

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions



March 24, 2021

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SHALE GAS

Mr. Legacy (Bathurst West-Beresford, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I hope this morning finds you well.

We found out last week that Southwestern Energy received a five-year extension to continue searching for shale gas in our province. It is our understanding that to receive such a license or an extension of one, companies must submit a plan as to what work will be completed during the period allotted for the license. You cannot just stake a claim in New Brunswick without doing some work for that period of time. Can the minister elaborate as to which obligations the company will have to meet to fulfill its commitment to have these permits?

Hon. Mr. Holland (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the honourable member from the opposing bench for the question. It is important to clarify and not to confuse the fact that the granting of a license does not change the fact that the full moratorium as it relates to the drilling of natural gas in the province is still fully in effect.

There are a variety of administrative components to that, but we have stated very clearly that the moratorium that was put in place is still in place. There are a variety of administrative components to that that will continue. As a result, we will continue to work with those companies, ensuring that they understand that our commitment, which dates back to our 2018 platform, is to develop our natural resources but to do so in a responsible fashion. This is a province that was built on natural resource development. We are a government that is committed to developing resources in a balanced and fair fashion.

I look forward to any other follow-up questions or supplemental information that the member opposite would like to discuss. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, for the question.

Mr. Legacy (Bathurst West-Beresford, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the minister for asking for another question. I have one.

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

Mr. Legacy (Bathurst West-Beresford, L): With the moratorium that is imposed on the fracking industry in the province, certain conditions have to be met for the companies to be allowed to drill and do exploration. In 2016, SWN communicated to its shareholders on its site that it was suspending its exploration efforts in New Brunswick due to the moratorium. Can the minister clarify why the renewed hope...

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I am going to make this easy. I am going to make it multiple choice. There are only two possibilities here, either (a) the company has proven in its submission that it will be able to meet the conditions of the moratorium to have this license or (b) this government has changed or is planning to change the conditions. You cannot create a (c) option. We have to look at reality, and the reality is (a) or (b). Can the minister indicate which possibility we are dealing with here?

Hon. Mr. Holland (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, multiple-choice answers in school were always where I wound up doing quite well because they gave me a chance to review, to look at, and to ultimately come up with a well-thought-out answer. Hopefully, the member opposite will receive something very similar here today.

Once again, I go back to the fact that licensing and the associated components to that do not change the fact that the moratorium that was put in place is still in place. There are a variety of administrative components to it. This is a company that did have a footprint that it was working on. I am quite sure that there is a significant amount of information that the company is dealing with within its plans that it ultimately will come forward with to us. That is where the commitment to developing the resource responsibly can give New Brunswickers confidence. We are ensuring that we will look for opportunities but not without an eye toward responsibility. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, and I look forward to another question, if need be.

CLIMATE CHANGE

Mrs. Landry (Madawaska Les Lacs-Edmundston, L): Mr. Speaker, \$10 million of the \$36 million in the Climate Change Fund was not spent on initiatives that tackle climate change. This is unacceptable. The province of Nova Scotia recently announced programs for energy efficiency and the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, including \$9.5 million in rebates for the purchase of new and used electric vehicles, plug-in hybrids, and e-bikes. How much money is this government planning to set aside for the purchase of electric vehicles?

Hon. Mr. Crossman (Hampton, Minister of Environment and Climate Change, Minister responsible for the Regional Development Corporation, PC): Thank you very much to the member opposite for the question. The \$36 million for climate change funding has yet to be directed into projects. Electric vehicles are certainly part of the discussion that we are having each and every day. It is important. There are a lot of good things happening in the Maritime Provinces. We want to be part of that plan moving forward. Thank you.

Mrs. Landry (Madawaska Les Lacs-Edmundston, L): Mr. Speaker, this Nova Scotia program will provide generous rebates of \$3 000 for the purchase of new electric vehicles, \$2 000 for used electric vehicles and plug-in hybrids, and \$500 for e-bikes. When added to the federal \$5 000 rebate for the purchase of new electric vehicles, Nova Scotia will vault way ahead of New Brunswick in electric vehicles purchased. This is without naming Quebec,



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which provides \$8 000, and Prince Edward Island, which provides \$5 000 for the purchase of electric vehicles. Is the government prepared to provide a similar rebate, or are we just going to fall further behind in supporting positive climate change initiatives?

Hon. Mr. Crossman (Hampton, Minister of Environment and Climate Change, Minister responsible for the Regional Development Corporation, PC): Thank you, member opposite, for the great question again. As I mentioned in the first response, we are working on this. We are looking to come up with a plan. I cannot give you timelines on that, but certainly sooner is better for me. There are other programs across Canada as well. You mentioned the federal amount of \$5 000 as well, and you mentioned Quebec, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island. We certainly want to be part of the program moving forward regarding climate change. Thank you.

WORKERS

Mr. LeBlanc (Shediac—Beaubassin—Cap-Pelé, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last year, this government did a great disservice to our fisheries and agricultural industries by banning temporary foreign workers and suggesting that there was no need for outside workers as this specialized work could be carried out by New Brunswickers. This decision led to a fiasco.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Speaker, the fishing season will soon start, and the farming season will follow closely. Does the government have a plan regarding temporary foreign workers, or will it just improvise and pass the bill on to seafood processing plants and farmers, as it did last year?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Thank you for the question. Yes, that is true. Last year, it did not work out very well, and the whole goal was to step up for New Brunswick. We hoped to have people available to meet those new requirements because the opportunity was there and it was one other measure of security for our province. So you are correct. It did not work out.

This year, Mr. Speaker, we are not going down that trail. We have had a successful year of isolating temporary foreign workers as they came into the country. We have an extensive list and are going through PETL and identifying who is coming, when they are coming, and where people need to go and at what time. There are some new regulations, however, that the federal government has put in place that are causing some concern around isolating in a separate spot before they actually go to the location. We are working on those ideas and on what we can do to eliminate or reduce that, even with the possibility of vaccinations at source, where people are earlier coming from.

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We are working with the industries. We are working with the companies. We are working with the agriculture and fisheries sectors to meet the demands that they have for temporary foreign workers, and I am confident that we will have a solution in that regard.

Mr. LeBlanc (Shediac—Beaubassin—Cap-Pelé, L): I thank the Premier for that answer. Mr. Speaker, industry has made arrangements to bring in temporary foreign workers, but the processors are facing increased costs associated with bringing these workers to New Brunswick, isolating them, and ensuring that the work environment is in accordance with COVID-19 requirements. My question is this: What is the province planning to do to provide financial support to these vital industries?

Hon. Mr. Holder (Portland-Simonds, Minister of Post-Secondary Education, Training and Labour, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. We thank the member opposite for the question. There are mechanisms put in place by the federal government for support for bringing in temporary foreign workers, and we are monitoring this situation. As the Premier just indicated, we have learned from some of the challenges of last year. There are a number of protocols in place between our department, Population Growth, and the Department of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries, and we are confident, as the Premier just said, that we have everything in place that we need to bring these temporary foreign workers in to meet the demands for both the fish processing sector and, later on in the summer, the agriculture sector as well.

[*Translation*]

GOVERNMENT FUNDING

Mr. LePage (Restigouche West, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To help New Brunswick SMEs, the Higgs government has only provided them with working capital loans, payment deferrals on government loans, WorkSafe NB premium payment deferrals, and the Business Property Tax Penalty Relief Program. This is a series of debts, Mr. Speaker.

Yet the other provinces, including those with Conservative governments, have offered much more to their SMEs. In February 2021, almost a year after the beginning of the pandemic, the government finally came up with a non-repayable grant of up to \$5 000 for SME recovery, with very, very strict criteria that excluded a lot of businesses. Even after the program was revised, on March 2, businesses with a single employee—meaning owners like hairdressers—some seasonal businesses, and service businesses like dry cleaners have not had access to this grant.

Can the minister confirm whether or not she will amend the criteria again? If so, when will she do so?

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[Original]

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 to the member opposite for the question. Mr. Speaker, I will preface all my comments with respect to this. As you may recall back in February, the Vice-President of the CFIB, which actually has about 100 000 members in Canada and 5 000 in New Brunswick, made it very clear, saying: We do not want more subsidies. We want more sales. We want pathways to safe reopenings. That is what they are asking for, not handouts from the government.

The other thing that I would say to you is this: \$5 million has been set aside in this budget with respect to small businesses. I would also remind you of this: RBC senior economist Robert Hogue said just last week that New Brunswick's economy is poised to be one of the fastest to recover in the country this year. GDP is forecasted to grow by 6.1% in 2021, enough to fully reverse the economic retraction experienced in 2020. This growth puts New Brunswick behind only Quebec and significantly higher than any...

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

(Interjections.)

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

Mr. LePage (Restigouche West, L) : Mr. Speaker, since the minister wants to give out statistics, I will say that we have recently learned that 99% of financial assistance for COVID-19 in New Brunswick came from the federal government, not the provincial government. Up to December 2020, the federal government provided \$26 per day per capita. And New Brunswick? It provided 26¢—26¢. What have you done?

(Interjections.)

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

[Translation]

Mr. LePage (Restigouche West, L): Therefore, today, I urge the Minister responsible for Economic Development and Small Business and responsible for Opportunities NB—that is a big hat to wear—to finally unveil this famous economic recovery plan to us and tie in the corresponding amounts that are included in the 2021-22 budget. Thank you.

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[Original]

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 to the member opposite for the question. I would ask you to do your homework before you come in here. This was published before COVID-19. This is our economic recovery plan.

The other thing I would do is this. I wish I could ask for more time because I can tell you that the list can go on and on with respect to what this government has done. Right now, I am going to focus on business property tax relief.

(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): Millions of dollars in property tax assessment breaks went to businesses, providing major savings for most of the province's struggling restaurants and airports. An average assessment adjustment of 25% was made for hotels and motels. Airports received an average drop of 30% while restaurants saw 20%, shopping centres, 10%, and others, 5%. There was an \$802 000 tax cut for things such as the Champlain mall. There was a \$414 000 reduction in property tax for Fredericton's Regent Mall. I could go on and on and on with respect to the stuff that this government has done.

[Translation]

TOURISM

Ms. Thériault (Caraquet, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In this entire list, there was obviously not a lot of room for artists and tourism.

In Nova Scotia, with a population of 970 000, \$22 million is specifically allocated to tourism, which generates \$2.4 billion. In New Brunswick, with a population of 775 000—it is fairly comparable—\$10 million is allocated to tourism, heritage, culture, sports, recreation, and so on, which generates \$1.3 billion. We invest half, and we get back half. It seems to me that this concept is quite easy to understand, especially since the current Premier seems to love Excel spreadsheets. Nevertheless, the portion of the budget in New Brunswick that is earmarked for tourism is still meagre. We do not yet consider tourism to be a true economic driver.

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My question for the Minister of Tourism, Heritage and Culture is this: Do you find that investment in your department is sufficient? Thank you.

[*Original*]

Hon. Ms. Scott-Wallace (Sussex-Fundy-St. Martins, Minister of Tourism, Heritage and Culture, Minister responsible for Women's Equality, PC): Mr. Speaker, we are talking Tourism, Heritage and Culture today, and certainly, there are some theatrics in the room this morning. I appreciate that.

I will say that, in our department, we are seeing a 13% increase in our budget this year. We will see more details on that as the main estimates come out. We know that this has been a challenge for tourism operators. I believe the question was about Tourism rather than arts and culture. You mentioned both. I will say that we have more details coming out. Hopefully, they will be satisfying to the people in the room when the main estimates are discussed. Thanks.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Thériault (Caraquet, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. There are always details to come. We look forward to those, because, as you know, we are wondering about concrete action by the minister and her department. We know that there has been a pandemic year and that it has caused enormous challenges. We understand that. We know there was the travel incentive program, which provided a 20% rebate on travel within the province. That was a good initiative. However, to this day, the only concrete tourism initiative has been this 20% rebate.

There is no other strategy. If all goes well, on April 19, the Atlantic Bubble will be opening, as will the bubble with the Témiscouata and Avignon regions. Where is the plan, and where is the strategy? What will your marketing be? Later this summer, if all goes well, the borders with the rest of the country could open up. Who are you targeting? What is your plan? The other provinces have already announced their plans. It seems to me that you made things as comfortable as you needed to for your deputy minister to come up with a strategy or for you to come up with a strategy together. What is it?

[*Original*]

Hon. Ms. Scott-Wallace (Sussex-Fundy-St. Martins, Minister of Tourism, Heritage and Culture, Minister responsible for Women's Equality, PC): Thank you so much. I will tell you, we are incredibly excited about our plan. We have a growth and recovery plan for our tourism operators. I was giving kind of an expiration date of March 31 to produce it, and I have seen it. It is something for which we are truly going to roll out the red carpet in a way that is going to make New Brunswickers incredibly proud and our industry incredibly proud. Hopefully, our members opposite will be very proud of this recovery plan. We are

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also continuing with our Explore NB program this summer. I know that it may seem like small potatoes, but I will tell you, to our tourism industry, it has been an incredibly useful tool. And we will have that program extended. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

HEALTH CARE

Mr. G. Arseneault (Campbellton-Dalhousie, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The delivery unit at the Campbellton Regional Hospital has been temporarily closed for a year—a year, Mr. Speaker. For a year now, mothers from the Campbellton region have had to go to the Chaleur Regional Hospital in Bathurst to give birth. It is a 100 km drive.

A few days ago, a woman from the Restigouche region had to have an emergency delivery. She had to travel 100 km to get to Bathurst. She almost lost the baby. That is a 100 km drive in winter.

We have been complaining for a year that the government is doing nothing. This is absolutely unacceptable, Mr. Speaker. When will the minister restore delivery services at the Campbellton Regional Hospital?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): I appreciate the question from the member opposite, and I do not have an official date for that. As you know, human resources in our medical communities are probably one of the biggest concerns not only here but also all across Canada and, quite frankly, the world. Mr. Speaker, I have spoken very clearly on physician recruitment recently, and I have said that we are going to be bringing it into the Department of Health. We are working with our partners at the RHAs and at the New Brunswick Medical Society as well as at the Nurses Association in order to ensure that we have the staff. We have doctor shortages, nurse shortages, and medical professional shortages all over, and we have to have a safe work environment. We will diligently proceed on working with this to recruit the professionals that we need, and the opening, I am sure, will be dependent on that.

AMBULANCES

M. G. Arseneault (Campbellton-Dalhousie, L) : Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am sure that it would be very unacceptable if mothers from the Saint John area had to travel to Fredericton all the time to have their babies born here.

Last week, a senior in my riding who has been waiting for an operation for about a year and suffering from chronic back pain had to call an ambulance at six o'clock in the morning and



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be taken to the hospital. The ambulance parked outside the hospital and waited for eight hours for that patient to be admitted. After being admitted and given morphine and everything else, she finally reached her room at midnight that evening.

In the meantime, they had to call in an ambulance from two hours away to serve the region. That has been going on and not only in the north. It has been going on down here in the urban centres and right across the province. The Premier promised us. That is what he campaigned on in 2018, that he would fix that ambulance situation throughout the province within two weeks. We have not heard much about what is going on. Can the minister help and tell us what she is doing to resolve...

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

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Thank you very much for the question. Since the release of the Auditor General's report, Ambulance New Brunswick and the Department of Health have certainly been in conversations about looking at response times.

Also, we have other challenges within the system, and that is really part of what the health review is about for bringing forward our five-year health plan. We need to help to understand why we have off-load times that take as long as they do. That problem is all over the province, so we have ERs that are backed up. We have no beds available for patients in ERs to be admitted into wings, and that backs up the process.

Mr. Speaker, we are diligently working with this health review to understand all those components. We did Session 37 last night. We have done many, many sessions with the medical professionals in the community, and we will continue to do so to fix the problem.

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

[*Translation*]

AGRICULTURE

Mr. K. Arseneau (Kent North, G): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. A few months ago, the minister announced the new Local Food and Beverages Strategy. Although the strategy appears at first glance to have potential, everything will depend on its implementation.

Unfortunately, we have had very little news or information about the implementation of this strategy. The primary goal of the Grow NB component of the strategy includes increasing the number of acres of field-grown vegetable and fruit production in New Brunswick. The minister should know as well as I do that increasing production on a farm requires a lot of planning and that spring is just around the corner.

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So, my question is for the Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries. What have you actually done to ensure a substantial increase in vegetable and fruit production around the province?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mrs. Johnson (Carleton-Victoria, Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member opposite for the question. Now, more than ever, New Brunswickers want to know where their food is coming from and how it is processed. Our plan is about encouraging farmers and producers to expand and increase the volume and the variety of local products that are available. In addition, we want to educate residents on the importance of buying local and on the career opportunities that are available.

Our plan incorporates specific goals reflective of Indigenous values and of enabling more food opportunities for First Nations by working together with input from the Indigenous community, industry stakeholders, and government partners. We are confident that this plan is going to strengthen our food system, improve food self-sufficiency, and make sure that people benefit from products that are grown locally.

Mr. K. Arseneau (Kent North, G): The question was what you have done concretely, not what your staff has written for you.

[*Translation*]

My second question is about the Feed NB component of the Local Food and Beverages Strategy. One of the performance measures is the number of projects developed for fridge or freezer storage, meat processing, and controlled environment farming.

My question is again for the minister, and I would appreciate a good answer, please. Does the department play an active role in developing these projects? If so, does the minister have the necessary resources to meet the objectives and performance measures by the end of farming season?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mrs. Johnson (Carleton-Victoria, Minister of Agriculture, Aquaculture and Fisheries, PC): Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the honourable member opposite. I apologize if my eloquence is not as pronounced as yours. I am still a newbie in this, and my vociferous nature is not as defined as your own.

However, I would say that I wish I had brought my legislative briefing notes with me because, yes, I do have succinct briefing notes with me today. I could provide you with those numbers, and I would be pleased to provide those to you.

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In terms of the process for the Local Food and Beverages Strategy this year, it is a one-year program. Yes, we are looking at refrigeration and making sure that those resources are available to our farmers and producers. Yes, we have those numbers, and I can get those to you at any time.

EDUCATION

Mr. Austin (Fredericton-Grand Lake, Leader, PA): Mr. Speaker, with an increase to Education in this year's budget, I feel that it is very important to understand how each dollar will go toward enhancing our children's education in the future. In that regard, there is also the important factor of ensuring that the money is distributed as evenly as possible between both Francophone and Anglophone students. The numbers we have received from the Department of Education show a significant difference between the two. For example, based on overall budgets, we have found that in 2019-20, a Francophone student was funded \$3 693 more than an Anglophone student. Can the Minister of Education please explain this discrepancy?

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. When you are working with communities of different sizes, the materials you provide for those students will often cost different amounts. For example, if you are buying in bulk, something some of the members of this Legislature are familiar with from their past lives in business, the larger the bulk, the lower the cost. Approximately 30% of our students in our system, about 100 000 students, are Francophone. The cost to purchase online resources, textbooks, and so on is significantly more than the Anglophone equivalents. We also receive funds from the federal government to help offset these costs as part of Canada's commitment and New Brunswick's commitment to having a proudly bilingual province.

I will finish this off by saying that the last thing this Legislature needs as we come out of the time of COVID-19 is an effort to divide us based on language. We are going to educate our kids in either of the official languages of choice in this province.

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

Mr. Austin (Fredericton-Grand Lake, Leader, PA): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I find it interesting that the minister gets so defensive about simple questions about stats and data from his department.

Let's be clear: Translation costs, textbooks, and material are the reasons a Francophone student is funded 44% more than an Anglophone student to the extent, based on the numbers provided by the department, that an additional \$108 million was spent in 2019 and \$98 million in 2018. Does the minister want to stick to that answer? Can the minister provide documentation to this House as to exactly why there is an additional \$108 million



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in funding for Francophone students than for Anglophone students in this province year over year?

Hon. Mr. Cardy (Fredericton West-Hanwell, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, what a shameful display.

(Interjections.)

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

Hon. Mr. Cardy (Fredericton West-Hanwell, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): What a shameful display when a member of this Legislature would try to use education funding... It is money that we need for our students and that we need more of to be able to further our goal of trying to make sure that we have a world-class education system. It is money that was delivered in the budget presented by the honourable Finance Minister a couple of weeks back, as we work toward fixing the problems in our education system. Do you know what is not going to fix it? Attempting to divide New Brunswickers.

[*Translation*]

These efforts to divide this province in terms of language are unacceptable in 2021. Mr. Speaker, it is appalling to say that paying a little bit more to ensure a high-quality education for the members of our minority language community is a bad thing.

[*Original*]

We are going to stand up for Francophone education, for Anglophone education, and for the best education for our students, and we will have no apologies from this side of the House.

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

CANNABIS NB

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, the Premier and the government announced last week that they will not be selling Cannabis NB. We could argue that it was a waste of time looking into this. We could argue that it probably wasted a lot of money as the government went through this exercise because there have been delays and delays. Potentially, we lost a CEO along the way.

Can the Premier commit today to making public all documentation and information around the process of not selling Cannabis NB? That includes the information that was circulated around selling or not selling Cannabis NB, the cost associated to selling and now not selling Cannabis NB, and all the pertinent information that was used and accounted for so that

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New Brunswickers can fully understand the magnitude of the effort and cost of getting to a decision that we had told you about.

Hon. Mr. Steeves (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member opposite for the question. He is asking for information that is protected through an NDA. We have an NDA with the main proponent in this whole situation. We had a fairness monitor throughout, which is standard practice. Optimus SBR was the fairness monitor. We will give you the information that we can. Keep in mind that a lot of this information is protected by a nondisclosure agreement. We are legally bound by that. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

