

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions



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HEALTH CARE

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, *Stabilizing Health Care: An Urgent Call to Action* is the plan that the minister and this government unveiled last week. Clearly, the government, in its call for urgent action, did not understand what action is needed. The government's answer is technology. Its answer is virtual care.

Technology can help. It is a tool to help deliver some services, but technology will not fix our health care challenges. We need people. We need health care professionals. We have a shortage of all these health care professionals—nurses, all kinds of other professionals, and doctors—now and for the future. When are this minister and this government going to give us a health care recruitment plan?

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

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Well, Mr. Speaker, I think the members opposite had to pick on something. You know, I understand where they are coming from. Recruitment has been a priority from day one, although, I do have to say... Let me regress to 2014 to 2018, when the member opposite was part of a government that allowed nursing enrollments in this province to go down by nearly 25%. How could the members have let that happen? It is one of the reasons we are in this position today. Recruitment and retention are of great importance in this province, and we are going to be working with the associations, our RHA partners, and the communities that have a great deal of interest in this topic. We are going to address the mistakes that the members opposite made.

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Their strategy is quite clear. As the government works on rolling out technologies, the health care authorities will have to make some cuts and reduce services to New Brunswickers because this government, in a document that talks about principles and some guidelines, does not give us a real, concrete recruitment and retention plan for our health care professionals. We need more people in the system, and this government is not even making that the top priority in this plan. When are you going to unveil this whole recruitment and retention strategy with an important budgetary envelope so that we can attract and recruit the people that we need?

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, it has taken them seven days to muster a response.

(Interjections.)

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

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Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): I do not quite know how to accept it. But it is okay. We are fully transparent, and we are up to the task of recruitment and retention.

I just want to speak to the Leader of the Opposition's comments about the fact that we have offered technology. With all due respect, we are addressing some of the most difficult issues in health care, and we are providing New Brunswickers with measurables and a timeline that not only are doable but also will be done. We are going to provide access to primary health care for all New Brunswickers, even when they are in a transition between providers. We are going to increase access to surgeries. The technology that the member opposite speaks of is for a connected system, something that is long, long overdue in this system.

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): The government may want to have people to connect to these technologies. This government and this minister are totally disconnected from reality. The reality is that we have a shortage of health care providers. We need more nurses. We need more LPNs. We need more doctors, and in the future, we will need even more because 35% are projected to retire based on her report. Why can you not get connected with reality?

She says that the government is acting. No, there are no actions. There are no concrete actions that are meaningful in this report to really retain and attract. I know that you have to invest money. I know that your Premier does not want to invest money in HR to recruit and retain health professionals, but we need it now. It is going to get worse because of your inaction toward that file.

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): I think he knows about inaction, Mr. Speaker. Look, recruitment has been a top priority of our government since the day I walked through those doors. We are working not only with our regional health authorities, Vitalité and Horizon... Let me just add that they are very excited to be working together on the recruitment of medical professionals in our province. We are working with the New Brunswick Medical Society, the Nurses Association, and the Nurses' Union and with other medical professionals. Almost every single classification of medical professional is predicting and working with a shortage. It goes without saying that this is an urgent issue, and we have been working and will continue to work on it with all our partners. We will show results, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Let's remind ourselves that this same minister promised all New Brunswickers who did not have access to a health professional that they would have access within six months. She failed. She totally failed. She had an opportunity in this plan to make it a top priority and the number one action item, and she failed again. She failed again.

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Now, the recruitment of these individuals and professionals is going to be transferred over to the regions and communities. Yes, we need their input—we do—but we need to have a serious commitment from this government, with funding made available for incentives to retain and recruit health care professionals. Other jurisdictions are much more competitive than we are. Nova Scotia is way more competitive than we are on that file. Why did you miss the boat? Why could you not have it as your number one action item?

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

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Because, Mr. Speaker, then we would not give them anything to aspire to. Let me just say that this plan addresses some of the most urgent needs of New Brunswickers.

(Interjections.)

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

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): This plan was written for New Brunswickers. This plan tells them that they are going to have access to primary care. This plan tells them that surgical wait lists are going to go down. This plan tells them that our mental health and addictions action plan that was set for over five years has been accelerated to three years. This plan tells them that seniors and that helping them to age at home are priorities.

Mr. Speaker, we speak about a connected system. That is not just talking about virtual appointments, as the Leader of the Opposition alluded to. This is about patients being able to find the services they need when they need them. It does not matter whether it is Vitalité or Horizon. These systems are going to be seamless. Vitalité, Horizon, EM/ANB...

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

[*Translation*]

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, we are going to move on to local governance. A comprehensive document—admittedly—was announced and tabled last week by the government and the minister. If we examine this document, we realize as we read it—maybe not right away, but quite quickly—that this proposal goes beyond new governance structures—beyond them. I would even say that this reform could take us back to the way things were before Equal Opportunity.

However, before getting into that, I would like to note the following: As he travelled many kilometres, the minister said he met with a significant number of people, and he convinced

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people that he would not impose reform. What made him change his mind and decide to impose this reform?

Hon. Mr. Allain (Moncton East, Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. The Leader of the Opposition is asking an excellent question. Here is the answer: We wanted to modernize the local governance system, and our plan will certainly deal with New Brunswickers' needs. We are really going to ensure that a service and infrastructure crisis is avoided, and that is why we have developed a plan for all New Brunswickers.

As for the restructuring issue, associations told us it had to be done and it had to be considerable. During our meetings, people informed us about what they wanted done, so many of the things these people said to us are in the white paper. We received over 200 briefs and letters from municipalities and local service districts indicating to us what we should do. That is how we came up with this restructuring.

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, the minister can talk the talk, but he cannot walk the walk. The minister made a public commitment that he would not impose the proposed changes, but now he is imposing them. He just explained that that is what the people want, so why did you state that you would not impose this reform?

However, the minister—or maybe it was the Premier who made the decision, since that is his brand of leadership—wants to impose the changes. I think it is important that the minister clarify why he changed his mind, clearly and precisely. Why does he want to impose this restructuring of local governance?

Hon. Mr. Allain (Moncton East, Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform, PC): Mr. Speaker, I have no intention of talking about walking the walk today. So, honourable Leader of the Opposition, it is important to listen to the people. Associations, the Union of Municipalities of New Brunswick, the Association francophone des municipalités du Nouveau-Brunswick, the Cities of New Brunswick Association, and the Association of Local Service Districts of New Brunswick all said they wanted change.

I have pretty consistently said that that we will not force anyone to restructure, but the fact remains: We need to make reductions, and that means restructuring. We will go from 340 to 90 entities in New Brunswick. New Brunswickers want to be more efficient; they want more asset management. The member for Fredericton-Grand Lake brought up several issues, and I agree with him: There is still a lot to discuss...

[Original]

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

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Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, as I mentioned early on, this reform goes beyond a new structure of governance for our municipal world, and I think that there is a risk. The government is certainly opening the door to going back to before Equal Opportunity.

One of the things that we noticed in this... And people are paying attention to this new map. That is obviously the most important thing right now, but beyond this new map, when the reform is adopted by this government, what will be some of the future initiatives proposed by this government? Will it download a whole bunch of programs that the province is now responsible for, such as mental health, economic development, poverty reduction, and affordable housing? It has been pretty clear historically that the Premier wants to get rid of some provincial responsibilities—to have nicer financial statements—and we question what they are. So we need to understand what is beyond this new structure.

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

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. Allain (Moncton East, Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. As the opening paragraphs of the white paper clearly indicate, our local governance reform is based on the Equal Opportunity program. Have no fear: Education, health, social development, and justice, which were essential parts of the Equal Opportunity program, are not going to change. Nobody is questioning that, and the Progressive Conservative Party is proud to have treated communities and regions equitably.

To provide service in the long term, we need to work together. As you know, there are problems in social development, with homeless people, for instance. This is not just a problem in Moncton or the southeastern region. It is also a problem in Riverview and Dieppe. We see it in Saint John, for example, in Quispamsis, and in Rothesay. Communities in the Saint John area have their own responsibilities with regard to social issues.

[*Original*]

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

[*Translation*]

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, when I listen to the minister, I just get more worried. He says this is also a problem in Riverview, Moncton, and other communities. This is the responsibility of the provincial government. The provincial government has a responsibility to act. However, this government has not acted. Now it is...

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Beyond restructuring local governance, the provincial government wants to open the door wide. It wants to download provincial social responsibilities. The aim of the Equal Opportunity program was to provide equal opportunity to everyone, wherever they lived. We know that, in New Brunswick, the ability to pay varies from region to region.

So, the province wants to download provincial responsibilities to the regions. The Premier wants to please himself, because his financial statements will look better. This reform goes beyond restructuring. That is the concern. The minister will have to reassure a lot of people about his reform.

[Original]

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

[Translation]

Hon. Mr. Allain (Moncton East, Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform, PC): Mr. Speaker, the only concern is coming from the other side of the House.

With regard to regionalization, work has to be done in the regions. We have said that there are 12 regions in New Brunswick. Cooperation is essential. It is really important to cooperate on asset management. Duplication has to be reduced. Efficiency has to increase. This is because, right away, when it comes to... Let's take tourism as an example. Some municipalities have taken over provincial responsibility for tourism. They are doing the work themselves. We do not want to duplicate their work. We want to make sure there is a good regional strategy.

That is the important thing; people have to communicate with each other to move forward and to maintain our services and infrastructure. It is so important to have good management in New Brunswick. Efficiency is important, too. The plan called *Working together for vibrant and sustainable communities: a green paper* is not for the people here; it is for the next generation.

[Original]

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

[Translation]

HEALTH CARE

Mr. D'Amours (Edmundston-Madawaska Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Health claims to have held consultations with many New Brunswickers before presenting the long-awaited health reform.

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Among other things, the documents provide for the addition of the profession of emergency paramedical technician. We have learned that the union that represents paramedics in the province was not consulted about this. Even though we understand that this government apparently has little respect for workers, it would seem appropriate to have discussions on the upcoming changes with the employees involved. Can the minister tell us why this group was not consulted and which groups, if any, were consulted and on what subjects?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Well, Mr. Speaker, I am not sure what to make of that comment: The Minister of Health claims she spoke to a number of stakeholders. Let me clarify for the record that we did 50 engagement sessions throughout this province, not just with citizens but with local medical communities, and I felt they were really important. We needed to have that perspective. Every stakeholder was consulted. We had good conversations with the Paramedic Association of New Brunswick. And, no, maybe the union at that time was not specifically asked about this, but quite frankly, why would we talk to the union when we did not have a position to talk to it about? This is evolving, and we will certainly keep the Paramedic Association and the paramedics' union apprised of what is happening. We actually need them to work with us to go forward.

Mr. Speaker, I am not sure what the member opposite was trying to get at. I do not claim to have done those engagement sessions—I was at every one of them.

[*Translation*]

Mr. D'Amours (Edmundston-Madawaska Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, this is another plan like the last one: without meaningful consultation. What was stated did not place.

[*Original*]

Mr. Speaker, the minister recently made a statement about the task force that was appointed to implement her health plan, a statement that, frankly, took me quite by surprise. She indicated that the task force would have the authority of the Minister of Health. While the two people appointed may well be very capable in their respective fields, they are not ministers of the Crown whose authority is stipulated in legislation. The delegation of such authority does not just happen because one says that it does. Can the minister explain and please provide details on how her authority is to be exercised by the task force? What are its mandate and terms of reference, and will these be made public?

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, it was 50 engagement sessions, every stakeholder, and town halls and over 2 200 individuals that we consulted for this engagement process. It was extensive, and we did it for a reason—we needed everyone's input. And we are going to continue to have everyone's input as we go forward together.

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With regard to the task force, let me just say that two of, I believe, the highest qualified individuals have been appointed to this task force. We learned a lot from COVID-19. We learned that if we put considerable focus on areas that need to be repaired, we can do it and we can make gains. Look at the surgical program with hips and knees at St. Joseph's Hospital in Saint John. We put together a surgical advisory committee, and at the top of COVID-19—at the height of COVID-19, when other provinces could not even get surgeries done—we reduced our long waiters by 40%.

CLIMATE CHANGE

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Mr. Speaker, the climate crisis is upon us, and we have had plenty of warnings in New Brunswick, beginning with the great deluge in December 2010 that flooded much of southern New Brunswick. In St. Stephen, there was 166 mm of rain, and in Gagetown, 245 mm of rain. In 2017, we had the devastating ice storm on the Acadian Peninsula. In 2018, there was the massive flooding of thousands of properties in the Saint John River basin. We have all witnessed the trifecta of climate calamities in British Columbia this year. But climate action is so low on the list of the Premier's priorities that you would be hard-pressed to find a New Brunswicker who could even name the minister responsible for climate change. Why is the Premier ignoring the clear and present danger posed to New Brunswickers by an unstable climate?

Hon. Mr. Crossman (Hampton, Minister of Environment and Climate Change, Minister responsible for the Regional Development Corporation, PC): Can you imagine for just a minute that the leader does not understand what is going on in this province—for a minute? This department and this government are on top of things like never before. You are going to see in the next few days a flood mapping update that goes back to the pretty historic days of flooding that you mentioned. I drove yesterday and today to the flooding that is in the Saint John to Hampton area.

Things are being looked into. There is \$36-million worth of climate change money to look at the concerns, and there are studies on the go. We have the erosion of the coastline. We have the river systems and brooks and streams, and there is more money going into those. I spoke last Friday to the new minister Steven Guilbeault. We are on the same page. We talked about erosion and flooding, and we talked about working together for all provinces in Canada. Thank you.

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Well, Mr. Speaker, lots more studies—that is the problem—and no action.

(Interjections.)

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



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Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): We have 5 500 km of coastline in this province, and that includes six island communities. With a coastline like that and a rising sea level and damaging storm surges, you would think that the government would be regulating development and hardening infrastructure in the coastal zone. It was 20 years ago that the Department of the Environment released its Coastal Areas Protection Policy—20 years ago—but no legislation has ever been tabled in this House to implement it, just more studies. So unsustainable development continues, such as the proposal for a five-storey apartment building with—get this—underground parking within 30 m of the shoreline of Shediac Bay. Will the Minister of Climate Change introduce legislation to protect our coastal zone and those who live there?

Hon. Mr. Crossman (Hampton, Minister of Environment and Climate Change, Minister responsible for the Regional Development Corporation, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Coastlines and the safety of everybody are of the utmost importance. Regarding the Cap Bimet apartment complex, there is nothing in the works right now that has been identified. There are meetings with the proponent and with the community to look at what you are talking about. I know the area very well. We lived there for a few years ourselves. It is very real and very concerning. After the flooding that happened down that way in 2010, it needs to be done right. The flood mapping that is coming out, whether it is coastline or inland, will help to plan ahead for mitigation or adaptation. So if you are going to purchase or sell land, you want to make sure that it is safe and that it is the right thing to do. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Mr. Austin (Fredericton-Grand Lake, Leader, PA): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Over the last few days, I have had the opportunity to meet with several residents of the Fredericton-Grand Lake area, including Minto, Chipman, and several LSDs. In relation to municipal reform, I am hearing on both sides of the equation that some of it is good but that people have some serious concerns about some of it. The mayors of both Minto and Chipman have come out and said that they have very serious concerns about the plan. I was pleased to see that the minister is welcoming a meeting with those two mayors.

But I think that what is important—and this is what I have a question for the minister on—is in relation to the process with which the white paper has been released. I am hopeful that the minister will allow for some questions and amendments to that white paper. My question is just that. Will the minister give time for people to look at the white paper and to understand what it means before he tables the legislation to bring this forward?

[*Translation*]

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



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[Original]

Mr. Speaker, the member across the way has some good questions. There is uncertainty. There is sometimes a fear of the unknown when there is change. People are not accustomed to change. And there is some misinformation. That is why I agreed, definitely, to meet with the mayors of Minto and Chipman this week to discuss municipal reform.

As we know, the process is that I will be tabling some legislation next week. I hope to collaborate with the members on the other side. I have had great discussions with the member for Shediac—Beaubassin—Cap-Pelé, the member for Kent North, and you, sir. That is what we are here to do. It is to make sure that we have a reform process and legislation that will be good for the future, for years to come. It is not a 5-year plan. This is a 20-year or 30-year plan, so let's make it right. Let's work together, and let's make sure that we make the right decisions. We have to do that because we know that sometimes it is not one hundred percent right.

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

Mr. Austin (Fredericton-Grand Lake, Leader, PA): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I want to thank the minister for that because I think that it is important that we do not rush this. I understand that the minister has taken a lot of time over the last year to consult about what the white paper would look like and its final results. But now that we have the white paper, there is a lot of information and complexity about what it means for people in the regional boundaries, municipalities, LSDs, and rural areas. Again, I think that it is vitally important, especially when you look at communities such as Minto and Chipman. They are almost 30 km apart, and they have their own distinct identities. There are even a lot of questions about what this new municipality is going to be named.

I just want to encourage the minister to be open to changes, if necessary, to what this looks like and what it means for local identities. I would like to have the minister help us understand exactly what it means in terms of naming the local identities. What will the process be with respect to what the name will look like? Will each community continue to have its local identity?

Hon. Mr. Allain (Moncton East, Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform, PC): To the member across the way, again, that is a great question. People do not want to lose their identity, and the white paper indicates emphatically that people will still have their address and still get the same mail. It is just the governance structure that we are changing. Community identity is so important. We live in an experience economy, as we know. People in restaurants in Toronto want to know where their lobster was fished and at what time. They want to know where the microbrewery is. Sometimes the best microbreweries are here in Fredericton. Maybe there are some in Moncton, in my riding, too.



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Mr. Speaker, we will consult. This is a livable plan. There definitely still have to be discussions held. A lot of people are asking for mapping. We hope to have that mapping. The transition year will be 2022. As we all know, by the first of July, we will have the naming. The transition leaders and the community members will decide those things.

[*Translation*]

Mr. K. Chiasson (Tracadie-Sheila, L): Mr. Speaker, now that we have had a few days to go through the white paper with a fine-toothed comb, some mayors and community leaders have significant concerns about some of the twinning imposed by the Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform.

We have only to think of Baie-Sainte-Anne, Saint-André, Coldstream, and Pokemouche, where serious questions are being asked about why these communities are in this situation. Furthermore, the question of forced consolidation was never discussed during the initial consultations. Is the minister responsible for municipal reform prepared to undertake a round of consultations to follow up on the white paper and explain to communities why he has forced them to amalgamate? He could also say what criteria, among the ones listed in the white paper, were used to set the boundaries of the new entities. Thank you.

Hon. Mr. Allain (Moncton East, Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. We have been talking about local governance reform for over 50 years. It is time to move forward. So, we have developed a process. We are going to table bills next week. We are going to discuss them here. However, the next generation can wait no longer.

So, yes, there are certainly concerns. There is misinformation, too. The boundaries have not all been set yet. We are going to talk about them after the bills have been tabled. I am sure that we will be able to talk about this in more detail in the Standing Committee on Economic Policy. However, right now, it is time to move forward. It is very important to get this done for the next generation. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

[*Original*]

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): The time for question period has expired.