking at gas development.

But what I found particularly interesting, Mr. Speaker, is that even though this band has been looking at that area — and I'm sure this government has been aware that that First Nations community is interested in that portion of the lands that are being protected — there was no consultation. Chief Kennedy says in his letter, he said and I would quote, Mr. Speaker, "However we were not consulted about the change in status of this land in question." And then in another part of his letter, he says:

However this is difficult to do when our plans are interrupted by unilateral decision making at the provincial level [Mr. Speaker].

So when we look at what the minister said and what Chief Kennedy has said, it raises some questions as to if some of the land that is within the ecological reserve is used for treaty land entitlement, what would the status then be of gas development?

Certainly Chief Kennedy references the fact in his letter that the environment is important, in protecting this fragile status of that area of the province is important, and I have no reason to doubt that his community would certainly look at that. But it just seems that we may be in somewhat of a conflict of interest, and we're not sure who would have the right to protect that area, that area of the Great Sand Hills, Mr. Speaker. And I would suggest that perhaps we need to have a clear understanding of the roles of responsibility of the provincial government, the First Nations community, the federal government, Mr. Speaker.

So we certainly do have some questions that we need to have answers to, Mr. Speaker. However I think that I'm sure the minister will be willing to answer those questions that we may have on this Bill, and so therefore I think we can accomplish what work we need to do by . . . we can get that done in committee, Mr. Speaker, so I would move that this Bill proceed to committee.

The Speaker: — The question before the Assembly is the motion moved by the Minister of the Environment that Bill No. 95, The Ecological Reserves Amendment Act, 2005 be now read a second time. Is the Assembly ready for the question?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Speaker: — Is it the pleasure of the Assembly to adopt the motion?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Speaker: — The motion is carried.

Clerk: — Second reading of this Bill.

The Speaker: — To which committee shall this Bill be referred? Chair recognizes the Minister of the Environment.

Hon. Mr. Forbes: — I move that Bill 95, The Ecological Reserves Amendment Act, 2005 be referred to the Standing Committee on the Economy.

The Speaker: — The Minister of the Environment has moved that this Bill 95 be referred to the Standing Committee on the

Economy. Is it the pleasure of the Assembly to adopt the motion?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Speaker: — The motion is carried. This Bill stands referred to the Standing Committee on the Economy.

Bill No. 98

[The Assembly resumed the adjourned debate on the proposed motion by the Hon. Mr. Forbes that **Bill No. 98 — The Prairie and Forest Fires Amendment Act, 2005** be now read a second time.]

The Speaker: — I recognize the member for Last Mountain-Touchwood.

Mr. Hart: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Again I'd like to enter into debate of The Prairie and Forest Fires Amendment Act.

Mr. Speaker, also a number of my colleagues have spoken to this Bill. What this Bill does is it winds up the Forest Fire Contingency Fund. It is no longer . . . there is no funds in that . . . no dollars in that fund, and therefore there is probably no reason for that fund to exist, Mr. Speaker.

And as such, the few questions that we do have, we can certainly . . . would hope that we would get reasonable and good answers to our questions in committee. So therefore I move this Bill onto committee.

The Speaker: — The motion before the Assembly is the motion moved by the Minister of the Environment that Bill No. 98, The Prairie and Forest Fires Amendment Act, 2005 be now read a second time. Is the Assembly ready for the question?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Speaker: — Is it the pleasure of the Assembly to adopt the motion?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Speaker: — Motion is carried.

Clerk: — Second reading of this Bill.

The Speaker: — To which committee shall this Bill be referred? The Chair recognizes the Minister of the Environment.

Hon. Mr. Forbes: — I move that Bill No. 98, The Prairie and Forest Fires Amendment Act, 2005 be referred to the Standing Committee on the Economy.

The Speaker: — It has been moved by the Minister of the Environment that Bill No. 98 be referred to the Standing Committee on the Economy. Is it the pleasure of the Assembly to adopt the motion?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Speaker: — Motion is carried. This Bill stands referred to the Standing Committee on the Economy.

Bill No. 104

[The Assembly resumed the adjourned debate on the proposed motion by Hon. Mr. Taylor that **Bill No. 104 — The Planning and Development Amendment Act, 2005** be now read a second time.]

The Chair: — The Chair recognizes the member for Wood River.

Mr. Huyghebaert: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, I'm pleased to comment a little bit on this Bill, an Act to amend The Planning and Development Act, 1983.

This Bill streamlines municipal planning process and is consistent with the nature of the changes that were introduced in the new municipalities Act. However instead of requiring ministerial approval for changes such as zoning changes, authorities will have to submit some planning decision to the government for review for provincial interest.

Provincial interest is a new concept in the Act, and it allows the provincial government to declare whether it has provincial interest regarding land use, planning, and development in a specific instance. This is an area that I think we'll be addressing once the Bill goes to committee, Mr. Speaker, because it is a new concept of provincial interest, and I think we need some clarification on that.

This Bill concerns municipal planning legislation and puts in place a number of new elements regarding the planning process for local municipalities which is a good thing. It provides local planning authorities with more autonomy in areas concerning planning and for undertaking capital works plans. And we've been consistently saying that municipalities — in fact lots of areas of the province — we need to devolve the authority and devolve the resources to interested organizations within the province. And this is a step in the right direction where you're devolving the authority from municipalities and providing them with some autonomy.

This Bill also provides for more accountability and transparency in local planning processes and public notices.

Mr. Speaker, there's a couple of issues within the Bill that we will bring up in committee. We will be asking the minister for further clarification on the concept of provincial interests and whether this streamlines the planning processes I just mentioned, and the definition of provincial interest will be of interest to us.

While some parts of the Act indicate that there will be greater autonomy for municipalities in the planning process, in other areas — such as approval of a zoning bylaw — seems the government has retained the same provincial government overview stating that municipalities refer bylaws to the minister for a review of provincial interest rather than ministerial approval of zoning bylaw and stating that authorities don't need the minister's approval of a subdivision bylaw but that the bylaw must be referred for review for provincial interest.

So these are some concerns, Mr. Speaker, that we have within this Bill although it is very much in concert with the new municipalities Act. We can address these concerns in committee. So at this time I would like to recommend we forward this Bill to committee.

The Speaker: — The question before the Assembly is the motion moved by the Minister of Government Relations that Bill 104, The Planning and Development Amendment Act, 2005 be now read a second time. Is the Assembly ready for the question? Is it the pleasure of the Assembly to adopt the motion?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Speaker: — The motion is carried.

Clerk: — Second reading of this Bill.

The Speaker: — To which committee shall this Bill be referred? The Chair recognizes the Minister of Government Relations.

Hon. Mr. Taylor: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I move that Bill No. 104, The Planning and Development Amendment Act, 2005 be referred to the Standing Committee on Intergovernmental Affairs and Infrastructure.

The Speaker: — It has been moved by the Minister of Government Relations that Bill 104 be referred to the Standing Committee on Intergovernmental Affairs and Infrastructure. Is it the pleasure of the Assembly to adopt the motion?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Speaker: — The motion is carried. This Bill stands referred to the Standing Committee on Intergovernmental Affairs and Infrastructure.

Bill No. 106

[The Assembly resumed the adjourned debate on the proposed motion by the Hon. Mr. Taylor that **Bill No. 106 — The Municipalities Act** be now read a second time.]

The Speaker: — The Chair recognizes the member for Wood River.

Mr. Huyghebaert: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well I am pleased again to rise and talk briefly to Bill 106, The Municipalities Act as we are very familiar with this particular Bill.

It was introduced originally last year and it's a fairly extensive Bill. And thanks to the good work of SARM and SUMA, and it was their desire to have this Bill put forward . . . But as we know when it was introduced in the legislature with very, very short notice that the NDP tried to ram it through . . . and we were quite upset when we said what we really need with this Bill, a Bill of this size, a Bill of some 200 pages . . . and to try and ram it through within a few days in the legislature, it's not fair to the stakeholders. And we debated that point extensively, Mr. Speaker. And as a result of the extensive debate that we had

on this in a short period of time, the government finally saw fit that they would hold the Bill and do some consultations on it.

So I would like to, I'd like to say that because of the consultations that were done — that were basically agreed to by the municipalities, that they had not been consulted properly — that the government saw fit . . . because we were ready to go out and talk to the municipalities and get their input so we would be able to further debate this Bill if in fact the government had not done it, went out and consulted. So the government went out and consulted. And lo and behold, Mr. Speaker, they pulled the Bill. So what we have now before us is a Bill that is corrected because of the consultation process.

And I think the government could take some lessons on this consultative process in other Bills that are before the House currently. And this is one that it speaks very highly to what the consultative process can be.

On the labour Bill for an example, there's been negligible consultation, and the stakeholders are quite concerned about it. Well as this Bill was the same thing. There's stakeholders that were very concerned, and now we see the Bill introduced with all of the corrections. In fact there are so many corrections to be made in this Bill that that's why it was pulled and a new Bill introduced.

Mr. Speaker, this Bill again is wanted by SUMA and SARM, and they put an awful lot of effort and work into this, and there's a few, there's a few issues that we'll be discussing. But I think the issues that we have with the Bill — and they're minor issues and small issues — that we'll be able to deal with these in committee, Mr. Speaker. So at this time I'd recommend we move this Bill to committee.

The Speaker: — The question before the Assembly is the motion moved by the Minister for Government Relations that Bill 106, The Municipalities Act be now read a second time. Is the Assembly ready for the question?

Some Hon. Members: — Question.

The Speaker: — Is it the pleasure of the Assembly to adopt the motion?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Speaker: — The motion is carried.

Clerk: — Second reading of this Bill.

The Speaker: — To which committee shall this Bill be referred? The Chair recognizes the Minister of Government Relations.

Hon. Mr. Taylor: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker, I move that Bill 106, The Municipalities Act be referred to the Standing Committee on Intergovernmental Affairs and Infrastructure.

The Speaker: — It has been moved by the Minister of Government Relations that Bill 106 be referred to the Standing Committee on Intergovernmental Affairs and Infrastructure. Is it the pleasure of the Assembly to adopt the motion?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Speaker: — Motion is carried. This Bill stands referred to the Standing Committee on Intergovernmental Affairs and Infrastructure.

[21:15]

Bill No. 107

[The Assembly resumed the adjourned debate on the proposed motion by the Hon. Mr. Taylor that **Bill No. 107 — The Municipalities Consequential Amendment Act, 2005/Loi de 2005 sur les modifications corrélatives découlant de la loi intitulée The Municipalities Act** be now read a second time.]

The Speaker: — The Chair recognizes the member for Wood River.

Mr. Huyghebaert: — Well thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, all the comments I made on the previous Bill, all I can say is ditto to this one. It's a consequential Bill and it's a housekeeping legislation. It goes right along with Bill 106, so I recommend that Bill 107 be moved to committee.

The Speaker: — The question before the Assembly is the motion moved by the Minister of Government Relations that Bill 107, The Municipalities Consequential Amendment Act, 2005 be now read a second time. Is the Assembly ready for the question?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Speaker: — Is it the pleasure of the Assembly to adopt the motion?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Speaker: — The motion is carried.

Clerk: — Second reading of this Bill.

The Speaker: — To which committee shall this Bill be referred? The Chair recognizes the Minister of Government Relations.

Hon. Mr. Taylor: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I move that Bill 107, The Municipalities Consequential Amendment Act, 2005 be referred to the Standing Committee on Intergovernmental Affairs and Infrastructure.

The Speaker: — It has been moved by the Minister of Government Relations that the Bill 107 be referred to the Standing Committee on Intergovernmental Affairs and Infrastructure. Is it the pleasure of the Assembly to adopt the motion?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Speaker: — Motion is carried. This Bill stands referred to the Standing Committee on Intergovernmental Affairs and Infrastructure. The Chair recognizes the Government House Leader.

Hon. Mr. Van Mulligen: — Mr. Speaker, I move the House do now adjourn.

The Speaker: — It has been moved by the Government House Leader that this House do now adjourn. Is it the pleasure of the Assembly to adopt the motion?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Speaker: — Motion is carried. This House stands adjourned until tomorrow at 1:30 p.m.

[The Assembly adjourned at 21:17.]

TABLE OF CONTENTS

EVENING SITTING

COMMITTEE OF FINANCE

General Revenue Fund — Government Relations — Vote 30

Taylor.....	2941
Hermanson.....	2941
Huyghebaert.....	2944
Bakken Lackey.....	2945
Hart.....	2947
Atkinson.....	2947
Weekes.....	2949

ADJOURNED DEBATES

SECOND READINGS

Bill No. 88 — The Health Labour Relations Reorganization Amendment Act, 2004

Hermanson.....	2953
Van Mulligen (referral to committee).....	2953

Bill No. 95 — The Ecological Reserves Amendment Act, 2005

Hart.....	2954
Forbes (referral to committee).....	2954

Bill No. 98 — The Prairie and Forest Fires Amendment Act, 2005

Hart.....	2955
Forbes (referral to committee).....	2955

Bill No. 104 — The Planning and Development Amendment Act, 2005

Huyghebaert.....	2955
Taylor (referral to committee).....	2956

Bill No. 106 — The Municipalities Act

Huyghebaert.....	2956
Taylor (referral to committee).....	2956

Bill No. 107 — The Municipalities Consequential Amendment Act, 2005

Loi de 2005 sur les modifications corrélatives découlant de la loi intitulée The Municipalities Act

Huyghebaert.....	2957
Taylor (referral to committee).....	2957

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