

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions



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COLLECTIVE BARGAINING

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Stabilizing health care was the theme of a government's document that was tabled a couple of weeks ago. Last Friday, I asked the government whether there had been any negotiating sessions with our nurses and LPNs. If there is one thing that needs to be critically addressed, it is the shortage of nurses and LPNs in our system. The document about stabilizing health care does not address that.

I am going to ask the Premier a question. You said on the news last Friday that you were hoping to get this collective agreement resolved by Christmas. Have you scheduled a negotiating session with the Nurses' Union for this week, to resolve this before Christmas?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, thank you for the question. Yes, we want to get back with the Nurses' Union to talk about the issues. But primarily, the issues are related to the workplace, what the conditions are in that regard and how we can improve on that. We have an offer on the table—a revised offer—that the union has had for a few weeks now. I guess we are waiting for a response to that offer. We are willing to go back and talk about this at any point in time.

But I think that part of it, as I have said here in the House many times, is that we need to find a new way to develop and work through to having a sustainable health care plan, because innovation is going to take more than just doing the same thing and hoping for the best. We have seen the challenges recently about the demographics and looking forward in New Brunswick and the cost of health care and what that is going to mean. But that is not new. That is something that, certainly, Richard Saillant talked about years ago. It is interesting that it is not necessarily his focus now, but it used to be. That demographic is really changing. We need a health care system that is new and different.

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

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): You know, Mr. Speaker, the Premier should stop talking about doing things differently and doing new things. Right now, do you know what the issues are? Our nurses and our LPNs are on stress leave. They are overworked. They cannot handle the level of hours that is being requested of them. They want to have a normal quality of life with their families. The Premier talks about new ways of doing things. They need to have a collective agreement. They need a contract. To retain them, they need to have a collective agreement whereby their wages will be competitive and fair and their working conditions will minimize the level of stress they have to endure. They care about their patients. But they also need a collective agreement. There was a vote against on October 6—about two months ago. Premier, tell us when you are going to resolve this collective agreement.

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Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the issue around wage competitiveness and ensuring that we are fair and reasonable in relation to our Atlantic counterparts, and that is exactly what was proposed. That is exactly what was proposed for when we get to the table with the LPNs as well. We know that is important. It is necessary, and it is the right thing to do. We also know that we must look at ways that we can complement our entire hospital system so that we can work together, we can jointly share capabilities, and we can provide the time off and the necessary schedules that work. Some nurses would say to me: No, we were not scheduled for 24 hours. There just was not anyone coming in after 12 hours to help us, so we had to work for 24.

It does not matter—24 hours is just not acceptable. We have said this: Help us put in a system that actually works. But it should work for both Vitalité and Horizon and work for both systems so that they complement each other in the delivery of service. That is the change that is going to be required in an innovative health care program and in the sustainable path forward that the minister is working on now. Thank you.

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

[*Translation*]

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, the Premier should start reading his briefing notes or actually having discussions with the New Brunswick Nurses' Union. It has been two months since these professionals voted against the last offer, and there have been no meetings for negotiations with the group since that time. This week, union members are voting on a potential strike mandate. Imagine what a mess another such strike mandate from nurses would cause, since this is what the Premier seems to want.

The system is already in crisis. We already have a shortage of nurses. A number of people in this group are already on leave because of work-related illness. The Premier should tell us here today if he really wants to resolve the collective agreement situation. When will the next negotiations take place with the union?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, we finalized, essentially, 10 out of 11—we are working on the 11th—in relation to CUPE. The same refrain continues from the Leader of the Opposition. It is about innovation. It is about putting forward a path that is fair and reasonable for nurses and recognizing what they have been doing, previously and today, to help us through this pandemic. The idea that we have put in a fair and reasonable one is real. We have put in a fair and reasonable offer. I do not know whether it is public or shared, but it does recognize

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competitiveness throughout the Atlantic region. That same thing will be part of the LPN program as well. There is no debate on what we are doing in that regard.

It then comes down to asking this: How do we get better scheduling? How do we get better utilization of our personnel resources and physical resources? How do we ensure that we can actually bring back to our health care system a quality of life, which has not existed for many, many years? Needing more nurses is a big part of it. There is no question about it. But finding better ways is a huge part of it as well.

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

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, he seems to have all the solutions here this afternoon. Sit at the table, put them on the table, and get a collective agreement.

Right now, because we do not have enough nurses... We do not have enough nurses. What is it, a shortage of almost 1 000 nurses in the system today? The ER at the Sackville Hospital is closed overnight, indefinitely. The off-loading of patients brought to the ER by ambulance is three times higher this year compared to last year. Do you know why all of this is happening? We have a shortage of nurses.

To be able to recruit some or all of them and to retain them, we need to have a decent, fair collective agreement. They do not have even that right now. It has been three years, and he still does not have a meeting scheduled to negotiate with them. When are you going to negotiate with them face-to-face?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, the one-trick pony continues. Just hire more, and it will get better.

Well, every province is in that same bucket—every single province. If you look at our province and ask what our per capita needs are and how many people we have, whether they are doctors, nurses, or other health professionals, you will see that our numbers are not that bad. How do we find a better use of the facilities that we have and the people that we are working with? How do we listen to nurses to deliver a better service?

One thing we know for sure is that if we just try to fill vacancies and do the same thing that we have always done, our health care system will not meet the demands of the aging demographic that we are being warned about and are seeing every day. We know that for sure. If we do not find ways to improve the service that we deliver, ways to do it in a better manner, and ways to sustain it and get better at it, we will not fix health care. I am confident that the Minister of Health is dealing with just that with health authorities all over this province in order to deliver better results. Thank you.

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

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Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, the Premier just said that it is not about hiring more nurses. It is not about hiring. Other jurisdictions have complete, comprehensive retention and recruitment plans, plus they have incentives to keep nurses in the system and to bring in new ones. This Premier talks about all kinds of things that do not even relate to the fact that we have a shortage of nurses in our province. They are on stress leave. They want to go to work. They are overworked. They need help. But the Premier leaves it to the RHAs. Do the dirty work. At the end of the day, a collective agreement is going to help to retain these individuals, these nurses and LPNs, and to recruit new ones. Why does he not get that? They have been three years without a collective agreement, and they have refused two of his proposals. When is the next negotiating session with them?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate that any time there is talk about innovation or about doing things differently, the Leader of the Opposition gets confused. I understand that, because doing something different to get better is just not in the vocabulary. It is just the same old same old.

Look across the country and see what they are trying to do across the country. They are not able to fill the vacancies they need to fill. And we are in the situation of asking: How do we find ways to compete with Quebec and Ontario? How do we find ways to deliver services?

Our discussions with the federal government have been based on having standards across the country so that we are not left trying to compete with richer provinces. And how do we have a health care transfer that reflects the reality that we have with our demographics? There is a big picture here. It is not singular.

With respect to the issue around needing more nurses, if you go back to that in terms of the universities and the money that was spent by the previous government to bring in more seats, it did not bring in any. No one was watching that. There is the difference, Mr. Speaker.

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

CORONAVIRUS

Mr. D'Amours (Edmundston-Madawaska Centre, L): Mr. Speaker, I think that we are all becoming quite alarmed with the situation in the hospitals in Saint John and Moncton, where we are seeing outbreaks of COVID-19. There are 64 hospitalizations and 17 cases in intensive care. These are numbers that we did not expect to see. We have seen outbreaks in numerous hospitals over the course of the pandemic, but with more people vaccinated than ever before and a new variant to worry about, things are even more concerning.

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We know that the health authorities are having great difficulty in finding the human resources they need to run the system on a good day. Can the minister elaborate on what she has done to ensure that federal funding would be made available for frontline health care workers in the hospital system? Also, are the COVID-19 units currently sufficiently staffed?

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): I appreciate the question, Mr. Speaker. In actuality, I have two reports here in which both health authorities outline their current day-to-day situation and how they are managing it. Do you know what this comes down to? It is management. We in this province have unfortunately had a time when we had over 30 in ICUs across this province, and Vitalité and Horizon and Extra-Mural/Ambulance New Brunswick worked in sync to ensure that it was managed. We do not want to ever get back to that. That is really the important element here. We need all New Brunswickers to be part of the solution.

But the RHAs are managing the system. It is not easy, and they are certainly making sure that they are able to have those vacant positions. I will say that our hospital capacity is quite stretched right now, Mr. Speaker.

[Translation]

Mr. D'Amours (Edmundston-Madawaska Centre, L): Evidently, Mr. Speaker, I am not getting any answers to my questions. We do not know if the minister will take the money from the federal government to assist our front-line workers. We do not know, either, whether there will be enough staff to ensure that people receive adequate treatment at COVID-19 testing centres.

With the arrival of a new COVID-19 variant in Canada, we are certainly very concerned with knowing whether everything will be done to ensure that the people of this province are safe. I understand that sequencing is being done for everyone who tested positive for COVID-19 after travelling outside the province. I believe all the surveillance tests are also very important tools to ensure this variant is defeated. Can the minister tell us how many cases are currently being tested for the Omicron variant and whether the sequencing is being done here in New Brunswick laboratories or is being sent for testing outside the province?

[Original]

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Last week, our labs began sequencing for the new variant that has now become noticeably available in Canada. They have been doing that since last week. Every single test is looked at for the Omicron variant, and they will continue to do that monitoring because it is important. Factual information on a day-to-day basis is what gets us through this COVID-19 reality.

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I appreciate the member opposite asking the question, and I hope that he gets some comfort from knowing that not only have our labs set the bar very high for all of Canada since the beginning of COVID-19 but also they are continuing to do so.

[*Translation*]

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Mr. K. Chiasson (Tracadie-Sheila, L): Mr. Speaker, many LSDs in the province are currently getting grants to help them pay for policing services. With a highway system that is spread out over a large area, it is clear that the delivery of this essential service costs taxpayers in rural regions more than it does those in cities.

These government grants cover up to 25% of annual costs. When the new entities are created, involving the amalgamation of a number of LSDs and municipalities, it is expected that the cost of policing will be borne entirely by these new clusters.

Keeping in mind that the cost of policing will increase significantly this year, and in order to avoid tax increases at the local level, I would like to know whether this grant covering 25% of the cost will be transferred to the new municipalities and whether the government plans to provide additional financial assistance to help with the delivery of this important service. Thank you.

[*Original*]

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

[*Translation*]

Good afternoon, Mr. Speaker. I thank the member opposite for his question. It is certainly a question I will take under advisement. I do not have an answer to give you right away, but, when we restructure the LSDs and municipalities, we are certainly going to ensure that the services provided are taxable. People who do not receive the services will not be taxed. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

[*Original*]

Mr. K. Chiasson (Tracadie-Sheila, L): Mr. Speaker, let's try this one. The grant funding that municipalities receive every year consists of one part core funding and one part equalization. The white paper does specify that a new grant formula will be created to ensure that communities that need support will receive adequate funding. Now, section 4.2 of the white paper talks specifically about the equalization part, but there is no mention of the core funding component. With government getting ready to off-load a list of new

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responsibilities onto municipalities, there is great concern that sufficient funding will not be provided to help with service delivery. So I will ask the minister whether municipalities will lose their core funding and how much money government is putting aside for this new equalization grant fund.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Mr. Allain (Moncton East, Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. There is no off-loading of responsibility mentioned in the white paper. The white paper does indicate that the services currently provided by municipalities and LSDs will still be provided through the same facilitators, meaning municipalities and the province.

In fact, equalization payments will be changed. They have not changed in over 10 years. They must reflect today's reality. It is totally normal, Mr. Speaker, to take the time to look at old facets and old politics and bring them into the 21st century. The primary objective of the plan developed in the white paper is to have a positive impact on people in rural areas and municipalities. So transfer payments will certainly stick to what they have been designed to achieve since the introduction of the Equal Opportunity program: assist municipalities and entities that need help. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. LePage (Restigouche West, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The minister's white paper broadens the mandate of regional service commissions beyond the common services listed in subsection 4(2) of the *Regional Service Delivery Act*: solid waste disposal, planning, and building inspection.

The minister wants to add the following services—at least, these are the ones we have read about—: economic development, tourism promotion, community development, public transit, community transportation, cost-sharing for recreational infrastructure, more social orientation, and the creation of a public safety commission.

What other responsibilities does this government want to download to municipalities? What support will be provided to rural communities and districts by the provincial government? Also, when will it be done? Mr. Speaker, who will pay to establish and manage these services during and after the transition?

Hon. Mr. Allain (Moncton East, Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. In fact, the regional service commissions will have a new vision for the 12 New Brunswick regions. Municipalities certainly already have some of the responsibilities mentioned. These are responsibilities that are part of Equal Opportunity. They are social programs provided by the provincial government. Each municipality—if I take Expansion Dieppe or the centre responsible for economic development in Moncton as an example—is already doing this. So we want to establish

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better partnerships at the regional level, especially where regional service commissions are concerned, continuing an initiative started in 2013.

It is a good exercise. All community leaders are part of it. There will certainly be discussions about many things and many files. These include the issue of public transit in the Acadian Peninsula, which is really important. They may be about best practises. This is why we are going to work in the regions and see what we can do in partnership with municipalities and the province.

[Original]

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

[Translation]

Mr. LePage (Restigouche West, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On page 18 of the white paper, the minister is delegating the responsibility for hiring an individual to fill the new leadership role in each region to transition facilitators he has appointed.

Under paragraph 8c) of the *Regional Service Delivery Act*, the commission can engage and pay personnel. Under subsection 13(1) of the same Act, a board shall appoint an Executive Director of the commission and establish the terms and conditions of their appointment. Under subsection 16(3) of the same Act, a commission shall not delegate the power or duty to appoint or suspend the Executive Director or to terminate their employment.

The minister wants to burden the RSCs with more responsibilities, but he wants to take away their right and privilege to hire their own Executive Directors. Mr. Speaker, why does the minister want to appoint an Executive Director for each RSC?

Hon. Mr. Allain (Moncton East, Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform, PC): Mr. Speaker, I believe the member for Restigouche West has misread the white paper. It is about cooperation. The word “cooperate” means to work together. At no point during the transition period will decisions be made by the minister alone. As you know, a transition will begin in January and continue throughout the year. A transition means teamwork and cooperation.

Mr. Speaker, we want to strengthen our regional service commissions to ensure that, after 10 years, we can work on enhancing them. We want to make sure they have the tools to work on the areas they are responsible for now, certainly, but also on future responsibilities in tourism, economic development, and so on. We need people with an encyclopedic knowledge of the environment. Mr. Speaker, I have confidence in the regions. The transition team will certainly do a good job. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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[Original]

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

WILDLIFE

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Mr. Speaker, as soon as the ground freezes up, the clear-cutting of Crown lands will take off. The Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development has the power to save the hundreds of species that are at high risk of being driven to extinction by the resulting destruction of their habitat.

A year ago, conservation organizations pointed out that the minister was failing to fulfill his duties under the *Species at Risk Act*. Six months ago, he had still not taken on these legal responsibilities, so the organizations hired a lawyer to inform him that if he did not take up his legal responsibilities by today, they were prepared to commence proceedings at the Court of Queen's Bench. Has the Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development now assumed his legal obligations under the law that this Legislature adopted in order to bring hundreds of wild species back from the brink, or is he headed to court?

Hon. Mr. Holland (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, when it comes to the discussion of species at risk in the province, I think we can look at the history, going back to 2012, of when the subject matter first came up and at the fact that there had been nothing done up until now—up until now. We have identified significant numbers—dozens—of species at risk, and we have gone to work. I am very proud of the work that the department has done. We have mitigation strategies for a number of those species that were identified as being at risk.

The member opposite started out by talking about clear-cutting. He is trying to paint a picture that this is not a government that is responsible when it comes to creating biodiverse and ecological sustainability in our forest footprint. The absolute opposite is true. Mr. Speaker, I look forward to the member opposite seeing the work that we have done to mitigate issues related to species at risk and proudly watching, with me, and acknowledging the work that we are doing, in a historic fashion, to expand conservation and habitat area in New Brunswick.

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

NB POWER

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): That sounds as though he might be going to court.

Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development has presented Bill 77, which will enable NB Power to incorporate subsidiaries under the New Brunswick



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Business Corporations Act. NB Power will be able to transfer staff, land, equipment, and assets to these subsidiaries. Fiscally, although this will be backed by taxpayers, because these subsidiaries are incorporated as private companies, they will be expected to operate free from interference by the parent company, which is a Crown corporation. This means that there is no way of ensuring that the private subsidiaries are accountable to New Brunswickers. The minister was able to put a stop to NB Power management's investments in Joi Scientific \$13 million later because he is the minister responsible for that Crown corporation. With this bill, he is opening the door to fiascoes on the scale of Atcon or Bricklin.

Why did the minister vote against my motion to send Bill 77 to the law amendments committee for a closer public review?

Hon. Mr. Holland (Albert, Minister of Natural Resources and Energy Development, PC): Mr. Speaker, it is a pleasure to stand and talk. We have been talking about this subject matter in the economic policy committee for about four-plus hours. What the member opposite did not tell you is that we are putting steps in place for the publicly owned utility, NB Power, to meet its financial goals and to start paying down its debt. That is something that the member opposite and governments of the past have not been able to accomplish. What we have done is that we have looked and have found that the utility has a number of ideas and has identified a number of barriers. We have done the work to systemically and thoughtfully frame legislation that is going to address those barriers.

Make no mistake, NB Power is a publicly owned utility. The government of New Brunswick is the primary shareholder, and we will continue to work hand in glove with the utility so that it can start meeting its objectives, start meeting its goals, and actually show that the utility, if given the opportunity, can meet its goals and make New Brunswick proud. Thank you.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Mr. Austin (Fredericton-Grand Lake, Leader, PA): Mr. Speaker, over the past week, I have had the opportunity to speak with many residents within my riding of Fredericton-Grand Lake concerning the upcoming changes in the municipal reform plan. While many in the area agree with the need for reform to ensure long-term sustainable communities, there is an overwhelming consensus of uneasiness when it comes to taxation and representation.

One of the problems is in regard to representation within the incorporated areas. For example, the village of Minto has four councillors and one mayor, and the village of Chipman has four councillors and one mayor. This plan has been touted as an opportunity for an increase in representation, which is true for rural areas, but the question remains for the incorporated areas. Can the minister tell us what the makeup of the current incorporated areas, especially of Minto and Chipman, will be in regard to representation if these changes proceed as planned?



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[*Translation*]

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

[*Original*]

When you bring out a white paper of such scale, it is complex. There is a lot of uncertainty and fear out there. And there is some misinformation. So we, as a department, have to do better at bringing out information for New Brunswickers. Again, we are working with the people of Minto and Chipman to make sure that they understand the process. We had a consultation with them last week, and we hope to be in contact with them in the next couple of days. We have explained the viability.

Again, as the member opposite indicated, there are challenges or questions about taxation. That is totally normal. However, I think that we addressed it in sections 4.1 and 4.2 in Phase 1 of the white paper. We hope to move forward, but we will have to do a better job of bringing out that information. We hope, within the next six months or a year or so, during the transition period, to make sure that the people have the right information. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

COLLECTIVE BARGAINING

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I think that we have to refresh our minds about the fact that this Premier and this government have created so many different messes in handling the fourth wave of this pandemic. It has certainly been a mess, and it has been very difficult for New Brunswickers.

The labour disputes have been a terrible mess. It seems that based on the answers—or the nonanswers—that we are getting from government today, from the Premier, another mess is just on the horizon, and it will apply to Horizon and Vitalité. The Premier needs to tell us when he is going to sit down with the Nurses' Union. The nurses and LPNs are entitled to have a collective agreement. Their contract has been expired for three years. They need a contract to be able to retain nurses and to have better working conditions. We do not want to see another strike and a mess in our health care system. Please, Premier, give us a date and a specific timeline.

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate how, you know, everything seems to be simple in the eyes of the Leader of the Opposition, but it is not simple. There are some significant issues that we are facing in our province. I am pleased to see the cooperation with Vitalité and Horizon as we work through the fourth wave. They have been managing it very well throughout the province.

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I would like to think, too, that people are following Public Health rules. Although lockdowns are not in our future, as things like that are not really palatable anymore, we have to prepare for this next wave. Hopefully, it will not materialize. Hopefully, the vaccines will be there. We need the third doses to reduce the impact on our hospitals, Mr. Speaker.

As we work through the negotiations, it is not just about wages, as I have said. It is about doing things differently, which is part of the discussion. That involves every negotiation. I know that is not something that the Leader of the Opposition is used to because he is used to a very one-track solution. We have complications in our province, and we have challenges facing our province. But we have solutions to deal with them, and we are not afraid to deal with them, Mr. Speaker.

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