

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions



December 10, 2020

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SPECIAL CARE HOMES

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Every new week, we learn more and more why this government and this Premier do not believe in transparency. Being secretive and making decisions behind closed doors is not the right thing to do.

CBC has revealed today in the news that the government signed a pilot project to reduce the level of services and care in our special care homes: Manoir de la Vallée, Manoir Oasis de la Baie, Manoir Sugarloaf, and Manoir Sunrise. Why is this government not being open and transparent and not telling New Brunswickers why it is making these types of decisions behind closed doors and putting at risk our most vulnerable?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Social Development, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I am glad to discuss that. It is good to see that the opposition is using the CBC as its research partner. You know, this is a very concerning situation, when I...

(Interjections.)

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Social Development, PC): Yes.

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Order.

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Social Development, PC): Again, when this opposition uses the most vulnerable of the population as a political jumping-off point, that is the issue that I have.

(Interjections.)

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Social Development, PC): If the opposition would just let me have the floor, I would appreciate it.

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Proceed, minister.

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Social Development, PC): I can talk about this because this was a situation that, again, you would try to find... You know, when you attack staff, as you in opposition do, it is very demoralizing to the staff who are out there working very, very hard to help the seniors in the province. I am more than happy to take other questions, one at a time.

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

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Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Well, Mr. Speaker, it is a serious matter that we are talking about here this morning, and the minister cannot even answer the question in a truthful manner. The minister is basically walking on quicksand here—quicksand. They have made a decision behind closed doors. They are not telling New Brunswickers, and they are not telling the residents of those special care homes that their level of care is being reduced significantly.

My father passed because he had Alzheimer's, and he needed extra care because of that. This government decided secretly to reduce the level of services for the most vulnerable of society, and the minister brings us an answer such as that. The Premier should get up to answer, justify, and explain his decision.

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Social Development, PC): The issue that I want to address here is the fact that the opposition is again using the most vulnerable population of the province as a political point.

But I want to get to the issue at hand. The MOU was signed with the operators of the homes that were mentioned. It was a pilot project to try to improve the efficiency in delivering care to the seniors in the province. That particular way is to make sure that we are using the new technology that this group uses in other jurisdictions to provide the care that is needed for the residents of the homes.

What is being delivered by many staff across the province is a high level of care to the seniors who need it the most. Let's remember that those pilot projects are about that: to try to find efficiency based on the needs and the care needs of those individuals. That is why you have to look at these projects and then evaluate them.

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

[*Translation*]

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, we have here a government that wants to increase the profitability of private businesses on the backs of the most vulnerable. It is not even complying with the regulations governing the staff-to-resident ratio in our private nursing homes.

Mr. Speaker, we understand now why the Premier does not want to accept national standards with respect to levels of care provided in our nursing homes, given that he wants to reduce the levels of care offered to our most vulnerable people. We have a concrete example of that with this pilot project. The decision was made in 2019 without being announced. How can we trust a government that makes decisions behind closed doors, in private, and puts the most vulnerable people, our New Brunswick seniors, at risk?

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[Original]

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Social Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, it is interesting when the member across the way talks about national standards. That is why we want to be at the table to talk about the standards here in New Brunswick, because our ratios are among the highest right across this federation. This actual pilot project was based on some of the practices in other jurisdictions. If you are taking offence to the other jurisdictions that are suggesting that this is a more effective way to provide care for the seniors of New Brunswick, then maybe you should have a look at what those national standards are.

I will say this: The facts speak for themselves. During this pandemic, the results show that the continuum of care for our seniors within the homes—be they nursing homes, special care homes, or adult residences—has been done very, very well compared to other jurisdictions across the federation. The facts speak for themselves. The staff in those homes are doing a great job, and we appreciate them.

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

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, what is even more worrisome is that the minister who was responsible for this file then, in 2019, is now the Minister of Health. That minister, with the Premier's support and the green light in Cabinet, decided to cut services to those most vulnerable. Now, that same individual, the Minister of Health today, is responsible for making cuts in health care and wanting to reform health care services. If we base the outcome of that reform on what was decided here, New Brunswickers: Get ready—get ready. You are going to lose a whole whack of services in health care because of trying to meet your health care needs.

Can the Premier get up this morning and explain why he, behind closed doors, said yes to this pilot project and to reducing the level of services to our most vulnerable?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Social Development, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Once again, when the member across the way calls into question the amount of service and the types of services that are being reserved for the most vulnerable population in the province, it is demoralizing to the staff. The results speak for themselves. Here in New Brunswick, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the seniors in this province have fared very well compared to those in other jurisdictions. The facts speak for themselves, so I want to take this time to say thank you to the frontline staff who have been working very hard to protect the vulnerable citizens in New Brunswick.

If there is a situation where there is a complaint or something that people feel is not right, then we will inspect it. We regulate and inspect the homes, and if there is something that needs addressing, we will address it, without a doubt. However, I do appreciate the staff, unlike the members opposite, who want to attack all the time.

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IMMUNIZATION

Mr. D'Amours (Edmundston-Madawaska Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, we all know that the people of New Brunswick want to know and understand the Conservative government's plan concerning the next vaccination campaign. The provincial government is responsible for prioritizing the administration of the vaccine. Earlier this week, other provinces publicly announced the full list of priorities for those who will receive the vaccine. Can the Premier explain to the citizens of New Brunswick the complete list of priorities for the administration of the vaccine and when it will be made public?

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It is a great privilege for me to stand and speak to that question. I have to say that the staff at the Department of Health have been extremely on this from the beginning and it has not been easy. The federal government told us that a vaccine would not be available until January. Then we got three days' notice that it was going to be available in December and that we needed to get our plans together right away. Well, thankfully, our staff have been working on those plans for some time now.

Last night, at the COVID-19 committee, these plans were presented, and they are going to be made public at this afternoon's press release. While I will not get into the details at this moment, I can tell you that the priority lists have been established and that we have also done a dry run on distribution. I think that it is very important to know that we are very ready for this to happen. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Mr. D'Amours (Edmundston-Madawaska Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, this is all about transparency. A few days ago, the Minister of Health told us that we were the most prepared province in this country. Today, she is saying that the province is not prepared and that she is waiting for confirmation as to when the vaccine is going to arrive in New Brunswick.

So, you will understand, Mr. Speaker, that New Brunswickers want to know how many sites will be set up in the province. Will people have to drive long distances to be able to receive the COVID-19 vaccine? Will New Brunswickers get the full priority list for those who will be receiving the vaccine?

Mr. Speaker, the other provinces presented such lists and the information a few weeks ago now. The government of New Brunswick is apologizing by saying: Sorry, but we were missing some information. Why were the minister, the government, and the Premier not prepared to provide the information?

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[Original]

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): I am sorry if communication from the Opposition Leader to his members is not happening.

This has been a long nine months—a long nine months—and people are waiting for this. We have been prepared. The opposition sitting over there wants every minute detail. We will have those details today at a press release. Do you know what? I am sure that they are not going to be as minute as the opposition thinks they should be. We have been transparent through COVID-19. I am absolutely sure that any other government in a minority situation, and particularly with the parties in New Brunswick, would not have had a Cabinet COVID-19 committee of all parties. I know that, and I am proud of the work that we have done.

[Translation]

Mr. LeBlanc (Shediac—Beaubassin—Cap-Pelé, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Several families in my riding have contacted me about their parents who live in different nursing homes. This is what these families want to know: Will nursing home residents be vaccinated first, or will they have to wait?

[Original]

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Again, Mr. Speaker, the vaccine priority groups will be unveiled today at this afternoon's press conference. We know that the federal government has issued a list of priorities. Provinces have been given discretion to utilize that list to the best of their ability. I think that it is also really important to bring forward that we are going to receive 1 950 doses of vaccine. They will be the first of two vaccine doses that need to be delivered to individuals. For this very first pilot from the federal government, we will receive 1 950 doses of vaccine that need to be stored at -80° C. This will not be a widespread project next week. It will be in an area, and we will act accordingly.

Mr. LeBlanc (Shediac—Beaubassin—Cap-Pelé, L): That is not very clear, Mr. Speaker.

I am getting many calls from families, but I am also getting many calls from nursing home and long-term care workers expressing their concerns. They are asking whether they will be considered a priority group for the COVID-19 vaccine. They want to know when they can expect to be vaccinated. They also want to know whether they will receive the vaccine directly where they work or whether they will have to drive somewhere to get it. If there is a plan, workers need to know it. They need to know. My three questions to the minister are these: Who will be vaccinated? When will they be vaccinated? Where will they be vaccinated? Thank you.

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Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): I want to thank the member for the question. It has been made very clear from the federal government that we will receive 1 950 doses of vaccine. They need to be shipped to an area and stored at -80° C. This is the beginning. Health Canada has approved this Pfizer vaccine. There are other vaccines coming behind it that will have different deployment capabilities.

Mr. Speaker, at 2:30 this afternoon, we will have details on the rollout of this initial batch of 1 950 vaccines and how the vaccines will be distributed and where. We are taking into consideration every priority group and the availability and the ability to make it happen. Mr. Speaker, we will be fully transparent.

Mr. Bourque (Kent South, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, giving information in a press conference is obviously more important to this government than giving information in the Legislative Assembly. I find that appalling.

[Translation]

We know that early childhood and education workers deal with a large number of children and students every day. We also know that, when we are dealing with younger children, particularly in early childhood, it is difficult to oversee, or even control, where, what, when, and how little kids touch toys and learning materials, which greatly increases the potential for exposure for educators. So, the purpose of my question to the minister is to find out where early childhood workers come on the vaccination priority list.

It goes without saying that our children are the future of our province. Therefore, it is important for them to be properly protected, which includes protecting their educators. Mr. Minister, are our early childhood workers a priority in terms of getting this vaccine?

[Original]

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, I want to have patience with the opposition. I just find this line of questioning to be extremely distracting to the situation at hand with regard to our overall approach to the COVID-19 experience.

The vaccine has priority groups, and the federal government has made those priority groups public. Every province has been given a little bit of leeway to understand and work toward its own circumstance. I realize that the opposition members want everything in their timeline. We are doing the work, and we have created, I believe, a policy that the COVID-19 committee has accepted. It was discussed in great detail. I am happy to say that we will be bringing all that information forward this afternoon.

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Mr. Bourque (Kent South, L): Well, Mr. Speaker, again, the minister obviously prefers answering questions from the reporters and the media than from the opposition members. That is great democracy in action.

The question, I find, is also pertinent when it comes to our schools. We know that a limited number of vaccines are soon coming. However, our teachers, educational assistants, and custodians and other school staff fit in the priority list to obtain the vaccine. Where do they fit in that list?

In this particular case, I would like to hear from the Minister of Education as to how he plans to reach out to the parents of children who are in schools and day cares to ensure that they will eventually be vaccinated when, obviously, the vaccine is readily available. Will he consider, for example, an awareness campaign or other means for encouraging a maximum number of children to be vaccinated? To recap, what about school staff and what about some type of campaign to see more children vaccinated? Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Mr. Cardy (Fredericton West-Hanwell, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, thank you to the member opposite for the question. I will set aside the irony of the particular member talking about the particular positions that maybe he may or may not have around vaccines.

Certainly, we will be conducting awareness campaigns in schools. The end of the last question, I thought, was helpful: What can we do to increase awareness? Those plans are absolutely going to be rolled out, and I look forward to working with him and the folks in my department and all opposition parties so that we have a coordinated approach to make sure that we get the maximum possible uptake for vaccines in our schools.

I have to say that around these discussions and around pushing for details on specific groups to get vaccinated, go look at the World Health Organization directives for how to make sure that you create division when vaccines are being rolled out. Start saying, which group is going to go first? Saying here on the floor of the Legislature that we should start putting people on lists and asking for answers on detailed public health questions in the 60 seconds allowed during question period... We are sharing this information at 2:30 this afternoon. Tune in, and please act responsibly.

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

FARMING

Mr. K. Arseneau (Kent North, G): Mr. Speaker, as you know, this summer was one of the driest ever observed. Lack of rain during crucial growing periods can have devastating impacts on crops. Many farmers have been telling me that this has been the worst year that they have ever seen, and some of those farmers have been around a long time. When this happens, farmers are confronted with difficult decisions. One option is downsizing the

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herd, which can have adverse effects spanning over many years of the farm operation. The second is to buy hay from elsewhere. What I am hearing from many farmers from around the province is that hay is either unavailable or unaffordable.

As I have often said, New Brunswick cannot afford to lose one more farm. Our food sovereignty is already fragile. My question is for the Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries. Will the government assist farmers in finding and importing affordable hay to keep herd numbers stable and healthy during the winter months?

Hon. Mrs. Johnson (Carleton-Victoria, Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries, PC): Isn't this amazing? My first opportunity to address the Legislature. On behalf of the fine people of Carleton-Victoria, I am pleased to address the question presented by the member.

This was a summer beyond any that we have known before. Anyone who grew anything suffered with the drought that we had at hand. The Department of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries is working stringently with the federal departments to announce new funding for farmland irrigation. We are looking at receiving more details on the federal government's plans as to how the New Brunswick industry will be able to benefit from the programs that it has. Looking at business risk management (BRM), programs such as AgriStability, AgriRecovery... Shoot. There is one more. What is it, Kevin?

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

Mr. K. Arseneau (Kent North, G): Thank you, but that was not an answer. I did send an email to the minister, and hopefully, she can answer me and say whether or not the government is going to help the farmers with the hay situation.

CORPORATIONS

Mr. Speaker, my second question is for the Minister of Service New Brunswick. Earlier this year, Canada's anti-money-laundering watchdog, FINTRAC, found that there were serious gaps in the information provided by nearly half of the real estate companies that it audited. Meanwhile, British Columbia is currently doing an inquiry into how money laundering distorted housing prices and fuelled the opioid crisis in the province. With its lax regulation and its hot housing market, New Brunswick could be the next target for outside investors looking to invest in the real estate market, driving up the prices of housing and apartments in New Brunswick.

Considering this, can the minister tell us when she will bring forward beneficial ownership legislation to combat this problem?

Hon. Mary Wilson (Oromocto-Lincoln-Fredericton, Minister of Service New Brunswick, Minister responsible for Military Affairs, PC): Thank you for the question, Mr. Speaker.

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Changes to New Brunswick's *Business Corporations Act* will be made to ensure that we know who owns privately held corporations. Corporations will have to maintain a register of individuals who have significant control in their companies and make that information available to law enforcement and taxing authorities. This will increase ownership transparency and assist in exposing activities such as money laundering and tax evasion. These changes that we will make to our legislation will bring us in line with the changes that were made to the federal *Canada Business Corporations Act* in 2019. To date, British Columbia, Manitoba, Nova Scotia, Saskatchewan, and Prince Edward Island have passed similar amendments.

NURSES

Mrs. Conroy (Miramichi, PA): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Our nurses' unions have been pleading with the government to help solve our nursing shortage. Before this pandemic, we were short over 500 nurses, and now, it is even worse. It has been reported that RNs have worked over 187 000 overtime hours just this year, which is a 20% increase since 2017. They are worked to the max, they are exhausted, and they are frustrated. Some are even looking for new careers and leaving from stress. With the issues surrounding burnout among our health care professionals, what is in place for a plan to help alleviate the stress and burden of our nurses who are working on the front lines in hospitals? Thank you.

Hon. Mr. Holder (Portland-Simonds, Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I want to thank the member opposite for the question. I want to state very clearly that in the last two years, we have established a nursing resource strategy in this province. There have been a number of initiatives flow out of that. Quite frankly, we have started to ramp up our navigators program around the attraction of internationally trained nurses, making sure that they have all the tools they need. We started the LPN to RN bridging program at UNBSJ with 24 seats. That was so successful and there was such an uptake that we increased it to 32 seats and made the same thing available to the Université de Moncton as well.

I am telling you, Mr. Speaker, we have some other initiatives that I look forward to announcing here in the House in the near future. Thank you.

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

Mrs. Harris (Miramichi Bay-Neguac, L): Last week, I read in the media that the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs announced an All Nations and Parties Working Group on Truth and Reconciliation. I quote the minister: "we have a cancer in our province... and it is called systemic racism. We are going to take on this initiative, and we are going to do something about it. You can be assured of that. You are going to hear lots from me over the next several days—guaranteed."



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Mr. Speaker, this is what I am wondering: Did she get her marching orders from the Premier, saying that the government is not doing an inquiry, so she went and grabbed the dormant committee, without speaking to any of the First Nations people or anybody else on the committee, in order to try to show that she was making some sort of an announcement?

Mr. Speaker, they have asked for an inquiry. What is this minister doing?

Hon. Ms. Dunn (Saint John Harbour, Minister responsible for Economic Development and Small Business, Minister responsible for Opportunities NB, Minister responsible for Immigration, Minister of Aboriginal Affairs, PC): Thank you, member opposite, for the question. Mr. Speaker, it is a pleasure to rise in the House today to speak about something that is near and dear to my heart, which is systemic racism. As many of you know, I am married to a Black man, I have a daughter who is biracial, and I have nine nieces and nephews who are all Indigenous. This is something that matters to me and something that I am going to be working on.

I did not take the opportunity to compose an all-nations and all-party committee. That is something that was already in the works. That was in the works prior to the election actually. A number of individuals on that committee received letters back in August notifying them that they would be taking part in this committee work. Having said that, I would suggest that you should perhaps look into the information that you are talking about before you get up and announce these things.

Mrs. Harris (Miramichi Bay-Neguac, L): Let me tell you, it is the chiefs themselves who said they were not asked by this minister. I know that I was not. I had discussed that committee with the former Aboriginal Affairs Minister, MLA Stewart. He had a genuine interest in moving the inquiry forward. I would have sat on that committee with him. It is not a problem, because truth and reconciliation are very important.

Are you using this committee to try to steer away from the inquiry into systemic racism? We know what happened to the last minister when he refused to listen to the Premier. Will you stand up today and agree to the inquiry? Yes or no?

Hon. Ms. Dunn (Saint John Harbour, Minister responsible for Economic Development and Small Business, Minister responsible for Opportunities NB, Minister responsible for Immigration, Minister of Aboriginal Affairs, PC): Thank you again for the question. Mr. Speaker, this is what I would say today: This is not an opportunity to address systemic racism. It is exactly what it is, which is a truth and reconciliation commission. You know that there are 94 recommendations, 32 of which have provincial jurisdiction. Those are the things that we are going to be working on with respect to that committee.

In terms of your comments with respect to the previous minister, I actually take exception to that. I think that he did a great job. I think that he had a wonderful relationship with First Nations.

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(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Order.

Hon. Ms. Dunn (Saint John Harbour, Minister responsible for Economic Development and Small Business, Minister responsible for Opportunities NB, Minister responsible for Immigration, Minister of Aboriginal Affairs, PC): As a woman who went up through the building-trades industry, I am not going to let anybody push me around. The same principle applies here. You will be hearing more from this. Thank you.

Mrs. Harris (Miramichi Bay-Neguac, L): Mr. Speaker, I think I am more confused now than I was when I was reading that I was on a committee that this minister put together without having any type of consultation. You are off to a good start.

The First Nations Chiefs have been very clear and concise in saying what needs to be done. They stated that they will not accept anything less than an inquiry. This, minister, is not pushing you around. This is asking you—I am asking you on behalf of them—to do the one thing that you can do to try to mend this relationship. Will you agree today to supporting the inquiry as they want it?

Hon. Ms. Dunn (Saint John Harbour, Minister responsible for Economic Development and Small Business, Minister responsible for Opportunities NB, Minister responsible for Immigration, Minister of Aboriginal Affairs, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you for the question as well. Once again, my comments with respect to being pushed around were to your references with respect to the Premier and what happened with the previous minister, so I do take exception to that.

The other thing that I would like to say here publicly today is that you are going to actually hear lots from me this afternoon with respect to the motion about the inquiry. That is something that I will be going into in depth later on this afternoon, so thank you.

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): The time for question period is over.

Hon. Mr. Savoie (Saint John East, Minister responsible for La Francophonie, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise on an actual point of order...

MUNICIPALITIES

Hon. Mr. Allain (Moncton East, Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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[*Translation*]

The member for Tracadie-Sheila asked me a question last Tuesday, and I took it under advisement. I simply want to tell him that we are happy to work with the federal government under the Safe Restart Agreement to provide some assistance to his community so that its essential services can remain sustainable over the long term.

To date, the department has approved seven compensation claims, for a total of \$3.5 million, for the following communities: Balmoral, Drummond, Lac Baker, Le Goulet, Nigadoo, Pointe-Verte, and Saint John.

We encourage all local governments to send their resolutions to the department by December 31.

Mr. K. Chiasson (Tracadie-Sheila, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It would seem that I have the option of asking one last question. So, that is 7 municipalities out of 102, with only a few weeks left before December 31. Will the minister make the claims of the municipalities public so that people know exactly what situation they have been in over the past seven months?

Obviously, it is difficult to get information from the government, since it is very tight-lipped in this regard. Municipalities have been asking for help since the beginning of the pandemic, and only now is the government waking up and reaching out to them.

So, my question is for the Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform: Will he make public the information disclosed by the municipalities?

Hon. Mr. Allain (Moncton East, Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform, PC): Thank you to the member for Tracadie-Sheila for his question. I can assure him that we are committed to municipalities. If there is a government that has worked hard, it is certainly the current one. In fact, the Premier has been transparent about files related to COVID-19, and I can assure you that, in accordance with the Safe Restart Agreement, we are going to work with the municipalities.

Communities were informed on October 30 that they had to submit their claims. We asked them to be accountable, and that is why we are asking for a motion. I can assure you that, as of the first week of January, Phase 1, as you know, \$1.6 million has been provided to municipalities for transit. Phase 2 covers the 2020 fiscal year, and the claims from the municipalities will be analyzed. As for Phase 3, in 2021, we will make an announcement as soon as possible about this.

During this reform, the goal is still to form a new partnership with the municipalities...



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[*Original*]

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

