

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions



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[*Translation*]

CORONAVIRUS

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We want to use the Legislative Assembly to share government decisions more. Yesterday, the Premier and the Minister of Health made an announcement that is indeed important but which nobody wanted. However, I think everyone was expecting the Omicron variant to come to New Brunswick.

Mr. Speaker, this announcement made yesterday will certainly have an impact on the Christmas period. However, on December 3, the government announced its three-level Winter Action Plan. This plan contains measures specifically linked to hospitalization rates, which could lead to a change in levels. Yesterday, new Public Health guidelines were announced. Could the Premier provide more details about the differences between the Winter Action Plan announced on December 3 and what was announced yesterday?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, I am very pleased that the Leader of the Opposition asked his question in the manner in which he did. We do understand that this is difficult. Last week, in one of my speeches, I spoke to the fact that COVID-19 is very unpredictable and that we need to pivot when we must. Right now, we are in a transition phase. We are gathering data in order to understand what will happen next in the short term. We may very well move to Phase 2. But right now, we need just to put in place ways in which we can slow the spread and hope that we can see Christmas. Maybe we cannot. We do not know what is going to happen over these next few days, which are very crucial. We are giving Public Health an opportunity to review the data and then analyze it to see what we need to do.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Through you, Mr. Speaker, thanks to the minister for providing us with more details. Yesterday, there were announcements that were really quite specific. In particular, there was a guideline reverting to what we experienced last Christmas, which is to always respect the obligation to restrict our mask-free contacts to the same 20 people, if I understand correctly. A new guideline was also announced yesterday. I would have liked the minister to talk about this, but I will do so: Children aged 12 and under can no longer take part in organized sports activities, as of midnight last night. Could the minister or the Premier explain, certainly on a public health basis, the rationale for this decision? Without a doubt, some parents are extremely puzzled by this decision made by the government yesterday.

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[Original]

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, children aged 12 and under are still working through the process of receiving their vaccinations, and there is no doubt that quite a large amount of transmission is now happening between children in this group.

We realize the hardship that this creates for children. We know that sports are very good for them, but we must slow down the spread of Omicron and COVID-19. We are in a very delicate position. The injection of Omicron into our province has changed the water on the beans, so these interim measures are here. We may be going further, but we need to give Public Health time to review its data and to give us concrete motions going forward. This is not fun, Mr. Speaker. We realize the impact that it is having, but we must protect our seniors, who are the grandparents of these children. It is the way that we can slow the spread.

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Thank you, through you, Mr. Speaker, to the minister. The minister said that—I think that it may have been said yesterday but not at the press conference—Public Health needs more time and that it needs time to do more analyses of the Omicron virus and its consequences. I guess a pointed question to the minister is this: How much time does Public Health need? Are we potentially going to see changes based on those analyses and on the understanding of the Omicron virus being in the province and the impact and the consequences of that variant being here? How much time does Public Health actually need—so that we have a better understanding of what that statement really means?

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, I would love to give predictions as to what is going to happen two days from now, a week from now, or even a month from now. But the one thing that we have learned through our COVID-19 reality is that we must be agile and pivot when we need to.

We are monitoring this on a daily basis, every single morning, with in-briefs and out-briefs and with understanding what is happening in the provinces around us and understanding exactly where we are in this province. So, there is no way that we can give you a determination of what is going to happen tomorrow.

Right now, the one thing that we hate the most is unpredictability, but we do not have predictability with COVID-19 any longer. Right now, we need to be very, very vigilant with what is happening with Omicron in this province. We are seeing in Ontario that Omicron cases are doubling every two days. If that happens to us, Mr. Speaker, we are going to be in a pickle.

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



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Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Thank you, through you, Mr. Speaker. I would agree that we have to be very vigilant. That is why we are asking questions today, to get more information from the minister and the government.

There was one thing that was said yesterday during the press conference, and for me, it really raised a flag. I do not know whether it was the minister, the Premier, or Dr. Russell who said it, but I think that it was you, minister, who said this: In terms of vaccination, it seems to be that we are going to go through a race of getting booster shots that needs to be faster than this Omicron variant. And we saw that before with the Delta variant, going way back. The question is this. The minister said yesterday, I believe, that the capacity to be able to offer vaccines is limited or could be a challenge—maybe that was the word that she used. We need clarification on this because vaccination is obviously the solution. Even though it is not bulletproof, it is the solution. What do you mean by the challenge of capacity to be able to vaccinate?

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, the Leader of the Opposition is correct. Boosters are our best—our best—defense against Omicron and what is coming. With Delta, we were racing the train. Unfortunately, the train has arrived in New Brunswick. Now, we are going to try to keep it from running over us. On that point, I should just share that the capacity that I was speaking to was actually about having enough immunizers to get this done as quickly as we would like to.

To that point, I would like to announce that today in Saint John, there is a walk-in-only clinic at Exhibition Park. Anyone who wants to go to this clinic can do so from 12 p.m. to 6:30 p.m. if the person is over 50 and ready for the booster. We want to get as many people vaccinated as possible. There is going to be another one tomorrow at Brookside Mall, and it is going to be from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. This is the beginning, Mr. Speaker. As we are bringing in those other resources, we are going to be putting up many, many more walk-in clinics.

[Translation]

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I am pleased to see that there will be a walk-in clinic in Saint John, which is extremely good for that region; however, there are many other communities in New Brunswick.

I am prepared to give the minister my entire minute so that she can provide more information about which categories of professionals will continue to vaccinate people. Are there enough people to vaccinate those who need a second dose or a booster shot? When will we see the plan? Can the minister tell us today where the vaccination clinics will be held so that we can speed up the vaccination process and make the third dose available as quickly as possible? Can she tell us where people will be able to get that third dose?

Madam Minister, please give us far more specific, precise information, because people are listening this afternoon.

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[Original]

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): I appreciate this opportunity, Mr. Speaker. I want the Leader of the Opposition to know that we have been in consultation with several groups, even since last week.

As you know, our pharmacists are coming on board to help with our pediatric doses and also our booster doses. That is going to increase our capacity throughout many communities in this province, including in rural New Brunswick. We are also reaching out to nursing students, for over the holidays. Physiotherapists who have acupuncture training are also going to be able to help us with this. We are reaching out to more physicians. We have about 100 physicians on board to help us distribute these doses.

This is an all-out, no-holds-barred attempt to make sure that we can get these vaccines out as quickly as possible. As soon as we have a list of where and when, we will make it public. Public Health is finalizing some of those details.

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, I will not be critical, but I am a bit concerned. I am a bit concerned that this new variant, Omicron, is in New Brunswick. I think that three cases are confirmed, and more are being analyzed and verified. The minister, I would think, if not today... We need to have a full-blown strategy and plan for getting people their third shots, their booster shots, based on whether they are eligible to get them. This should be public by now.

I know that Public Health is probably working hard, but we need to have this now. Christmas is in 10 days or so. People want to know where and when they will be able to get their vaccines. This is a race between third shots and Omicron coming into and being in New Brunswick. We should be fully transparent by putting out when and where people can get their third shots.

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, the Leader of the Opposition is making a fair point. We want to get these clinics up and running as soon as possible.

Please know that there are many options for people to get their third doses and their pediatric appointments, such as at our pharmacies. Contact your local pharmacies to see whether they are participating members. They can help us, and they have been helping us. We want to thank the Pharmacists' Association and all its members for coming to the table with us, not just at this time but with the first doses and second doses as well. They have been invaluable in accomplishing what we want to accomplish.

We will finalize those lists. I am sure Public Health is trying very, very hard to nail them down with regard to any RHA clinics that are going to be available, making them mass

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clinics and walk-in clinics so that people can come at their convenience and as soon as possible. That is our intention. We need to get these doses in arms as soon as possible.

JAILS

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Thank you, through you, Mr. Speaker. We will wait for the plan. This is certainly a very critical piece to fighting this new variant.

I want to shift over to an announcement that was made yesterday. I was surprised. I was blown away, to be quite frank. Of all the challenges that we have in our province, all the infrastructure investments that need to be made, the strategy of the government over the past few months with regard to people going on strike to get fair contracts, forcing nurses to vote for a strike to try to get a fair contract, and all kinds of infrastructure in our education system that needs to be addressed... Yesterday, the government announced a \$32-million jail that nobody was talking about. No one was actually thinking that this was going to be the biggest priority of this government—a \$32-million jail. Who came up with that idea, Premier?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): I think it is important to put that information kind of on the table. Obviously, the Attorney General is not here today and neither is the Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure. But in looking at the overall spectrum of needs within the province and how we manage them, we see that we certainly have talked a lot about managing the increasing crime rate in our province—the increase in relation to drug use and those concerns. But I think we can supply more information about the need for a facility like that at this time. It is not about trying to demonstrate whether somebody wants this or does not want this. It is about demonstrating whether there is a need or not. That would be the rationale that we will certainly share with the Leader of the Opposition and his members through estimates and through the philosophy. Thank you.

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): But, speaking of the needs, do we not think there is more need, with \$32 million, to recruit more nurses or to have a contract with the paramedics or to invest even more in mental health and in treating addictions? It is \$32 million for a jail, which is totally not the trend as to how we deal with people with drug addictions and how we treat them. It is really interesting that a government would make a \$32-million jail a priority when we have all kinds of problems and challenges in society.

Premier, I think your priority is way off—way wrong—on this one. You should cancel that project and put the money where it is needed so that we can have more nurses and paramedics with fair wages.

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

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Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Well, Mr. Speaker, I can appreciate the Leader of the Opposition's questions in relation to how we manage all aspects of what we see in our province. Certainly, we have been working hard to introduce new measures and to deal with mental health. We have been working hard with the police in areas of law enforcement, and we have also been working hard to ensure that we can mitigate the exposure. We know that in communities throughout our province, people are concerned. They are concerned about what they see happening in their communities—what changes are being made.

So there is a balance here. I would like to say that I believe the balance is being struck as we go through this because it is going to require a focus throughout the province. This is just one aspect of many treatment ideas or treatment needs in our province in order to deal with the challenges that we face throughout our communities. This is not the only solution. We know that. It is just one of many as we work with police officers and enforcement and they share the needs that they have as well.

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

[Translation]

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, it is really necessary to question this government priority of investing—actually, it is not even an investment, it is an expenditure—\$32 million in a correctional centre, while we have a serious shortage of nurses. Our paramedics do not even have a collective agreement. The teachers' collective agreement will soon be under negotiation, so that issue has not been settled.

We have a shortage of health care professionals. Instead of trying to cure and jail those people, these professionals could do some prevention to stop them getting into the position of going to jail. This could be done by hiring health care professionals to prevent certain acts instead of trying to cure these people by jailing them.

Mr. Premier, you need to reassess your priorities and listen seriously to the public in order to find out what people really need. Given everything I just listed for you, a correctional centre is not what people need. Will you take that into consideration and change your mind?

[Original]

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

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I think that if we look back over the past several weeks or months, we will see that we settled the agreement with CUPE. It was not easy, but we did that. We have a third tentative agreement in front of the nurses right now. I am confident that, this time, it

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will pass. We recognize what they have done for us and will continue to do for us. We have done that, and that is moving forward.

We have made major improvements in Social Development. The minister will elaborate on more of those in the coming months and weeks, but we are addressing many of the issues, whether it be homelessness, the clawback scenario for wage increases or earning more than your social assistance, or minimum wage. We have raised the minimum wage, which was part of a necessary societal thing to have people earning a fair income.

Mr. Speaker, I could go on and on and on about the things that we have actually done to move the bar, but that does not mean that we avoid doing anything else. It means that we look across the spectrum, not with the narrow focus that we saw in the past from the previous Liberal government.

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

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, the Premier is way off the ball on this one. I can tell you that.

Just take infrastructure. We have a need in education for midlife upgrades to so many high schools in the province, and the government canceled these. It is our children, the future leaders of our province, who need adequate infrastructure and adequate schools. We need a ferry for Campobello Island.

[Translation]

The Shippagan bridge is crumbling. Mr. Premier, people on Lamèque Island need the Shippagan bridge to get to the mainland. I do not understand how the Premier can prioritize a correctional centre instead of investing in our children, in mental health, and in our nurses. Mr. Premier, change your mind.

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, the difference between me and the Leader of the Opposition is in relation to what is needed and what is wanted. So if we want to use as an example the Shippagan bridge, which has been a talking point forever—I can remember that it has been for many years now—we can ask: When is the replacement of a bridge supposed to be done? It is supposed to be done when it is mechanically unsound for it to continue to be used and when it is needed to ensure safe, reliable transportation across the waterway system. And the engineering has been done—it has been completed—and the report is in. That will be presented by the minister in the next while. But replacing it will be based on the need to do so.

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I have been saying that for years, but that is a theme that does not sell on the opposite side of the House. To that side, it does not matter whether it is needed. It only matters that it is wanted. There is a difference, and the difference in philosophy is that we can get better at our asset management. We have a capital budget this year that is absolutely doing that.

CORONAVIRUS

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. You know, with the large number of COVID-19 cases we have now, the wait times in Fredericton to get a PCR test and receive the results are up to five days. That is a lot of people self-isolating for a long time to find out whether they are COVID-19 positive. Given that cases of COVID-19 are expected to increase dramatically with the arrival of the Omicron variant, the number of people who should be off work and self-isolating is bound to skyrocket—that is, if they can afford to lose their pay.

My question is for the Minister of Health. From a health perspective, does the minister believe that New Brunswickers who need paid sick days to avoid financial hardship when they are supposed to be isolating at home should be guaranteed access to those paid sick days?

Hon. Mr. Higgs (Quispamsis, Premier, Minister responsible for Intergovernmental Affairs, PC): Mr. Speaker, I think that we look at the safety nets in our system, and we have done that from the beginning of the pandemic. You know, in the discussion here, there was a reference earlier that we did something else with the money that came from Ottawa, the \$2.3 billion. Every dime of that went throughout the province—every dime. In fact, the \$330 million, I think, that we spent is more than the \$280 million that we got.

So we have looked at ways to support families, to support those who are out, but with respect to setting up a program with guaranteed sick time paid by the government, I think that we need to think about that for the long term and we need think about what that would look like because we have a number of social programs that are in place today. As I mentioned earlier, the Minister of Social Development is enhancing many of those programs. Mr. Speaker, we cannot just keep building on. We need to get better. Let's make sure that today's programs work, and let's make sure that they meet the needs of those who need them the most. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

HEALTH CARE

Mr. Coon (Fredericton South, Leader, G): Mr. Speaker, New Brunswickers who are affected by the unidentified neurological syndrome and members of their families wrote an open letter to the Minister of Health today expressing their distress at the way the province ended the scientific investigation into the cause of this illness. They are asking the province



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to resume its collaboration with the Public Health Agency of Canada. They want the agency to carry out environmental and food tests and to be authorized to test for neurotoxins in living and deceased patients. Will the Minister of Health ensure that the scientific experts from the Public Health Agency of Canada are able to help Dr. Marrero identify the primary cause of their illness?

[Original]

Hon. Mrs. Shephard (Saint John Lancaster, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the question. From the very beginning of being aware that we were dealing with an unknown illness, which was back in December, one year ago, we absolutely knew that there needed to be scientific and methodical—methodical—research done to uncover what we are really dealing with. That is why we put in the oversight committee. That is why we put together six neurology specialists to review the 48 cases that have been brought forward. That is why we have been using medical experts to understand whether the natural elements in our province had anything to do with what we are dealing with.

Mr. Speaker, we know that there is a report coming early in the new year. We are going to wait for that report before deciding on the next steps. We are in touch with our Public Health Agency of Canada, and we will go forward with it together.

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

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Mr. Austin (Fredericton-Grand Lake, Leader, PA): Mr. Speaker, this morning in the media, there was a story about municipal reform, and it had a reaction from the President of the Association of Local Service Districts, Jules Bossé. In the story, Mr. Bossé said: “We are in favour of the reform but it should be well done... It seems like the work is not completed. There’s too much of a rush to adopt it.”

Those words are identical to what I have been saying in this House since the release of the white paper and identical to what I am hearing from the public at large. Most people agree that change is needed, but they also agree that to get it right, time must be taken to dissect and digest the contents of the white paper and to allow local area residents and leaders to offer amendments.

My question, as such, is for the Minister of Local Government. Will the minister pump the brakes on municipal reform and give time for amendments before passing legislation?



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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.

[*Original*]

Mr. Speaker, I met with the Union of Municipalities representative from Zone 2 on Saturday morning, and that exact question was asked. My answer to that elected official and to the people here in this House is that we have been consulting for the last year on this question. It is important that we have consultations. We brought out a white paper. There has been a year of consultation and work, and we are going to be transitioning for another year.

I agree with the gentleman from across the way. There is uncertainty, and there are questions. However, in the next year, we will have answers. I just do not know how much time we can take to move forward. There have been two years allotted to this. We have been talking about it for 25 years, and we want to move forward. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

JAILS

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, the Premier said he wanted to put tax dollars where they are needed. According to him, we need a jail in Fredericton. That is what he told us this afternoon. That is what he is telling us this afternoon.

Mr. Premier, what is happening with Polyvalente W.-Arthur-Losier? An investment had already been slated for its midlife project. What is happening with Polyvalente Louis-J.-Robichaud, in Shediac? What is happening with Cité des Jeunes A.-M.-Sormany, École Mathieu-Martin, and École Mgr-Marcel-François-Richard, in Saint-Louis de Kent? Let us talk about the Caraquet courthouse, which you closed.

Mr. Premier, through you, Mr. Speaker, I do not understand what the logic and reasons are that justify your investing in a jail in Fredericton instead of investing in our young people. I notice that these are Liberal ridings and that Fredericton is currently Conservative. Are you playing politics with taxpayers?

Hon. Mr. Cardy (Fredericton West-Hanwell, Minister of Education and Early Childhood Development, PC): Through you, Mr. Speaker, thanks to the Leader of the Opposition for his question. It is rather strange to suggest that school construction is a partisan issue. If that were true, knowing that the school that will be at the top of the list next year is located in the member for Campbellton-Dalhousie's riding, we would be happy to offer him a seat on our side of the House. That is not the case.



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We have an evidence-based list for school construction. We have an evidence-based list for midlife projects. We will continue along those lines, because our government has taken politics out of school construction to give ourselves an opportunity to serve our young people well. This is something we are proud of on this side of the House. We will continue with these infrastructure projects, along with all the others, in a way that yields results that benefit people around our province. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[*Original*]

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): Mr. Speaker, that minister has zero credibility in taking politics out of the selection of which school gets the money because he himself changed the criteria and then his riding got a school two years ago.

It is \$32 million—\$32 million—that the government wants to put into a new jail in Fredericton. We have our children all across the province who need adequate infrastructure to be able to learn, to learn some of the best ways to become good citizens and good leaders, and to be well educated. It is \$32 million for a jail. Is that the priority of this government? Seriously, Mr. Premier? You are supposed to be a financial hawk—supposedly. I think this \$32 million is not being spent in the right place.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Melanson (Dieppe, Interim Opposition Leader, L): It is a waste of money. Schools need to be upgraded. Mental health needs to be addressed. Nurses need to be recruited. Where is your priority?

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. Thank you for noticing our capital budget last year, which was the best capital budget this place has seen. The year before, it was a \$72-million increase. This year, it is a \$74-million increase.

What about the new Francophone school going up in Dieppe? Is it not in the member's riding?

(Interjections.)

Hon. Mr. Steeves (Moncton Northwest, Minister of Finance and Treasury Board, PC): Oh, Moncton Centre—there you go. In Moncton Centre, there is a school going up there.

How about the nurses? We have a tentative agreement with the nurses now. We will continue to work with any union that will come to the table. Next, we will be talking to the teachers. We will get that solved as well.

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We are about solving problems, and we are about doing the work. This is government, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Members, during question period, there was a reference to the absence of members in the House here, and I would remind all members that this is not to be announced. So, just for your information, please correct anything...

The time for question period is over.

