



SECOND SESSION - TWENTY-FIFTH LEGISLATURE

of the

Legislative Assembly of Saskatchewan

**DEBATES
and
PROCEEDINGS**

(HANSARD)

Published under the
authority of

The Honourable P. Myron Kowalsky
Speaker



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[The committee resumed at 19:00.]

EVENING SITTING

COMMITTEE OF FINANCE

**General Revenue Fund
Learning
Vote 5**

Subvote (LR01)

The Chair: — Now that it being 7 o'clock, we will begin the estimates for Learning that's found on page 113, 114 in your Estimate books, subvote (LR01), central management and services. I would ask the minister if she would be so kind to introduce her officials this evening, and we will begin the committee deliberations.

Hon. Ms. Higgins: — Thank you very much, Madam Chair. To my right is Wynne Young, deputy minister of Learning. To my left is Larry Steeves, associate deputy minister. Sitting directly behind Wynne is Karen Allen, executive director of corporate services. Directly behind myself is Gillian McCreary, assistant deputy minister. And to Gillian's left is Naomi Mellor, executive director, education finance and legislative services. And also sitting to the left of Naomi is Nelson Wagner, executive director of facilities. And directly behind Gillian is April Barry, executive director, early learning and child care.

The Chair: — I would recognize the member for Melfort.

Mr. Gantefer: — Thank you very much and welcome this evening, Minister, and to your officials. I understand that we'll have a couple of hours to begin the process of looking at the Learning estimates for this year. And there are a good number of topics that need to be covered.

And as a preamble, Minister, since we haven't had the opportunity to formally do this, I would like to sort of state that some of the questions that I will ask are not only for my information or the opposition's information but I think for the public interest, that there are indeed — as surprising as it may seem — are people who follow these proceedings and who are interested in the progress and the information that's provided.

So I think we have a two-level responsibility to provide information to the House but also to provide information to the public that we serve. So some of the questions may seem pretty obvious, but I think that there is a benefit in doing that.

Minister, there's a number of topics over the course of the next two or three occasions that we'll have to meet and discuss them. And I would like to try to explore these various topics in some depth as we go through them and then move on to other topics.

I think, Minister, that the first topic that I would like to begin on is the whole process that is very much engrossing our learning system right now, and that is the whole amalgamation process and the issues that are surrounding amalgamation across our province. And they vary and they're many and they're very interesting. And I think information and updates would be very

welcome, particularly as school boards are approaching, I believe it's early May or the first week in May when it's a requirement to have the mill rates set. So all of this process is very timely.

Minister, as a beginning I wonder if you would give a general overview from your perspective where the amalgamation process is at in a general sense.

Hon. Ms. Higgins: — Thank you very much, Madam Chair. First off, I guess, to talk about the restructuring and what has happened over the last couple of years and to give people a general overview of where we are.

After the Boughen Commission report was released, the Boughen Commission in 2003 . . . I think it was May of '04 we began to move into the period of restructuring. And there was really three points that come out of the Boughen and were announced by the minister after that.

The first and foremost was a restructuring to move to larger divisions, to go to regional pooling of resources and address many of the issues that were there. The next point was the redesign of the foundation operating grant. There's been a fair bit of work that's been done on that, and I would say we're about halfway through the factors so far.

The new changes have been put in place this year. There is still a number of factors that need to be reviewed and work done on that, and we're looking at it being done in two stages. So first stage implemented this year with the '06-07 budget and next stage looking at the next budget year. Also to the issue of education property tax and equalization which looks at the bigger picture of funding for education and the commitment of this government and our Premier to work towards a better equalization deal with the federal government and to address the situation and some of the inequities with education funding and the reliance on property tax. So that was the basic premise of where we are today.

For many people, the new boards took effect on January of this year so they are working. There's been overlap from the previous boards into the new boards so there has been a bit of a transition period. For many people, they talk about the restructuring being done, but what I would say is that at this point in time while the physical boundaries of the new school divisions are drawn and the new boards are in place, there is still a great deal of work to do. Many of the school divisions are working through the programs in the amalgamated divisions, what's available, what services are there, what the needs are within the division, and of course the funding and what will need to be done within that school division. So on paper, boundaries are drawn, new boards are in place, but now I think a great deal of the work begins at this point in time getting everything settled in and getting the new boards up and running.

Mr. Gantefer: — Thank you, Minister. Coming out of your comments I think there are a number of specific issues that we should explore. Minister, do you have a listing of what the old boards, or the boards that were prior to the restructuring, do you have a list of those boards and what their mill rates were leading up to the . . . or at December 31, I guess it would be,

prior to the new boards taking responsibility January 1?

Hon. Ms. Higgins: — What I have is a listing of all of the previous school divisions with the mill rates, '04 and '05, and the variance. Now I would assume though what you're looking for is . . . Do you want just a straight listing or do you want a broken down, previous school divisions into the new divisions? Is that what you're looking for?

Mr. Gantefer: — I was looking for the previous divisions because I believe the new boards have not set their mill rates until . . . or they may have been started to set their mill rates, but I believe it's May 4 or May 8 or somewhere in there. May 8, that's the deadline for setting the new mill rates. So I don't expect that we would have the new mill rates for the combined or the new amalgamated or restructured boards at this time. So I'm looking more for the former ones, if that will be available.

Hon. Ms. Higgins: — What I have is a list. It will name the new school divisions and what it contains inside in each of the blocks is the former school divisions and the mill rates from '05. So that's what you're looking for? We can get a copy for you.

Mr. Gantefer: — Thank you, Minister. One of the comments that I've received from people on the new boards is that the administrations of these new boards have really, I think underestimated the magnitude of the work that was going to be required to bring the financial statements from all of these individual boards, both the operating statement and balance sheets, and to reconcile with the appraised assets. And, you know, all of this financial information has been more onerous than originally anticipated to bring this information together.

With the new mill rates being set on May 8, is it the department's expectation that all of this work is then completed so that these new restructured boards are in a position to set their mill rate, and so that the work that they have embarked on, well officially on January 1, is going to be at a stage where they can effectively set mill rates beginning on May 8?

Hon. Ms. Higgins: — That's part of the reason why the elections for the new boards was held in July of last year, and they didn't take effect until January '06, to give a little bit of a window to be able to do some of the preparatory work that needs to be done.

The member will know that there is a three-year period, a three-year window before the school divisions are expected to have a common mill rate. So we know that there is going to be a couple of years of transition. Now each school division will make the decisions that they feel are appropriate for their area, but that was the big reason behind the three-year transition. And we know that there is going to be probably a couple of years of work that will take place in the divisions — in the new divisions.

Mr. Gantefer: — Thank you, Minister, and I've received information that you sent over. That's exactly what I was looking for. Thank you.

And without looking at it in detail, but anecdotally, that there is some variance and it isn't the same in every jurisdiction or

every instance. From this information — and I recognize that there's three years to implement and to get to a unified mill rate for each of these divisions — the work that's been done . . . Is the department satisfied to date that the work has been done in bringing these financial statements together so that boards, at least at this point in time, are solidly kind of confident in the financial information that they have — in the combination of the individual financial statements into a combined financial statement so that they're getting a very accurate and complete picture of what their financial position is prior to beginning the process of setting mill rates on May 8?

Hon. Ms. Higgins: — Well here again we can talk about the six months of lead time that there was before the new divisions came into effect. And also a number of things were done, one being that the former secretary-treasurers of the divisions were kept on, using transition funding that was provided through the department to keep with that continuity and to provide help in the transition period. I think right now when you look at the information that's coming out of the new divisions, I know the department is quite satisfied with it that we're . . . you know, we're there. And I don't think, you know, as there's been comments made, the work that's been done in the divisions is refined to a level that there wasn't a great many surprises on budget day.

[19:15]

Mr. Gantefer: — The minister says, appropriately perhaps, that there weren't many surprises on budget day. But in this budget process, were there surprises that some of these restructured boards had when they looked at the balance sheets and the financial statements of individual boards that were being part of the amalgamated new board?

And what I'm looking at, you know, specifically there's been anecdotal comment around the learning circles, if you like, that some boards' financial position was not quite as what had been perceived or was stated; that there might have been booked assets sitting on the books in terms of collectible arrears of taxes and things of that nature that, in a realistic point of view, were fictitious almost or they certainly were, you know, optimistically anticipated that these revenues would come in.

Has there been any surprises at all in this process that some positions of boards were not as expected? There have been anecdotal comments made that some divisions went on . . . you know, sort of spent some of the things that they may not otherwise have done in order to make sure there weren't extra revenues or assets sitting on the balance sheet, those kinds of things. Have there been any unexpected surprises in this whole process?

Hon. Ms. Higgins: — Well what I will say is that the financial statements are audited yearly. And when you look back to '04, the '05 statements are currently . . . or we're just kind of in the process of receiving those.

The comments that you made, whether it's something questionable, out of the ordinary that may have happened, I'm not aware of any of that. I mean a number of things that we're looking at, and part of the big one I think is the redesign of the foundation operating grant. And that is to make it more

equitable, more transparent, so we can work towards a more accountable system in the education field. So not aware of any comments. I mean if there's something specific that you have a concern with, we can talk later. That would be fine. But we're not aware of anything.

Mr. Gantefer: — Thank you, Madam Minister. I won't offer to get into the A minus B equals C discussion that my colleague is much more adept at. But certainly the foundation grant and restructuring how that foundation grant is applied to individual school districts is partly — I think that's what you said, perhaps halfway — in progress of making that whole system reviewed and adjusted.

And I think that there are arguments that have always been made. My experience on boards of education goes back to the mid-'80s when I was involved on the board and the Chair of a board, and the debates that used to happen among other things at convention used to always be, does it cost more to deliver a unit of education in rural settings or does it cost more in urban settings? And there were legitimate arguments that could be mounted on both sides of that argument and debate. And I think it's gone on for a good number of years and the department is reviewing and looking at this.

But I think that there are some things that definitely are true and that is that some costs are accelerating disproportionately — the cost of living if you like — when you look at the recognized costs. And I think of things like transportation costs and fuel costs.

The other thing that doesn't fit into the foundation operating grant calculations is capital costs and things of that nature — construction costs — because of the economy in Western Canada or across Canada perhaps has sort of been way ahead of inflation in terms of the increased costs. So some of these things have to be looked at and kept in mind when you're reviewing these operating grants to boards.

Madam Minister, a great deal of the time, it seemed, prior to January 1 for these new amalgamated boards was doing some of the very fundamental things about deciding where the central office was going to be, who the administrative staff was going to be, what the names of the jurisdiction were going to be. I mean the kinds of things that seem to be trivia and minutiae. But it is very important because it has to be done and it does take time and meetings and things of that nature in order for this to happen.

So I'm pleased to hear that the department is satisfied that the work that has been done up until now in terms of really getting a good handle on what the financial positions of the school boards are is in good hands and well along the way.

As you know, Minister, and we'll talk about the details of the Bill on The Education Act in another venue, but part of that Bill is going to be to adjust the financial year for school boards from the calendar year to the school year. And so I believe boards are looking at either-or combinations of an eight-month budget or a 20-month budget or combinations of an 8 and 12 for a total of a 20-month and looking forward to that whole period of time. What are the expectations of the department for the mill rate that's being set on May 8? Is it a mill rate to apply for the eight

months leading up until the new fiscal year for school boards, or is there an expectation of the department to actually look beyond the eight-month period of time into the next fiscal year?

Hon. Ms. Higgins: — Within the legislation, the budgets that will be required is an eight-month that we'll do until August 31, and then we will go into the 12-month, so it's an eight-month and a 12-month but the mill rate setting process will not change. That cycle will remain the same.

Mr. Gantefer: — The mill rate will then be on the basis of the . . . now for the eight months that will apply to the period of time in the interim, or will it apply to a different 12-month . . . I'm a little confused as to how this adjustment or the transition is going to occur.

Hon. Ms. Higgins: — This was part of the discussion with SASBO [Saskatchewan Association of School Business Officials] when we first looked at changing the year. So when it is set, it will be for the '06, and then we will follow the same cycle where in April, May of next year it will be the '07 mill rate.

Mr. Gantefer: — So then as I understand it the mill rate that is set by May 8 will be for the 12-month period ending at the end of April of next year. Is that correct then, that it's set for the 12 months?

Hon. Ms. Higgins: — No, it will be for the calendar year. So it will be from January 1, '06 to December 31, '06.

Mr. Gantefer: — And this has improved things how? When we have the budget year following the calendar year, the mill rate year following the calendar and then the government year that goes March 31 to April 1, this has clarified this whole situation how, Minister?

Hon. Ms. Higgins: — Now this could be a little tricky so bear with me. Previously when you looked at the budget-setting cycle, really six-tenths of your budget was set and you had no flexibility left, or very little flexibility left if there was any adjustments that needed to be done. So when we look at going September to August, it gives a larger control over your expenditures and your budgeting. But it also has very little effect on the mill rating or the tax setting that the school division may do. You have the whole year really, where you have more flexibility — whether it's staffing, whether it's programming, whatever.

Now I have to say also too that STF [Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation], the school boards association, and also LEADS [League of Educational Administrators, Directors and Superintendents], along with SASBO, were involved in the discussions around this, and all felt that the added flexibility and it was just a better process for the boards to have through their year.

Mr. Gantefer: — Thank you, Minister. I certainly remember the six-tenths and the four-tenths and the fact that by the time the provincial budget came out and the recognized foundation grant and the calculations came out that you were six months basically into your school year, and so that you had very little, at least on the operations side, that you could do. Your mill rate

basically was set. So I see the point.

I would have thought that the maximum benefit to make sure all of this went in sync is that the mill rate would also follow the school year as the budget-setting year so you could do it all together, so your income period and your expense period would be exactly the same. But certainly by moving to the budget year and being able to adjust the expense side, at least it does make more sense to have it as this sort of function.

Minister, moving on as part of this amalgamation process I wonder . . . The department maintains regional offices to be supportive to school divisions and that were set up I think in seven regions from south to north across the province. And I'm wondering if because of these new restructured school divisions if there is going to be reorganizing of the regional support program along the new boundaries and new areas as well.

[19:30]

Hon. Ms. Higgins: — In the early discussions that had been considered, that there may be . . . may be more appropriate if we went to a reduced number of regions.

But after the final discussions and with the addition of early learning and child care into the Department of Learning and also when you look at the importance of First Nations and Métis education, also independent and home-based education, and a continuous improvement framework, it was felt that it would be more appropriate if we stayed as is to provide the supports that are needed.

Mr. Gantefer: — Minister, and I'm not sure if the newly restructured boards followed the exact boundaries that the regional offices were responsible for. I know they all add up to the sum, but there might have been one or two boards that are in a different region or that are now part of the restructured situation.

Are you looking at a redrawing of the boundaries of the regional offices and thereby the services that they provide?

Hon. Ms. Higgins: — They're pretty close to the regional boundaries. But what we're doing is reviewing it to make sure that we've got the appropriate boundaries for the regions and the school divisions. I mean, in my view it just makes sense that they would be the same. So it's something that we're reviewing.

Mr. Gantefer: — Thank you very much, Minister. I would like to turn my attention to . . . Since you mentioned the fact that one of the reasons for retaining the regional boards was the child care and early learning that's been added to the responsibilities of the department, Minister, from written questions or answers to written questions that the department provided, I believe that there was only 4.6 million of the 21.7 million received last year by the province of Saskatchewan from the federal government for early learning and child care that was actually spent in '05-06. Despite the fact that 21.7 was indeed budgeted for, only 4.6 of it was spent. And in the '06-07 budget only 11.5 of the money that has been allocated despite the fact that 20 million has been provided for from the federal government.

Can the minister outline how much of the federal funding received under the early learning and child care agreement in principle between the federal and provincial government was allocated by the Department of Learning in '05-06? And how much of this money was actually spent?

Hon. Ms. Higgins: — Part of the question that the member asked is really answered in written question 896. But the difference that you will find is that that is contained . . . Oops no, wrong year. That's ours; 896 is ours, right? Question 897. You're also looking at the years and the allocations that were done then. Also what you would add to that is 4.6 million that was from DCR's [Department of Community Resources] budget. It will be contained in theirs.

One allotment you will see is in our budget, and the previous ones will be with Community Resources. And the 4.6 million . . . and I'm confusing years; I apologize. DCRE [Department of Community Resources and Employment], there will be another 4.6 million and that's for the subsidy increases. So while the subsidy increases . . . or subsidies are still managed through DCR, the responsibility for providing the service is housed now within Learning.

Mr. Gantefer: — So, Minister, in general is all of the money that has been received from the federal government been allocated and will it be spent?

Hon. Ms. Higgins: — The member will be quite aware that the federal election was held. And with the commitments of the previous federal government we had put together a made-in-Saskatchewan plan for early learning and child care in the province of Saskatchewan and had been ready to roll out some fairly major increases, some increases in the subsidy rates to provide a number of grants for capital start-up costs for child care, for home-based care.

And when the federal election, when the new government was elected, of course there was some apprehension as to whether we should go ahead with the rollout or whether we should wait and see what was going to happen with the commitment of funding. And from the 146 million that was committed to the province of Saskatchewan for early learning and child care, we ended up with two years of funding instead of five years of funding. So it was just over \$40 million that we got.

So while all of the money has not been allocated, we have kind of slowed down the process to make sure that we don't get ahead of ourselves because we can't start up a wonderful program and then if we aren't definite that we have the resources within the province to continue the program, it puts us in a very difficult position.

So the money is of course set aside. It will be used this year and in future years towards early learning and child care. So it still goes toward its intended process, but what we need to do is build off the resources we have provincially and provide the best services that we can for Saskatchewan children and Saskatchewan families.

Mr. Gantefer: — Recognizing that the new federal government has changed course in this program and that there are some monies that at least the two out of the five years

monies have been received for, is it the department's intent to build a made-in-Saskatchewan solution, if you like, that would plan to use what is available of these reserve money or residual monies from the federal government and add some monies from Saskatchewan's own resources in order to move forward at least to some extent with an expanded program?

Hon. Ms. Higgins: — During the whole process of last year and a half, two years when there was first the discussion and the commitment towards a national child care program, there was a great deal of work done in the province of Saskatchewan with partners across the province — child care advocates, many people who have worked in this field for many years — done a lot of research, a lot of work, a lot of planning. There was a great deal of work done by the department.

And we put together a plan which we felt was appropriate for Saskatchewan and addressed many of the issues that we have here, not only just looking to child care in the larger centres but also rural Saskatchewan, smaller towns — what are the options that work there? — and also in northern Saskatchewan.

So being our population, Saskatchewan being what it is — we're spread over a larger distance and we need to be creative, I think — we looked at creating part-time spaces. We looked at what was needed, whether it was home-based daycare, whether it was child care centres.

So we looked at a very comprehensive plan of increasing subsidies so that they were deepened and affected more families, gave support to families that would still be struggling to be able to provide child care and continue to work. Looked at a number of issues — capital grants to help with start-up costs. That can be pretty restrictive in some areas. And a substantial increase in the number of seats in the province of Saskatchewan.

So when the federal government changed and the commitment to the national child care program was changed, we needed to kind of reassess where we were, what programs we had, and what kind of resources that we had.

One of the things I think is an advantage that has not been a waste is all the work that's been done by the many people right across Saskatchewan that have contributed to the overall plan. So we have a good plan. We have a good analysis of what's out there in the province of Saskatchewan. We have gathered a great deal of information, put together a very good plan. And even though the money may not be there, what we will do is work with the resources that we have committed so far from the federal government and put in place the pieces of the plan as the resources are available. So you know it's not all for naught. There's been some very good work that's come out of it and I think Saskatchewan children will benefit in the long run.

Mr. Gantefer: — Thank you, Minister. In your answer to the previous question, I believe, if I understood it right, that you said over the five-year program of the previous federal administration that they had committed \$146 million to this program in Saskatchewan. Can the minister tell me how much that the province had committed of their own resources to this same program?

Hon. Ms. Higgins: — When you look at the '05-06 budget, there would have been 24 million that would have been spent on child care. That would have included new space creation, subsidies, and also \$5 million would have been allocated to pre-K [pre-kindergarten] programs.

Mr. Gantefer: — That's for that calendar year, not for the five-year period?

Hon. Ms. Higgins: — Yes, that would have been the '06-07. Sorry. And it was during the last couple of years there's been a major build-out of child care. Now I don't have five-year figures on me. That's something that we could look at and get for you.

Mr. Gantefer: — Just to be clear in the numbers that you just quoted me from '06-07, is that from subvote (LR08), the KidsFirst, the early childhood intervention programs and the child care facilities? Is that where those numbers came from or where are you quoting from, Minister?

[19:45]

Hon. Ms. Higgins: — What you will see when you look at budgets from the vote (LR03) you will find from the operating grant that is where the pre-K money would come from. It would be within that vote.

Now we've been jumping back and forth, '05-06 there was about \$30 million that would have been spent on early learning child care and pre-K together — child care and pre-kindergarten. You mentioned KidsFirst. That isn't included in any of the numbers I've used; that's separate. It's been a fairly stable number, and it's Learning vote — what is it? — 08 would be the KidsFirst. But that's not included in any of the numbers that I've been using.

Mr. Gantefer: — Okay. Thank you, Minister. So is the department then . . . I'm still a little bit unsure as to how close to matching the federal commitment that the province was. In general terms, was a requirement of this program that the province commit similar amounts of money to the 146 million over the five years? Was it a 70/30, a 60/40, or was there any commitment at all? Was this simply an unconditional grant from the federal government to be spent on this project?

Hon. Ms. Higgins: — Well we should only wish that some of the money coming from the federal government is unconditional. This 146 million was money that was dedicated to early learning child care. There was no specific time frame of it being spent. It was just designated to that area.

If you look at the . . . You know, if we're spending an average of 30 million a year, over a five-year period, we're talking about 150 million from the province, not including KidsFirst and other supports that are out there. So, you know, we're pretty well in the ballpark with matching the grant that the federal government had committed. So now what we have is just over 40. I think it was 20 and 21 . . . 21.6, something like that. So we're just under \$42 million that actually came out of the total commitment of 146.

So like I say, what we've done is slowed down the rollout of

child care and the expansion. And we'll continue to put it into sustainable programs so that there will be a benefit for children and families in the province.

Mr. Gantefer: — Thank you, Minister. When we look at some of the programs that you talked about, it also leads me on to look at some of the SchoolPlus initiatives. And I think that if we look at the general concept of SchoolPlus, it's designed to bring various services that children need into one central agency, if you like, or one central depository of services so that a child gets experiences or services in learning, but they also get services potentially from Justice, from Social Services, from health care, and things of that nature. Would that be a fair description of the SchoolPlus program, or would the minister like to add something to the general description of SchoolPlus?

And where I'm leading to this, it seems to me, Minister — unless you can point out something differently — that while these programs are inter-agency, if you like, in that there are dimensions to other agencies being involved in the delivering of these programs to children, that basically the budget is coming from the Education budget and from the Learning budget, from budgets that are part of the foundation operating grant that school boards receive.

Is that a fair assessment of who is picking up the financial responsibility, or can you direct me to some subvote somewhere that would indicate that these other agencies are actually contributing to the cost of delivering these very worthwhile programs?

Hon. Ms. Higgins: — Now while the comments that you made . . . And I think your brief explanation of SchoolPlus is accurate, and there may be some concern out there that although Learning is taking the lead in some of these instances or many of the instances, when different departments bring and provide the services for the students, they pay for those services. There are some shared with the coordination, but in many cases I think Learning does take the lead in this. But as I say, other departments, when they bring services to that student or to that child, they pay for those services whether it would be a social worker or a nurse or whatever the situation may be.

Mr. Gantefer: — Minister, I think that's commendable in terms of the programs that are needed. Are these costs part of that A minus B equals C formula in terms of the recognized costs? I mean part of that formula is that there is a format for the recognized costs, and that would include the operational costs, the heating costs, the instructional costs, the support staff costs, and these sorts of things. Is the actual cost of delivering these extra programs under the SchoolPlus program recognized so that it becomes a part of that formula that school boards can anticipate their grants being based on?

Hon. Ms. Higgins: — Previously when SchoolPlus was first developed and initiated, there was a line item that talked about SchoolPlus funding. Now what's happened with the redesign of the foundation operating grant is that it has been built in as a dollar amount into the basic rate.

Now what I will say to the member is that in many of the conversations . . . And this is an area where I'm still learning and still getting up to speed on the whole SchoolPlus issue. It's

got to be one of the things that I think you hear people comment on the most in many forums and in comments when you just meet teachers and, you know, school personnel from various areas. You know there's still some uncertainty around SchoolPlus. And I know before becoming the Minister of Learning and meeting with school boards in our area and in others, there was always questions about SchoolPlus and the balance that was there.

So I think that's something that I need to do a bit of work on: have a better understanding and make sure that that balance is there and that we all understand it better. And the supports that are needed to be there for children, whether it's for an extended period or a short period of time, that it's all something that we need to put an effort into and make sure that it works because I do believe that the ideal behind it is a very good one. And it is something that's needed. We just have to make sure that it's working well.

Mr. Gantefer: — Thank you, Minister. I share as well the point of view that there is a great deal of value in the SchoolPlus program, not necessarily universally in every setting, but certainly in settings where the community and the school environment identifies that these type of programs are very important for the children in that school.

But I also . . . One of the concerns there always is, is that you're dealing very often with children who are in some ways broken, that need this extra support and the extra help in order to succeed and to achieve their objectives in life. But that also quite often has to be tied realistically to broken families and broken homes that, you know, you just can't work and fix on one part of it without working your way backward, if you like, or into more depth into the family environment. And that involves and entails a more comprehensive kind of a program delivery.

And I guess one of the concerns that I would have is that, are we capable of mounting that kind of an initiative, or are we just going partway down the way and not really going to succeed ultimately because we haven't dealt with it in enough depth?

Hon. Ms. Higgins: — Well I think you've hit a number of issues kind of dead on. And not only with the SchoolPlus issue, but this was part of the ELCC [early learning and child care] program that we had looked at building out when federal money was first out there, that there would be family resource centres established throughout the province to provide family supports. You also have to look . . . and I mean while that's still in the plan, it's something that is a little bit out in the future, but you have to look currently at what there is.

I mean there's KidsFirst. There's community schools which also involve parents and the community more in the development process. There's also pre-K. In the pre-kindergarten classes, there is one day a week that involves family and working on the bigger picture instead of with the children. So there is a number of things out there.

[20:00]

Is there enough, and is it widespread enough? It's an area that we hope to expand on with the early learning and child care, but

it will be slowed down a bit and we'll continue working with the resources we have and through the programs that we currently have, whether it's community schools or KidsFirst or SchoolPlus. There's lots of opportunity out there, and we need to expand our capability.

Mr. Gantefer: — Thank you, Minister. I think we all philosophically agree with these comments. I guess the question is, is who takes the first step and where does the initiative come from? Does it come from Learning? Does it then bring in Social Services? Does it bring in First Nations? Does it bring in, you know, the poverty issues? Does it bring in potential issues around drug dependencies and addictions and these sorts of things? Because I think everybody agrees that it isn't a single-faceted and a single-dimension challenge and opportunity to deal with these things.

So where do you see the Learning component, the Learning department and the schools, fitting into this? Are we to be the lead in this whole process? And if we are, how does that then impact on other departments and commitments from their departments and their funding to make this happen? Because it can't continue to be just something that's somehow put into the new operating grants for school boards.

Hon. Ms. Higgins: —Mr. Chair, I think Learning will always be involved in this level, whether it's Learning programs or supports to Learning. But I mean, we'll always be involved in one extent or another, whether it's leading or adding to or supporting another community partner that's taken the lead.

And now maybe I'm being a tad bit idealistic here, but I would hope that wherever the need was that there would be someone in the community that would step up and that the other partners would be there to support. Well maybe that is a little idealistic, but you look at other communities. Circumstance arise. It may be the local police that have taken the lead in working with young people or working with families. It can be other community groups. But no matter what the circumstance, Learning will be there. I mean, that's part of our role.

Mr. Gantefer: — I think it's clear, Minister, that Learning has to be there. And certainly with the commitment on SchoolPlus that insofar as the impact on these programs are involving the children when they're in our custody in schools, we have to be there. The question is, is if that we acknowledge that these conditions for these children are multi-dimensional, multi-faceted, and if they don't reach back to the family or the environment outside of school, that they're highly likely to fail, that someone has to take the initiative.

And Learning can say, well we'll wait until the Social Services takes the initiative or until Justice takes the initiative or until Health takes the initiative. But clearly someone has to take the initiative.

And if we just wait idealistically or not for a community volunteer organization of some sort to say something needs to be done here . . . how can we draw all these various agencies together in order to develop a concrete plan? . . . is a pretty inefficient way of delivering programs.

So I'm wondering. Do you see the Department of Learning as

being the lead in this situation, that there is a responsibility to bring these other departments and agencies into the program? Or are you just going to let it happen by spontaneous combustion?

Hon. Ms. Higgins: — If the member will kind of think back a couple of years, I mean, it's been fairly consistently that community schools have increased. We're now at 100 community schools throughout the province, and that's important. It's important to draw in families. It's important for the children and for the families to have those schools where they're located.

Also you've got to look at SchoolPlus and also the RICs [regional intersectoral committee] that coordinate regionally many of the programs. We will never stand back, I don't believe . . . I mean that's Learning. I mean Learning's a huge part of any child's life. The school system is important, and they have contact with children. We will never, I mean, discount the support that we get from community partners, but learning will always be there, will be one of our roles.

Mr. Gantefer: — Minister, I appreciate you seeing learning in a leadership role, if you like, in terms of the issues facing the children that we serve. The department has I believe made the commitment that they're going to endeavour to increase the ratio of financial support to schools from the provincial government. You've made the commitment to people in the agriculture sector I think pretty clearly, and I believe that there is a general commitment to increasing the percentage of participation from the provincial government to the funding of the cost of delivering programs to schools.

Is that increased level of commitment going to recognize that if we're going to take this leadership role in providing these increased services to children and we're going to take the lead, and it might not be that we're going to have the appropriate amount of funding coming from these other agencies, is the department envisaging that there will be the increased funding that's required in order for schools to fulfill this mandate of greater leadership and initiatives in this area?

Hon. Ms. Higgins: — When you look at the commitment and you talk about the different programs, maybe putting a bit more of a dollar value to them — when you talk about community schools, I mean, we're talking about just under \$13 million that went into community schools. We're talking about 14 million that went into SchoolPlus, 5 million that went into pre-K, and also fifteen and a half million that went into shared services.

Also the department, when you look at diversity issues, you're just under \$50 million, which can include many behavioural issues. And I know the other partners put a fair bit into families and into family issues that they deal with. So I don't think it's being ignored by any means by anyone. And it will be an area that we will continue to invest money and to invest in services for families and children and the bigger picture.

Mr. Gantefer: — Thank you, Minister. Minister, we talked a bit earlier about the regional offices and the fact that you see them as supporting the local school programs in their territory. Do you see a role for the regional offices in this whole area of supporting the schools on these kinds of initiatives?

Hon. Ms. Higgins: — They already are. That's part of what they do. They're the department's final eyes and ears in the communities and in the regions. They sit on the RICs, they sit on community councils and community organizations. That's what part of the reason why they're there.

Mr. Gantefer: — Thank you, Minister. Switching back a bit to the regional offices, what is the typical component of personnel that are in a regional office? And what's their general job descriptions?

Hon. Ms. Higgins: — The average would be about 6 to 12 people. You would have your regional director, superintendent, superintendent of curriculum, ELCC folks. Also First Nations, Métis, and admin. Now depending on the nature of the office, where it was located, you know, it may not be one of each, may be some overlap in the larger offices. But 6 to 12 folks.

[20:15]

Mr. Gantefer: — Thank you very much, Minister. Minister, that completes the questions I had for this evening. Thank you very much for your candour. My colleague, the member from Biggar, has some questions.

The Deputy Chair: — I recognize the hon. member for Biggar.

Mr. Weekes: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. Welcome to the minister and your officials. My question revolves around the closure of the Radisson school. As you're well aware that your government brought in the school board amalgamation and imposed a two-year moratorium on closure of schools. But because the Radisson school was in the process of being closed, your moratorium did not apply to it and the old Saskatoon West School Division went ahead and closed the school in any case.

Of course the citizens, the parents of Radisson school were very upset and still are. And they've worked very hard to keep that school open. They began busing their students, the majority of their students from Radisson at their own expense to the Maymont School rather than going to the Borden School. I understand now that they have applied to your department, to your government, to have the boundary changed. I understand Radisson is just a few miles inside Prairie Spirit School Division, and they want to apply to go into the Living Sky School Division where they would get funding to have their children bused from Radisson to Maymont School.

Could you give me an update of the status of that situation and any other developments that may have arisen since I spoke to the community last.

Hon. Ms. Higgins: — One of the things that I will remind the member opposite is that, I mean, there's a reason that boards are elected locally, so that they know their community, they know the services that they need in their area, and they have that autonomy. And I mean, that's important. It's important to all of the divisions. It's important to the communities that they're involved in. So it's a local decision as to how and where services will be provided.

So we can go back. I mean the Radisson decision was made by the board before the amalgamation. The boundary commission

drew the boundaries for the new divisions. Now I understand that there has been a request made for review. This will be something . . . The department has sent back a letter saying that this is something that have to be reviewed by the boundary commission. I mean it's not anything that's done quickly, so we will look at having that done. But there's no guarantees as to what the outcome will be. So yes, we've received the letter, and yes, it's been responded to.

Mr. Weekes: — Could you help me with the process? The boundary commission has the authority to change the boundaries. What would be the time lag for the decision, and those types of issues? How will this be resolved?

Hon. Ms. Higgins: — What the member would do is, if you have a look at The Education Act, there is duties and powers of the Educational Boundaries Commission. And the commission will review anything that the minister refers to it. So that's what would happen.

I would refer to the boundaries commission the request. They would go through any research studies, inquiries that they may wish to and put forward a recommendation to me. And that would be the process. That's how it's laid out in the legislation.

Mr. Weekes: — Thank you. Have you referred this matter to the boundary commission?

Hon. Ms. Higgins: — Sorry. It hasn't been referred yet, but it will be.

Mr. Weekes: — What timetable would it be, or what's the schedule of the boundary commission once they have the referral from you and how long before they would come up with a recommendation? And would this decision be made before the new school year this fall?

Hon. Ms. Higgins: — Well I would say not likely by the end of the school year, highly unlikely I would think. What's happened is there has been a letter that has gone back to them giving some explanation and we're waiting for a response.

Mr. Weekes: — Thank you. I believe I said before the beginning of the next school year. Would this be resolved?

Hon. Ms. Higgins: — Well that's hard to say. But you're looking at from June which is coming up quite quickly, over the summer months where quite often with vacation and other things not a lot of these type of processes take place over the summer. So I would say it's not likely.

Mr. Weekes: — Thank you, Minister. I hope you understand, these people are very concerned. They have spent literally thousands of dollars of their own money busing their students. And the community of Radisson also has put in considerable amounts of money. And hopefully this will be resolved in an equitable way. Thank you very much.

Hon. Ms. Higgins: — I just want to make a comment. I mean, I hope you realize also, I mean this was a decision that was made by the local board before the amalgamations, before the changes to the school divisions. So I know it can cause some difficult feelings in communities.

And I realize that the boards in many cases are charged with making difficult decisions. They really do have an accountability to the communities that have elected them, that have put them on those boards. And I'm sure that the decisions that they make are in the best interest of the communities that they serve. So thank you.

The Deputy Chair: — I recognize the hon. member for Canora-Pelly.

Mr. Krawetz: — Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. And good evening, Madam Minister. I have a number of areas that I want to explore with you tonight and I believe we have about 30, 35 minutes left.

The first one, Madam Minister, is a situation that you have not been involved with because it occurred in the past. As you are aware, the province and the school system has been looking at the whole area of bullying and harassment on a provincial basis. I was involved in discussions with the Eastland Lakes School Division immediately after some unfortunate tragedies that occurred in that school division in the community of Canora. And I was led to believe that a gentleman by the name of Kevin Cameron was going to produce a report for the minister of Learning — the former minister of Learning. Could you tell us whether or not that report has been received?

Hon. Ms. Higgins: — While the Department of Learning hired Mr. Cameron, the report was more directed towards the community, some of the issues within the community, some . . . I mean, which is confidential of course, but the report didn't come back to the minister. The report went to the community and was used in that context.

The department has used some of the information, or used the report to build and strengthen the policy that we have. And my understanding is . . . You're looking confused. My understanding is that there is a new policy being put forward, and part of that was built out of the report that was developed for Mr. Cameron. Sorry, you're looking way too confused.

Mr. Krawetz: — Well I want to clarify, Madam Minister, or your officials need to clarify. My understanding was that the Eastland Lakes School Division contracted Mr. Cameron for an internal report. I was present when information was in fact given to Mr. Cameron, and Mr. Cameron did present a report to the Eastland Lakes School Division.

I also was told by the then minister of Learning that Mr. Cameron was contracted on a provincial basis because if you recall, Madam Minister, the phone lines lit up on talk shows immediately after that tragedy in Canora when there were parents from across the province complaining about situations in schools right from the Alberta border to Manitoba border.

And it was my understanding that Mr. Cameron was contracted to prepare a provincial report and to provide guidelines to the minister of Learning so that a strategy could be developed on a provincial-wide basis to deal with the issue of harassment and bullying. Is that not what was actually intended to have happen?

[20:30]

Hon. Ms. Higgins: — Now my understanding is, is that there wasn't a separate report that was commissioned by Mr. Cameron. We used the portion of the report that was not confidential and that was part of the basis that was used for the department to put together their provincial strategy.

Of course there's other resources that are drawn into that. You look across borders to see what is available in other provinces. Also the former minister made this a topic at the Canadian ministers of education meetings. So it's all been put together and has been put into a provincial strategy and will be released within the next while — short while.

Mr. Krawetz: — Thank you, Madam Minister, for clarifying this. Well I think you understand that this is a very sensitive issue across the entire province, and there are parents who are waiting very patiently for a long period of time already for a response from the Department of Learning on what is the strategy.

And I understand from your comments in your last answer is that you're suggesting that a strategy has been developed by the Department of Learning using information from Mr. Cameron and others to put forward a strategy on how to deal with bullying in the province of Saskatchewan. Is that correct?

Hon. Ms. Higgins: — If the member opposite has ever gone on to the Department of Learning website, the caring and respectful school strategy has been on the website with some very good information, some very good resources, not only for teachers and schools, but parents also.

But this really has brought a focus to the issue of bullying and that will be improved on even further with the release of the provincial strategy which, as I said, will be shortly.

Mr. Krawetz: — Thank you, Madam Minister. Madam Minister, I have looked at the caring and respectful schools website. And in fact there are many initiatives at the Canora-Pelly level that are . . . schools are in that very program and work on that. And there has been a lot of good work done.

And I understand from the teachers' federation point of view that in fact they have conducted provincial-wide seminars to inform administrators and others on how to deal with the things that needed to be dealt with at the school level, but there's still a need for the provincial strategy. I think that's what the former minister indicated. I don't have the press releases with me right now. But I'm sure that your officials will concur with me that there was indeed going to be a provincial strategy and that parents are waiting for that strategy. So, Madam Minister, I don't know that I needed another response from you, but I'm pleased to see that you have said that there will be a release of a provincial strategy to deal with that topic. Thank you.

Now, Madam Minister, my next series of questions are going to deal with capital funding, and I know your official, Mr. Wagner, is here, and he'll be able to probably assist. Madam Minister, I noticed with a degree of pain in my heart when I looked at the estimates that were presented for the Department of Learning, when I look at the Department of Learning estimates for capital last year and I see that there was \$26,665,500 allocated for capital in the regular budget and that

indeed our supplementary estimates that were presented to us here when the budget was presented include an additional \$10.851 million. So by putting those two numbers together you're looking at a capital budget that exceeded \$37 million last year. This year the budget has been reduced to 21.8.

Now, Madam Minister, clearly capital costs have increased. I've spoken in this Assembly, and you've heard me speak about hospital funding and the fact that a project seven years ago in Preeceville, an estimated cost of 4.5 million is now at an estimated cost of \$10 million. So capital costs have been going up.

Madam Minister, how will you deal with the requests from school boards for capital funding when you now are going to be working with less than \$22 million worth of capital dollars, when last year you had in excess of \$37 million?

Hon. Ms. Higgins: — If the member opposite, when you look at this year, what we're trying to do is to move to a more stable predictable method of funding. And to have there an envelope of 20 million for major capital projects, and that also excludes block funding which is about 10 million a year. But we want to have that consistent 20 million a year that is used for major capital projects.

Mr. Krawetz: — And the minister, could you tell me where I would find the expenditure of 10 million for block funding in capital?

Hon. Ms. Higgins: — You will find this in school capital transfers, and for '06-07 it will show 21.8. And the reason of the difference is because — that it doesn't show the full 30 — is because 8 million was advanced into '05-06 to meet some immediate pressures — over-crowding, other issues at La Loche, Ile-a-la-Crosse, also Warman. There's a number of projects that were moved up when the money was advanced early.

Mr. Krawetz: — So, Madam Minister, if I'm to understand your response, then the supplementary estimates that are presented for the March 31, '06 year which just concluded, of \$10.851 million. You're saying that 8 million of that was something for block funding for this year? Could you explain by what you meant by that response?

Hon. Ms. Higgins: — The number would have been net of an increase of 14.1 million, and that would be capital funding.

Mr. Krawetz: — Okay, Madam Minister, we'll just leave that alone. We'll assume that in the Estimates document we are working with 21.8 million, which I would think you would agree that that's less than last year in capital funding based on the supplementary estimates of 10.8 and the 26.6 that is in the document. Those totals are more than the 21 million that is currently at disposal for Mr. Wagner to use in allocating projects.

Madam Minister, could you indicate to the Assembly and to the public how many projects both in school construction and in renovation, approximately how many projects? The B1s that are sent to the department, to the facilities report, how many B1s are there before the facilities department right now?

Hon. Ms. Higgins: — When you look at the total list, there is 75 major projects that they're probably a little over 150 block. But the member will know that last Thursday there were 55 block projects that were approved.

Mr. Krawetz: — Yes, I heard that announcement, Madam Minister, about the projects that were approved. And I was wondering if you have a list or do officials have a list of that entire release — not available right now but that can be sent at an appropriate time — of what projects were approved in the province? I would appreciate that.

Madam Minister, one of the largest projects from the now Good Spirit School Division, then the Eastland Lakes School Division, was for phase 3 of a project at Norquay, in the community of Norquay. Phase 1 and phase 2 have been completed, and I know that there was . . . I look at a government press release of June 21, 2000, where it talks about the approval of a provincial government project in Norquay and in Canora as well. And it talked about expenditure of monies that would allow the first two phases to go on.

Madam Minister, I have received a number of letters and I know you have as well or your department has, former minister, from people in the community of Norquay, both the former Norquay local school board that's now going to become a Norquay council, very shortly I guess in the fall. But they have asked that the department . . . Because this is a key project in that school division, it was one of their requests that was flagged as high priority for the phase 3, which was going to be the demolition of a very old section of the Norquay school. It's a facility built in the 1950s. It's primarily a lab area for chemistry, physics, biology, and the like. And that was to be destroyed, and new laboratory and some additional classrooms would be constructed.

There's letters from the Norquay local school board, there's letters from the Norquay Chamber of Commerce, the village council asking that the government consider funding this project. Could you indicate at what level of rating is the project at Norquay?

[20:45]

Hon. Ms. Higgins: — As the member may be well aware, there's a pretty very well-defined . . . well a very well-defined criteria for ratings and criteria for defining projects and where they fall on the list. And for a priority 1, it's health, fire, structural safety, federal-provincial agreements. Priority 1A could be health, fire, and structural state safety. Priority 1B; health, fire, structural safety on hold. Priority 1C is a federal-provincial funding.

Then, you get into priority 2 which is critical space shortages. And you look at . . . Priority 3 is structural repair, building systems, and building restoration. And there is a priority 4 which is non-critical space shortages.

When we look at the list, the Norquay High School falls under priority 3.

Mr. Krawetz: — Now, Madam Minister, I know I saw that rating scale a number of years ago for the Norquay school, and

then I don't know whether that is still the same rating that I saw about three years ago.

The Norquay school is now a K to 12 facility because of course the elementary school was closed, and it was all combined into one single structure with some additional classrooms that were constructed in the early phases. Now phase 3 is asking for . . . and I'd ask you to, you know, send one of your officials to the school because I have had an opportunity to be in the school, and the 1950s laboratory, I think, would rank that project higher than a project 3 or a level 3 as you just indicated.

So I am wondering what procedure then should the local community follow to bring to the attention of officials at the facilities department that this project should be rated higher than what you currently rate it. What are the steps that the community can do to encourage the department to look at this in a slightly different fashion?

Hon. Ms. Higgins: — I am informed that the Norquay High School has been on the priority 3 list for a couple of years, so you could be accurate in your having a recollection of that. The project has been reviewed a couple of times, but it would not . . . I mean it would be possible to have someone go out again — one of our officials — and check the project over again to make sure that's the appropriate priority listing for the high school.

Mr. Krawetz: — Just a final question on this capital construction. Could your officials indicate when the last inspection occurred. When was there a department of facilities representative who actually inspected the Norquay school and evaluated it?

Hon. Ms. Higgins: — It was prior to June of last year.

Mr. Krawetz: — Thank you, Madam Minister. Madam Minister, I want to turn to a different area which is the new funding manual for 2006-07. Madam Minister, I recall my days as a school board member when we used to, I think, complain about a 28-page document I think it was. Sometimes maybe it was 23 pages, but it was a document that the boards of education used to receive about, you know, the most recent updating of the foundation grant formula. And now I downloaded from the website your new document which I think is 125 pages or more, and there are some questions that I have with regards to some of the very specific sections in this document.

Madam Minister, the first question that I want to raise with you is regarding shared services. Now shared services has been a concept that has been around for a long time, and school divisions have used it to deliver services and program in school divisions that could not afford it by themselves but were able to work collectively to ensure that certain services were provided through the shared services allocation of funds.

Madam Minister, I noticed that you still are allocating \$17.1 million to shared services. And I'm looking at B 15. If Mr. Steeves is looking for the manual that I'm referring to, I'm sure he has that page already identified. You indicate that 17.1 million is being used for shared services.

And I look at the size of the newly amalgamated school divisions. And I look at Good Spirit, which is the one that I can probably associate with the best because that's part of the Canora-Pelly constituency. The school divisions that make up the Good Spirit School Division were primarily school divisions that used to be part of a shared services agreement.

Now can you tell me how the shared services agreement is going to work if the Good Spirit School Division, which encompasses all of those divisions, has now a single division component? Or are you looking at Good Spirit School Division joining with — I guess probably — Prairie Valley?

Is this the kind of situation that you're seeing in shared services? Do you expect these extremely large school divisions to now create a shared services plan that would encompass almost an entire region? Could you clarify how shared services is actually going to work for the school divisions.

Hon. Ms. Higgins: — There was a number of the former school divisions that had shared service agreements, and there was funding within the foundation operating grant that helped with that. What has happened with the move and the amalgamation into the larger school divisions is that they have been moved to the higher rate so that the shared services funding goes to that division.

So you still may have shared services within the division, but they're really counted within that school district itself. So the funding is there. All have been moved to the higher rate. And the shared services funding is still contained within the foundation operating grant. And that will be part of the second phase of the review of the grant, which will be this year for implementation next year. But the rate has been moved to the higher amount for the shared services.

Mr. Krawetz: — Thank you, Madam Minister. I know we just have a few minutes left. As I understand your answer, you're saying that the shared services money does not necessarily mean that the Good Spirit School Division has to have a shared services agreement with another school division. It is within the existing school division. As I see your officials are nodding their head, so I won't even ask for an answer. We'll just conclude that that's correct.

Madam Minister, my final questions here before 9 o'clock deal with the changes in the basic rate, page B 3. And I notice that, as you've indicated, you've had the first review of the foundation grant formula and you had some elimination of a number of factors. And those factors are summarized on page B 3, and there's the elimination of the core actualization factor, the career development factor, the rental factor, the SchoolPlus implementation factor. All of those translated into some dollars per student that the basic rate was increased to compensate for eliminating those factors.

But one of the factors that just jumped out from the page, Madam Minister, is the fact that the elimination of the enrolment decline factor allowed you, or your officials have indicated that the base rate has changed by 114 for the elimination of the enrolment decline factor. Now as I understood the enrolment decline factor, what it used to do was to compensate school divisions for a large drop in enrolment

and it would lessen the pain over a number of years because it would slide, there would be a sliding scale to the enrolment decline.

Now, Madam Minister, to add \$114 to the basic rate of the students that are still left in the school division I don't think addresses the concern of enrolment decline. Or did your officials or . . . I know there was a larger group that was reviewing the foundation grant formula. How did an enrolment decline factor, how did your officials arrive at the conclusion that compensating for it would be to add a basic rate to the students that were still left in the school division? Because the school division that now loses enrolment due to a huge drop or a huge decline, they don't get anything. So could your officials comment on what was meant by adding that kind of a factor to the basic rate?

[21:00]

Hon. Ms. Higgins: — Now if we go back to the good old days when the member opposite was probably more involved in the school system and you think of the six-tenths and the way the budget planning was done, in that six-tenths of your year was really committed by the time you found out your dollars, your available funding for the next year. You had pretty limited flexibility.

That's when the enrolment decline factor was built in to offset some of those changes when the majority of your budget was already over and done with. So there was a need for the decline factor at that time.

With the changes in the fiscal year, there is a great deal of, or more flexibility in the ability to plan, and you're budgeting for the year so it's no longer necessary. With the change to the fiscal year there's really no need for that decline factor, the enrolment decline factor, to be built into the budget. And the external reference committee — and during all the consultations and the work that's been done on these changes — were supportive of this. So it's made some significant changes with the fiscal year being altered in the changes to the year. And it's been supported by partners and there's been a lot of work done on it. And I think, all in all, the divisions will find that it's much more appropriate and fits the system that's used. Well it makes . . . it will make, I think, life better when it comes to budgeting and planning for your year.

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

Hon. Mr. Hagel: — Mr. Chairman, I move the committee report progress on the estimates for the Department of Learning. In fact if the committee is so inclined, I'd be prepared to move that we report extreme progress on the estimates for the Department of Learning.

The Deputy Chair: — The Government House Leader has moved that the committee report progress on the estimates for the Department of Learning. Is it the pleasure of the committee to adopt that motion?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Deputy Chair: — That is carried. So we will recess for a moment while the officials for the next department come in, and the next department up will be the Department of Environment. Thank you, Madam Minister.

General Revenue Fund Environment Vote 26

Subvote (ER01)

The Deputy Chair: — Members of the committee will come to order. We're considering the estimates for the Department of the Environment and the first item is central management and services (ER01). I want to welcome the officials. And I'd ask the Minister of Environment to introduce his officials, and if he'd like to make an opening statement to proceed with that as well. So I recognize the Minister of the Environment.

Hon. Mr. Nilson: — Thank you very much. I am pleased to introduce the officials with me tonight. I have to my left, Lily Stonehouse who's the deputy minister, and to my right Alan Parkinson, the associate deputy minister of the compliance, fire, and forest division. And then over further left I have Bob Ruggles, who's the assistant deputy minister of the planning and risk analysis division. Behind Lily is Dave Phillips, who's the assistant deputy minister of resource and environmental stewardship division. Back over behind Bob Ruggles I have Donna Johnson, who's the director of finance and administration branch, and right behind me I have Stuart Kramer, who's president of the Saskatchewan Watershed Authority. And I will take opportunity to make a few remarks very briefly.

The '06-07 Environment budget represents an investment of over \$202 million to promote and protect the environment and its natural resources as part of the government's commitment to a green and prosperous economy. While the green strategy has not been fully finalized yet, this budget lays a firm foundation for its implementation once it is approved.

Saskatchewan Environment's vision is of a high-quality environment and healthy ecosystems in perpetuity which sustain social, health, and economic well-being for Saskatchewan citizens. It's a vision that's achieved through work on four goals: reducing risks to clean and healthy ecosystems; protecting people, resources, and property values at risk from wildfire; providing fair opportunities for the sustainable use and enjoyment of renewable resources; and sharing responsibility for environmental stewardship. It's a vision that will be achieved through the continued efforts of the many women and men who work in the department.

A number of the key initiatives in the department's performance plan were approved for implementation or ongoing development. These key initiatives include the green strategy framework development, the parks legacy project, the Great Sands Hills regional environmental study completion, and expanded recycling opportunities in conjunction with SARCAN.

I'm pleased and excited to have been given this opportunity to serve as the Minister of Environment. I've had numerous

opportunities already to see the scope of responsibilities in this portfolio, from the launch of the new province-wide waste paint recycling program to a ban on alcohol in provincial park campgrounds on the May long weekend; from the release of the province's first source water protection plan to the renewal of the aerial firefighting fleet.

The programs of Saskatchewan Environment and of the Saskatchewan Watershed Authority have real value in protecting and managing this province's environmental and natural resources.

I want to say thank you to all of the staff who are part of these two organizations and other community organizations that work with them. The commitment that we find in the people that are involved in this field is outstanding and I really want to say thank you to them for their work. So I look forward to answering questions from my colleagues opposite. Thank you.

The Deputy Chair: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. I recognize the hon. member for Last Mountain-Touchwood.

Mr. Hart: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. Minister, welcome here this evening on this late evening and particularly to your officials. I can well imagine and I've witnessed the good work that your officials have done in the past and would certainly appreciate their assistance with our discussions here tonight.

Before I get into any particular questions I would like also to make just a few general comments on . . . When the Leader of the Opposition first asked me to take on the role of critic of the Environment, I was somewhat hesitant. But of course, as you well know, Minister, when your leader asks you to do a job, you do the job. But I really come to appreciate the vast array of issues that the Environment deals with.

It cuts across the piece. In fact it cuts across probably every other department within government because it's the air we breathe, the water we drink, the plants and the animals and the flora and the fauna, I guess, and so on. But sometimes we as individuals, we sometimes forget and we lose perspective of where we are in a sense of time in the evolution of this planet Earth that we all live on.

And I made some brief reference to an analogy of the evolution of the Earth and mankind and plants and animals and so on in my budget remarks, but I would like to go back to that just to sort of, I guess, set the scene as far as, you know, the context we need to look at when we're talking about the environment.

The environment is something that is ongoing. It's been around for a long, long time, much longer than any one of us have walked on the earth, and it will continue to be here for many, many, many decades and centuries ahead. And an analogy that I came across in some reading that I've done really struck me and what it's done is it's taken approximately 4.5 billion years and compressed them into a week. And you know, mankind really has only been around on this earth sort of . . . Well *Homo sapiens* arrived at 11:59 and 54 seconds on the sixth day. I mean that's, if you start on Monday, you know, we're pretty . . . We haven't been on this earth very long. And yet we think we are the masters of the earth and the environment, and we are doing things that maybe we need to sort of step back a bit and

take a longer view . . . term view of it.

And I think I sense in society in Saskatchewan and in Canada and throughout the western world at least — and probably throughout the whole world although I have a very limited perspective on world views — that mankind in general is beginning to grasp the idea that we better be very careful with this planet Earth that we all inhabit because it is fragile. And we need to look at the way we are doing things because in the analogy that I referred to, they talk about the great . . . The splitting of the atom was within the last two one-hundredths of a second. If you're looking at Monday and 12 o'clock midnight, it happened right in the last two hundredths of a second.

Another part of the analogy goes something like this. If the timeline of the Earth was a mile, the industrial revolution occupies the last three hundred thousandths of an inch, and an average person's lifetime is about one one-thousandth of an inch. So we're pretty insignificant when we look at that. So as I said, just to sort of put things in context, you know, we need to I guess sometimes step back and realize, you know, where we're living.

And it seems to me one of the issues I guess that has driven that point home to me is the whole issue of climate change. And I know there are varying views on climate change, and is it a real issue, and isn't it a real issue? And I think the majority of people would agree that it's a real issue to the extent of whether the forecasts, for the consequences of some of our actions, will they be as severe as what's being forecasted? Well that nobody knows. And there are a whole range of forecasts. But I think, I think most, many people at least . . . And of course as with any other issue, we have the naysayers, but I think most people realize that there is something happening to our climate.

Now is that in conjunction with the cyclical things that have happened in the past? Absolutely. I believe it is. But I think those cycles are at the very least being exaggerated by the increased level of greenhouse gases in our atmosphere and those sorts of things. And I sense that there are a great number of people within our province and within our country who are coming to grasp with this whole issue of climate change. And that goes back to what I started earlier with my comments. I think people are starting to realize that the time we occupy on the face of this earth is very limited. But yet through technology and the advances in science and mankind's ability, we have a great potential to affect the environment, and so we need to look at the things we do in that context.

[21:15]

So, Minister, having said all of that, as I said I just wanted to make a few opening comments and what I would propose to do here tonight is to perhaps just touch very briefly on a few general topics and then a number of my colleagues have some specific issues that they would like to raise with you, and we will be doing that very shortly.

I have heard you and your government talk about a green and prosperous economy for a number of . . . at least two or three years now. And last year the former minister of Environment started the whole green strategy consultation progress, and there was work done I believe the year before that.

Minister, I wonder, there was certainly mention of the green strategy in the Speech from the Throne, and you made some reference to it in your budget remarks. But really when I look at the estimates, I see very little as far as the implementation of the green strategy, and I wonder if you could just explain where that process is at, perhaps identify some items within this year's budget that go directly towards addressing portions of the green strategy.

Hon. Mr. Nilson: — Well thank you for that question. This budget has a 7 per cent increase in the budget to \$202.5 million, and it includes money that allows us to continue working on the information that we received in the various strategy sessions and discussions that took place over the last year that my colleague was very much involved with.

And so what we're doing in this particular budget is consolidating that information and putting together the plan which we will bring forward. And then that will allow us to go forward into the budget planning for next year around specific things that may be part of that plan.

But some of the initiatives that are in this year's budget that are integral to what we're doing, including the parks legacy project which we're working on right now. And this is the 75th anniversary of the park system in Saskatchewan, and there are a number of areas where we'll be working there. It includes the Great Sand Hills regional environmental study completion, and that is a major task which fits with this overall process.

Plus then the various items that we're dealing with around recycling. We have the waste paint, and there's some other areas that we're working on. Those are some specific things. But at the same time, we have been working right across government to identify those things which fit with an overall strategy, and we have the resources within this particular budget to continue that work.

Mr. Hart: — Thank you, Minister. Minister, you had mentioned — I believe it was in your budget remarks — that there was \$1.35 million from your department that was dedicated to the Forestry Secretariat, and you had also indicated that Environment would be playing a pivotal role.

Out of what budget vote does that \$1.35 million come out of? And the second part to the question, could you explain the relationship between your department and the Forestry Secretariat as to what role your department officials will be playing within that Forestry Secretariat?

Hon. Mr. Nilson: — The specific budget amount is on page 57 of the Estimates, and it's under the heading called forest services. And there's a specific line for the Forest Secretariat. So that's where the financial information is, and basically the question around how this all fits together.

I think that what has happened here is that Minister Lautermilch was given the task of looking at some specific issues within forestry. The Department of Environment remains responsible for forestry, and I continue to be the minister of forests if we had that category as it relates to the relationships across the country.

The staff people who are involved with the management of the forests will continue to be located within the ministry of Environment, but they will provide crucial information in the work that my colleague, Minister Lautermilch, is doing. I'm also working with him very well and senior staff are working with him as well. So that's basically how it works.

Mr. Hart: — Good. Thank you for that. I guess when I was going through the estimates, I didn't look at them as carefully as I should have because I should have been able to pick that part of it up. I notice, Minister, that there is, I believe, over 44.6 full-time equivalent increase in this year's budget. That's a fairly significant increase. I wonder if you could explain where the new positions are, why the new positions are required, and just very briefly where they are positioned within the department and what their responsibilities will be.

Hon. Mr. Nilson: — So thank you for that question. There are 44.6 FTEs [full-time equivalent] as you've indicated that are included in this budget. 15.9 of the FTEs will support key components of the green strategy and help address operational pressures, and those are 4 FTEs to enhance the review process for oil and gas exploration and development proposals. Two FTEs to support the mining and mineral exploration sectors in the North, and these are things that are done by conservation officers and so they will . . . those two officers, one will be at Pinehouse and one at Stony Rapids. There'll be 7.9 FTEs in fire management, and these are primarily associated with the new aerial fleet that we have. And then there's two FTEs that are dedicated to building capacity, to meet the duty to consult issues with First Nations and Métis people.

The parks program shows an increase. And there's a note at the back of the Estimates book, I think it's on page 167. And this adjustment essentially reflects the number of staff that are actually hired each year based on visitor demand for services. So it's people that have been employed other years, but they hadn't been listed in this FTE complement. And there are internal transfer of five staff from revolving funds to department programs, and that accounts for the final tally.

So if you have any specific questions about any of those, I'd be happy to answer them. But that's the overall complement.

Mr. Hart: — Thank you, Minister, for the information. I guess the only question I would have at this particular time — and I'm sure, through the course of our deliberations in the upcoming few weeks, we will be perhaps, we'll be coming back to some or all of these — is first of all, I guess, are these positions . . . Have you filled these positions? And that would be one question.

And secondly, if you could just expand on those 7.9 positions in fire management, I just would like a bit more information on those, particularly those 7.9 FTEs.

Hon. Mr. Nilson: — The 7.9 FTEs in fire management, that relates to the new aerial fleet, and so it would be pilots and airplane mechanics. And they're in the process right now of hiring those people. So that's the status right now.

Mr. Hart: — Thank you, Minister, for that information. At this time, I have a number of my colleagues that have some

questions. And I will be turning them over to the member from Rosetown . . .

An Hon. Member: — Elrose.

Mr. Hart: — Elrose, sorry.

The Deputy Chair: — I recognize the hon. member for Rosetown-Elrose.

Mr. Hermanson: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. And thank you, Minister, and your support staff for being here fairly late this evening and not watching the hockey game.

I was quite interested in my colleague from Last Mountain-Touchwood's illustration of timelines. And I'm not sure whether he's right or wrong or not, but my calculations are that if his numbers were anywhere near right, the current government has about a zillionth of a millimetre of time left to govern, for whatever that's worth.

Actually my first questions are with regard to chronic wasting disease, and rather than get into a lot of details perhaps I could just ask you, Mr. Minister, for an update. And if there are questions arising out of that update, I will follow with them.

Hon. Mr. Nilson: — Well I think the update that you are interested in is that Saskatchewan's chronic wasting disease control strategy is consistent in part of the national chronic wasting disease control strategy. And in the year 2005, 4,534 deer heads and 48 elk were submitted for testing. Thirty-six new positives were detected: 26 mule deer and 10 white-tailed deer.

Mr. Hermanson: — Okay. Those were some of the numbers. In fact you went so quickly, I didn't get all of them down but I will . . . I got the 36 positive test, 26 mule deer and 10 white-tailed deer.

I'm assuming then that there were no elk that tested positive, and then my questions that arise out of that answer would be, what does your department consider to be the density of the problem now as compared to when it first arose? Do you have any idea as, you know, is the disease getting less prevalent but spreading over a larger geographic area? Or is it still pretty much confined to the regions where it was initially discovered? Do you see progress being made? Like, out of 1,000 deer, are the numbers of positive cases fewer or greater? And again, if you would just comment on the geographic area being covered.

Hon. Mr. Nilson: — Well I think that the situation is that we still in the province have a low rate of occurrence with about 100 cases over the last number of years in 27,000 samples. But we have identified more areas. So there are six areas in the province as of the records last year. So that does show that it's spreading. But the incidence in the samples taken is about the same. So there's not increasing in that population. But what we're doing is following the advice that we got from the expert panel and responding as problems are identified.

[21:30]

Mr. Hermanson: — Are you able to tell me what areas these

— you said six areas, six or seven — six areas or seven areas are? And perhaps can you categorize them as the most serious areas to the least serious areas?

Hon. Mr. Nilson: — I'm happy to try to provide this information for you. And basically there are six areas as I've identified. The worst, if we can put it that way, or the one where there's the largest prevalence, is along the South Saskatchewan River near Saskatchewan Landing. And the least is east of Kindersley near D'Arcy. And the other places involved are the Manitou Sand Hills south of Lloydminster, the Bronson forest area near St. Walburg, west of Nipawin near Love, and an area right around Empress, Alberta-Saskatchewan . . . I guess it's Empress, Saskatchewan but it's right there on the Alberta-Saskatchewan border. So those are the six areas.

Mr. Hermanson: — Okay thank you. That's very much appreciated. Moving to a somewhat different area, you gave me some numbers with regards to chronic wasting disease. Can you outline for me what your department does with regards to a census on wildlife overall? Do you calculate the number . . . I guess, what species do you calculate the numbers of so we know how many? Obviously I would think you wouldn't do rabbits, but I would imagine you might do moose. And so could you just say what you do, how often you do it, and what trends you can identify as a result of these census.

Hon. Mr. Nilson: — Thank you for that question and I will try to go carefully here so that you can get this information. Basically what happens is the department does sampling in selective areas and then extrapolates that to provide a province-wide population. And basically the estimate that I have of the winter population is as of 2001 in most areas, but there hasn't been that much change, although I do have an estimate for whitetail deer as of, I guess, it would be two winters ago.

And that number for whitetail deer is 300,000. For mule deer, it's 36,461; for elk, 14,429; moose, 43,244. For barren ground caribou, it's 776,000; woodland caribou, 3,510; pronghorn antelope, 13,506; and black bear, 35,000. So I think that's the information you were interested in, but that gives you a bit of a sense across the province. I've used very definite numbers, but those are estimates based on extrapolation of samples of much smaller areas.

Mr. Hermanson: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. We'll hold you to those numbers if you can tell how many hair I have on the top of my head. I just missed one number. After the caribou, you had one species and I missed that. If you'd repeat that, I just want to get that in these numbers. The other questions I'd asked is, what can you extrapolate from that as to where the numbers are growing, where the numbers are being maintained, or where perhaps populations are diminishing?

Hon. Mr. Nilson: — Thank you. The number that you were wondering about was woodland caribou and that's 3,510. And that species is actually not in a position where people are allowed to hunt it across Canada because it is one that I think all parts of the country are concerned about.

The population of white-tailed deer in the forests are basically, I guess, doing fine. There is not a concern there. The pronghorn

antelope number, that's probably about 60 per cent of an optimum population. So that is one that people are concerned about that we should end up having more pronghorn antelope. As far the elk and the moose population, I think it's the mule deer and the moose population down in the southern part of the province is increasing. But basically there isn't a concern I don't think about the populations other than the woodland caribou and the pronghorn antelope.

Mr. Hermanson: — All right. Thank you very much, Mr. Minister, for that information. There are some areas where the walleye populations are more sensitive, and I guess I've been doing some background work here to find out what I should be telling my constituents who are concerned about some of these specific areas. And the fact that you do your counting . . . You know, the last significant count was in 2001 or whatever. And they're concerned that decisions are being made without knowledge of where the numbers are at the current time.

Can you tell me what your policy is, say, with regards to the . . . You mentioned the Saskatchewan Landing. That's not an area where I did hear a concern, but it has been an area of concern, and there's been some management practices that have been undertaken in that area. Would your department, on an annual basis or a frequent basis, study population numbers in those sensitive areas, whether they deal with chronic wasting disease or, in my area, suddenly there's an elk population where there didn't use to be an elk population? Now I'm hearing of moose in places where there didn't use to be moose. How do you handle these changes, and how current are you in that regard?

Hon. Mr. Nilson: — Thank you. One of the questions that you asked was about the elk and the moose. It is identified based on the reports from conservation officers, from local farmers and ranchers, from the various conservation groups, and all that information is collected and examined. So that's a general way that populations are identified.

In that Saskatchewan Landing area, they have done some specific aerial surveys in the wintertime. One of the challenges in southwestern Saskatchewan is that you can really only do the aerial surveys if there's a sufficient snow cover. And so some of the winters there hasn't been enough snow to do that. But they have done that specifically in that Saskatchewan Landing area.

For moose and elk, there is I think an elk hunt that's going to be allowed this fall along the river, and there'll be a moose hunt available up near Kindersley. And that's something that's new this year because of the counts and because of the information that has been collected and identified in that area.

Mr. Hermanson: — Thank you, Minister. I had . . . now I'll get into some of the specifics of the calls I had, and you'll understand why being an MLA [Member of the Legislative Assembly] is challenging . . . because I had one call from a constituent east of Rosetown, in the Harris area where there's a forested area, who said the numbers have just gone crazy. There were grain piles out. There was huge damage, and he says Sask Environment has no idea of how many deer there are. They say that they don't count them; they don't know. He was giving me examples of how many deer had been hit by automobiles and, you know, these were provincial statistics. I think it was 11,193 for the year 2005 and just basically said that the whole situation

was out of control.

And then I had a call from a constituent on the other side of Rosetown, west of Rosetown in the — I think it was — in the Fiske area, who said the same thing. Sask Environment has no idea how many deer, but they have, you know, they have a special hunt, and you can get special tags. And this person thought there wasn't as many deer as perhaps Sask Environment thought.

So I guess my confusion is, constituents are concerned, and they're suggesting that Sask Environment doesn't really have a handle on what's going on. And in some cases, perhaps there should be tighter control of deer population, in other areas perhaps not. And I, you know, I'm just an observer who doesn't have the facts or the ability to gather the facts, and we're counting on you to enlighten us in that regard.

[21:45]

Hon. Mr. Nilson: — I appreciate the questions and the specific concerns. I think we always need to remember that the overall population of animals does relate directly to the winterkill — how many have survived the winter — so that we can tell over the decades how that works. The other thing that is quite interesting is that the hunter success rate, in other words how many animals are actually obtained, is kept, and the records go back many decades as well so that there are trends that can be identified.

Now the specific questions you asked about the Harris area, I think it is clear that in that area there is an overabundance of animals and so that has been identified. I think the other question related to the other question you got, that is an area where they actually allowed some extra hunting to deal with the chronic wasting disease, and so there probably is a reduction in the number of animals in that area.

But part of the goal is to deal with some of these specific issues. Obviously the identification of chronic wasting disease changes then some of the harvesting practices in a particular area.

Mr. Hermanson: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. I have one area left to cover, but I do have a subsequent question as a result of that response. And that is, what efforts is your department undertaking to communicate with landowners and residents in this area so they understand what's going on?

You know, I have landowners who are saying, we don't know if we should allow hunters in or not. We don't know if the problem is as serious as Sask Environment says it is. Or we wish more hunters would come, but Sask Environment only allows so many licenses to be issued in our area, and it's not enough. So what are you doing to communicate, specifically in these sensitive areas or troublesome areas, with the people who live there and have to deal with problems — the traffic, the hunters, the damage, that sort of thing?

Hon. Mr. Nilson: — Well it's nice when I have a specific answer to a very specific question. And for the second year in a row, last year and now this year in April, there have been public meetings in Leader, Lucky Lake, Cabri, Kindersley, D'Arcy, and then Love over on the east side to review the 2005 program

and what's happened with wildlife but specifically the ones that are affected by chronic wasting disease and then also to get local community recommendations about what should happen this year. Also I have in my hand the *Hunters' & Trappers' Guide* for this year, and it will provide some of that information as to what's new this year, and that's where some of the information about new or increased populations which allow for hunting in zones where there hasn't been hunting before.

Mr. Hermanson: — Thank you, Minister, and I might suggest for the current year that you have an information meeting in Harris because I understand that there is some real concern there.

The final area that I want to touch on is I just want to know if there's been any changes in policy. And perhaps you could just outline quickly what the department's policy is in dealing with what has been determined environmentally sensitive land or critical wildlife habitat areas. Have there been any changes in policies? How do you deal with transfer of land, with usage of land in areas, and how does that differ between Crown land and privately owned land?

Hon. Mr. Nilson: — I don't think there has been a change in the overall policy around some of the critical habitat for wildlife. There are some things that we have been doing around conservation lands, and there was an announcement made at the Ducks Unlimited dinner not so long ago that related to how conservation groups can participate in dealing with conservation land in the southern part of the province. So there is some of that. But if you have some specific questions maybe I can answer them.

Mr. Hermanson: — Yes, let's use a few for instances. If a company wanted to set up and work out a deal with SaskPower for a wind power generation project, which I know is on the agenda of the government, you know, what impact would it have if an area that was seen as a suitable site for wind power also had some land that was designated as a critical wildlife habitat area or environmentally sensitive area?

Hon. Mr. Nilson: — I think the answer is that that particular land where the project might be located would go through an assessment process. For example, for some of the land that is critical, there is a general rule of thumb that up to four oil wells are allowed to be drilled on a quarter for example. And probably the impact of a wind project might be less than that and so . . . but I'm not totally certain, but I think it would be assessed on a case-by-case basis, but it wouldn't something that totally stops a project.

Mr. Hermanson: — Thank you, Minister. Further to that, could you tell me whether land that has been deemed environmentally sensitive land or critical wildlife habitat protected land is changing status?

As I mentioned you know, the wildlife numbers have changed in my area for instance. There is I think more wildlife now than there has been. Some of the status is regarding you know, soil quality and that sort of thing. Other has to do with species that inhabited those areas. If someone has land that is designated to be, you know, an environmentally sensitive area or critical wildlife habitat area and it was Crown land or even private land

in that kind of an area, does that ever change status? Like, are you pulling land into those categories that weren't there previously, and are you releasing lands that were in those categories given contemporary circumstances?

Hon. Mr. Nilson: — I think the answer to your question is that we do have the RAN program, the representative area network, and that increase in habitat in a particular area, if it's — say — the mixed grassland area, the land that we've taken out would probably only be for treaty land entitlement purposes where we have to satisfy some of those particular agreements that have been put into place, land that's being added to representative area networks as primarily with third parties whether it's conservation easements that private people have, or some purchase and then conservation easements by some of the conservation groups.

But as a government or as Saskatchewan Environment, I don't think there's been a dramatic increase, and there hasn't been a decrease. So it's kind of pretty well the same, but there may be more activity by third parties to increase the habitat as part of a recognition of preserving the prairie, for example, in your area.

Mr. Hermanson: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. If land is taken out of the RAN, I believe you call it, to go into a treaty land entitlement deal, what steps are you able to take to ensure that the quality of that environment is sustained?

Hon. Mr. Nilson: — I think the simple answer to that question is that we have been able to negotiate land management agreements with some of the First Nations that take over the property, and on a general basis they provided good stewardship of the land as it relates to these particular properties.

The Deputy Chair: — I recognize the hon. member for Arm River-Watrous.

Mr. Brkich: — Mr. Minister, just have a couple of quick questions. I want an update on . . . familiar with the lagoon at Blackstrap Provincial Park. Can you give me the status of where that's at right now?

Hon. Mr. Nilson: — I think the update is this, is that the lagoon is closed at Blackstrap, and it was located in an inappropriate spot for long-term use. The department or the park, the Blackstrap Provincial Park there had about 10 percent of the usage of that lagoon, and then the resort villages of Thode and Shields had the other usage of it. The parks obviously would be interested in any new project that might come up, but right now that particular lagoon is closed.

Mr. Brkich: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. With other parks I believe you've upgraded over the years, have you upgraded lagoons at Cypress Hills Provincial Park, Pike Lake, Shell Lake? Have you upgraded them?

Hon. Mr. Nilson: — I think the answer is yes, there are upgrades that are happening across the system. And the answer also is at Blackstrap that in a cooperative fashion and in a cost effective way, if there was a project that would work there, the department would be interested.

Mr. Brkich: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. I believe that they were originally going to have a meeting set up with your officials in the end of March, and then there was a change with ministers, and I'm not sure how that meeting is going. I think they were going to contact you later on with that, but I know there was a letter sent to the other minister.

And I know they are interested in trying to work something out because they feel that that lagoon can be used. And they feel the park even uses more than 10 percent. I know you have that breakdown, but they've talked to the people that are hauling out of there, and they say they haul a lot more out of the park than probably than 10 percent. So they feel that it would probably pay to spend some money on the lagoon.

Also if you're familiar with Shields and Thode, they are growing, quite a bit being close proximity to Saskatoon. At one time there wasn't even hardly any residents there, and it's grown quite substantially, and I think it's going to keep growing. Every year there's a few more houses going there. So I would urge you to reconsider to spend some money there. You haven't spent anything in there since it was built in 19 . . . I think it was built in 1970 or '71. So you got a lot of use out of it, but there was never any money spent on it over the years, and I think if there would have been some minimal money spent on it you probably could be still maintaining it.

So I will urge you to, if you could, meet with the town officials to see if you can work it out because right now I think it's very cost prohibitive for them to either haul it to Hanley or the other one would be up around Saskatoon, the lagoon. And it's getting pretty cost prohibitive. Especially it may hinder the growing of that town. So with that, if you can maybe give me other little information . . . it's not really a question. It's more of a statement, but if you can give me more of an update if you are interested in possibly doing some upgrading there or meeting with the two townsites on it.

[22:00]

Hon. Mr. Nilson: — I think it is clear that the department is willing to meet with the people from those communities to try and sort out what would make the most sense in a cost-effective way to deal with the sewage in that area.

The Deputy Chair: — I recognize the hon. member for Batoche.

Mr. Kirsch: — Thank you. For the minister, my question is how many FMA [forest management agreement] holders do we have in Saskatchewan?

Hon. Mr. Nilson: — There are four FMAs in the province.

Mr. Kirsch: — And of those FMAs, what per cent does Weyerhaeuser hold?

Hon. Mr. Nilson: — 50 per cent. They have two.

Mr. Kirsch: — And what per cent of the Saskatchewan forest would that engulf?

Hon. Mr. Nilson: — Somewhere between 60 and 70 per cent of

the total FMAs.

Mr. Kirsch: — What is the lifespan of these FMAs? How many years are they over?

Hon. Mr. Nilson: — The normal course is that they are 20 years long with a renewal at 10 years, in other words an evaluation at every 10 years. And then they continue from that point and on, but it's sort of renewed on a 20-year basis.

Mr. Kirsch: — Okay. Under these FMAs, are there conditions under which an FMA holder can forfeit their FMA?

Hon. Mr. Nilson: — Yes.

Mr. Kirsch: — And what are these conditions?

Hon. Mr. Nilson: — I think in each FMA there are different clauses that relate to the specific forest. Some of them have to do with the usage of the forests. Other times it has to do with some of the facilities that are there. But you'd have to go into each FMA and see what kinds of things. So if there are some specific questions, maybe I can answer that.

Mr. Kirsch: — Okay. The one I'm specifically interested in — I hear from the foresters, but I haven't got any information on — is the use-it-or-lose-it clause. And how does that work?

Hon. Mr. Nilson: — I think the question you asked is . . . There is a colloquial phrase like you described about use it or lose it. But effectively how it works is that if there's an amount of fibre within that FMA that's not being used by the holder of the FMA, it can be assigned to someone else. And in that process I suppose ultimately if you didn't use any of the fibre, it could all be assigned somewhere else. But practically it's that kind of a clause that says that the fibre needs to be used.

Mr. Kirsch: — You know, I'm wondering in particular to the Weyerhaeuser FMA and if the sale doesn't go through, what's going to take place with these FMAs? And how are we handling them? Do they just sit there? Does Weyerhaeuser still have control of them? Where do we go with them?

Hon. Mr. Nilson: — I think the answer to your question is that the company has the obligation to manage the forest whether the mill is operating or not. But if they're not actually using the fibre, then it will be assigned to some other place or to some other use.

There is, I think, a specific clause in the Prince Albert FMA, which is a 24-month clause, so that if the mill was not operating for 24 months, then certain steps are triggered around the FMA.

Mr. Kirsch: — Now along with these FMAs, they have to submit a cut plan and that cut plan is yearly, I believe?

Hon. Mr. Nilson: — Yes. There's an annual operating plan which includes the cut, but it also includes management of other parts of the forest.

Mr. Kirsch: — If someone was to move into the forest now and make an offer, what's the process to obtain an FMA?

Hon. Mr. Nilson: — In the normal course, if somebody came in to take over the Prince Albert FMA, they would assume all of the responsibilities under that FMA and continue it forward. It's possible that it would start with a new 20-year period, but the responsibilities would be part of that takeover of that whole area.

Mr. Kirsch: — Okay. So if somebody doesn't buy Weyerhaeuser but a logging firm comes in from Ontario or wherever and applies for an FMA, how would that work?

Hon. Mr. Nilson: — If a logging company came from some other place or even from somewhere in Saskatchewan and wanted to access the fibre in a particular area, if there was no FMA there now, the first step is the creation of a land use plan which then identifies which areas can be harvested and which areas cannot and also sets out some of the things that need to be protected. And once that's been established, then it's possible to design the FMA to allow for the management and harvesting of the forest. And so . . . But that would be in an area where there isn't an existing FMA.

Mr. Kirsch: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. I've got a few more questions. And I'd like to go to agroforestry. It was a big item announced in the Speech from the Throne: 10 per cent in 20 years. And I'm wondering how and when is this going to be implemented, seeing it wasn't in the budget?

Hon. Mr. Nilson: — The agroforestry initiative is managed out of the Industry and Resources department in government because it relates primarily to private agricultural land that is used to grow trees. The minister of forests has the responsibility primarily for the forests on provincial Crown land, and therefore the FMAs and the other things that you've been asking about. But that agroforestry program is being developed in the Industry and Resources department, and it is a long-term plan of the government.

Mr. Kirsch: — I'm wondering though because it isn't in the budget, where you're getting the financing from because is this not going to cost to implement this program?

Hon. Mr. Nilson: — I think the existing costs now are in Industry and Resources in their planning and development area. Ultimately if it's on private property — private agricultural land — the costs would be there as part of the business, that people are involved in another form of agriculture in a way. And that's where the costs would be.

Mr. Kirsch: — I'm wondering where the Department of Environment fits in with these trees. Are we going to be careful that they don't get mixed in with general forest because they are hybrids or what's the situation there? What role is the Department of Environment playing in this new agroforestry industry?

Hon. Mr. Nilson: — The research around this particular project . . . and obviously with agroforestry the research is very local. In other words, it relates to the particular climate and place in Saskatchewan.

Much of that has been happening through the forestry centre in Prince Albert. The department's foresters and others who are

involved with silviculture, the growing of trees, are, you know, involved in providing advice around that. I don't think there's a big concern about the species of the trees. Primarily they'll be planted in the areas of Saskatchewan where trees have been cleared to farm, and it's really a mixed forest, and so there probably wouldn't be too much of a problem. We don't think that there'll be a situation where they can out-compete the local trees that are there now.

Mr. Kirsch: — Thank you, Mr. Minister, for those answers and thank you to your associates, and I'll now hand over to Mr. Hart.

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

Mr. Hart: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. I must admit that some evenings when there's 157 channels on the satellite dish and really nothing on, I do watch some of the other legislatures in Canada, particularly Ontario and BC [British Columbia]. And in some other provincial legislatures they use . . . members' names is allowed in committees. So perhaps we may need to look at some rule changes to allow a bit of more informality in our committee structure. But at this point in time we operate with the members' constituencies.

Minister, last year there was an addition of 9 full-time equivalents in the Department of Environment, and one of those positions was to work on this whole issue of cottage lease fees within parks. We have Bill 48 before us, and it's in adjourned debates, and it's proposing a new structure of lease fees from the one that was proposed back in 2004. The one in 2004 was based on the fair-value assessment system, and it caused great concern to many cottage owners within our parks. And we heard reports of some lease fees going up by 300 per cent, and so I believe your predecessor undertook to review the whole situation, and now we have Bill 48 before us.

I wonder if you could explain the process between back in 2004 and what we have before the legislature now, what the process of your department was as far as consultation, who was involved, and — I realize this may be somewhat unorthodox but — perhaps explain a bit of what's proposed in Bill 48 as far as the fee structures.

[22:15]

Hon. Mr. Nilson: — What happened was that a committee was created with some of the cottage owners. There were five of them that were working together with people within the department, and there were at least a dozen meetings and also some very thorough review of the fees that are being charged now as well as an analysis of the services that were available in each park where some of these cottage subdivisions were. And it's that information that is allowing us to go forward.

And the plan is as set out in the Act to look at what are the services provided and have a fee developed that's unique to a park and then deal with the land itself in some fashion. And so it will be divided up into two parts, and so we're moving forward with that.

Mr. Hart: — Thank you, Minister. You mentioned that there

was a dozen meetings. If I recall back in summer of 2004, I believe there was meetings with cottage owners in all of the parks. Are those the meetings you were referring to? How many meetings were held with the committee of five?

You mentioned there was a committee of five struck. How many meetings were there over what time frame? And where did the meetings take place? Just to get a sense of . . . I guess what I'm looking for is a sense of involvement from the cottage owner representatives in the process.

Hon. Mr. Nilson: — Meetings took place over 18 months. They didn't include the meetings in the summer of 2004 because those were the public meetings. But the cottage owners' groups — the 12 different ones — selected five people to be part of the meetings. Most of the face-to-face meetings took place in Saskatoon. About half of the 12 meetings had an element of people who could come in by conference call from other locations. But the 12 meetings included that smaller group that was selected by the cottage owners' associations.

Mr. Hart: — So, Minister, just so I clearly understand the process, you said there was approximately 12 meetings with the committee of five. And most of these meetings took place in Saskatoon, and there was some that took place by video conferencing and that sort of thing. Were there other people making presentations to the meetings on various aspects of this issue, or was it basically the committee of five with department staff looking at the issue and working on a resolution to this issue?

Hon. Mr. Nilson: — Well I think the five representatives of the 12 different subdivisions were the main participants in the meetings, and then they would report back to their people across the province, and that was the normal procedure. The information and expertise, much of that came from people who have been running the parks for many years. They would provide information as to what services were available, what the fees were, that kind of thing. But I think the participation from the cottage owners reps was also very valuable in attempting to look at all facets of the particular situation.

Mr. Hart: — Minister, could you tell me when the last time your department officials met with the committee of five. As you said there was a series of meetings just to get a sense of . . . approximately when did the first meetings take place, and how regular were they? And when was the last time your officials met with the committee of five?

Hon. Mr. Nilson: — I think the last meeting as I described would have been in late February of this year, and the final report from that committee came at the end of March, so that's only about three weeks ago.

Mr. Hart: — Thank you, Minister. Thank you for those questions. I see our hour is getting quite late. I have quite a number of issues that I would like to discuss with you and your officials. But I think we have covered some ground here tonight, and I think we're all about ready to see this day end. And we'll let the House Leader make his appropriate motion, so we can all have a good evening. Thank you very much.

Hon. Mr. Nilson: — Yes, I'd like to thank the colleagues for

their questions, and I think we've answered most of them in an interesting enough fashion that people will have stuck with us right through the hockey game, although I'm not sure. I'd also ask leave, Mr. Chair, to introduce a guest.

The Deputy Chair: — The Hon. Minister of the Environment has asked for leave to introduce guests. Is leave granted?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Deputy Chair: — That is agreed.

INTRODUCTION OF GUESTS

Hon. Mr. Nilson: — Yes. I am very pleased to introduce in the Speaker's gallery, Don Taylor who is with the Saskatchewan Association of Rural Municipalities. And he is a very faithful attendee of many meetings related to environmental issues in Saskatchewan and provides leadership in SARM [Saskatchewan Association of Rural Municipalities] as we work forward with many of these issues. And so I would ask all members to welcome him.

Hon. Members: — Hear, hear!

COMMITTEE OF FINANCE

General Revenue Fund Environment Vote 26

Subvote (ER01)

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

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

The Deputy Chair: — Now moved by the Government House Leader that the committee rise, report progress, and ask for leave to sit again. Is the committee in agreement with that motion?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Deputy Chair: — That is carried.

[The Deputy Speaker resumed the Chair.]

The Deputy Speaker: — I recognize the Deputy Chair of committees.

Mr. Prebble: — Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I'm instructed by the committee to report progress and ask for leave to sit again.

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

Hon. Mr. Hagel: — Next day of the House, Madam Deputy Speaker. And while I'm on my feet, I'll move that this House do now adjourn.

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

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Deputy Speaker: — This House does stand adjourned until tomorrow at 1:30 p.m.

[The Assembly adjourned at 22:26.]

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GOVERNMENT OF SASKATCHEWAN

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Premier

Hon. Graham Addley
Minister of Healthy Living Services
Minister Responsible for Seniors

Hon. Pat Atkinson
Minister of Advanced Education and Employment
Minister Responsible for Immigration
Minister Responsible for the Public
Service Commission

Hon. Joan Beatty
Minister of Northern Affairs
Minister Responsible for the Status of Women

Hon. Buckley Belanger
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Saskatchewan Inc.
Minister Responsible for Information Services
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