

Legislative Assembly of New Brunswick

Oral Questions



December 7, 2022

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[Original]

AMBULANCE NEW BRUNSWICK

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, two years ago, the Auditor General suggested that revisions be made to the contract signed with Medavie for delivery of services by Ambulance New Brunswick and that if we waited until 2027, when the contract expires, the quality of service would continue to miss targets. We continue to see long response times, especially in rural communities, and offload delays, which continue to put pressure on our crumbling health care system.

Issues that the Auditor General raised included paying millions for performance targets that were actually biased against rural areas; excessive use of exemptions, which are supposed to be used for circumstances beyond the control of the ambulance service; incentives to maintain low staffing; and overall governance issues. The Auditor General pointed this out to ensure that New Brunswickers would get the best possible service.

The former Health Minister said that she was open to renegotiating that contract with Medavie. I want to know whether the new minister has taken up that cause.

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Well, thank you very much. I appreciate the question. You know, Mr. Speaker, since that report, a lot has happened and continues to happen as we move through this difficult time. Again, I do appreciate the number of people, especially the paramedics and the advanced care paramedics, who stand up and serve the people in New Brunswick.

We know that those delays are occurring for various reasons. I would love to go into the various reasons and into how we are trying to alleviate some of those. I attended two new classes of EMTs, one in Campbellton and one in Moncton, from which additional people will be put into the ambulances. They are not paramedics, but they will assist the paramedics with transfers and also with some of the offload situations. The point of the matter is that we are taking this seriously and we are addressing the issues. We know that an overwhelming number of people are going to the emergency rooms, and we have made amends and opportunities for them to get the care that they need elsewhere.

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, the Auditor General pointed out that the contract skewed the overall response times and contained a raft of exemptions that allowed Ambulance New Brunswick to meet its targets despite its having had a poor performance, especially in rural communities. The people of New Brunswick are not being well served when a contract results in bonuses being paid out when the actual performance is far less than the performance targets actually being reported. There is all of this while pressure is being added to our crumbling health care system. So the failure to revise this contract is continuing to cost New Brunswick taxpayers money that should not be paid out and to allow New Brunswick an out for improving its performances.

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I know the Minister of Health will talk about EMTs. That is one piece of the puzzle that will provide assistance in nonurgent transfers, but that is not going to address what we are seeing in our ERs with long offload delays and long response times to get to a call. Why is this minister not making this a priority? What is he going to do to directly address these issues?

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Mr. Speaker, thank you very much. You know, there are many priorities in the health care system. When you actually look at the whole continuum, you see that it is all a priority, whether it is preventative care, primary care, addressing the emergency room issues, or making sure that people who are in long-term care in hospitals are back in the community as soon and as safely as possible, whether that is back home with care, in a special care home, or in a nursing home. Those are all priorities that we work on at the same time.

Without a doubt, we have seen some other opportunities, such as getting primary care through NB Health Link, which has had some great results, or getting some of the prescriptions renewed or looked at—even some of the dermatology issues can be looked at—through eVisitNB. Those are just two examples of how we are providing care for people and preventing them from going to the emergency rooms. There is also the portable X-ray machine down in the Saint John area, which is preventing people from going to the emergency...

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Thank you, minister.

[*Translation*]

Mr. McKee (Moncton Centre, Leader of the Official Opposition, L): Mr. Speaker, we are still hearing horror stories about ambulances being directed toward hospitals located more than an hour away from the nearest hospital. There is an obvious risk. Response times and offloading times can mean the difference between life and death, and people just do not have access to quality care in a timely fashion.

We have been told that, recently, an ambulance had to go from Quispamsis to Moncton to respond to a call. In another serious incident, a volunteer firefighter had to perform CPR for 30 minutes while waiting for an ambulance. Yesterday, nine ambulances were parked outside the Dr. Georges-L.-Dumont Regional Hospital waiting to offload patients. In addition, response times in rural areas continue to be a major problem.

I want to know whether this minister will reopen negotiations with Medavie to get a better contract to ensure quality services for New Brunswickers. He cannot just tell us that the technicians will solve all the problems. Is he prepared to reopen negotiations with Medavie to get a better contract for these services?

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[Original]

Hon. Mr. Fitch (Riverview, Minister of Health, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Again, I point to issues where we are solving some of the problems and the opposition diminishes them. I appreciate the frontline workers so much, whether they are firefighters, paramedics, RNs, LPNs, NPs, doctors, or personal support workers, and the list goes on and on.

Mr. Speaker, this whole idea of the continuum of care is about making sure that people have the care where they need it. Some of the paramedics are actually making house calls and doing the treatments right there, which prevents people from going to the hospitals, because they have stabilized them, assessed them, and put them back on the path to addressing their issues.

We talk with Ambulance New Brunswick all the time and try to make improvements, and in the not-too-distant future, I think that you are going to see additional improvements that will try to alleviate some of the backlogs and some of the issues that are prevalent in the health care system today.

CAPITAL BUDGET

Mr. Legacy (Bathurst West-Beresford, L): Mr. Speaker, yesterday the Minister of Finance presented his capital estimates for 2023-24. In his speech, he stated—proudly, I might add—that he was tabling a \$1-billion budget that was \$152 million more than what he had planned for the year. He went on to say that much of this increase is a result of the elevated inflationary environment and the delays related to the supply chain, as seen around the globe. “Much of this increase,” he said.

Then I go to the media scrum, and the first comment that reporters hit me with is that the minister just clarified that only a portion of the increase is due to those factors—some \$50 million. I wonder whether the minister can tell us which talking points he will use today. Is this increase due to higher prices for what government has already planned on doing? Is this government capable of thinking outside of the box and doing anything original?

Hon. Mr. Flemming, K.C. (Rothesay, Minister of Justice, Attorney General, PC): Thank you for the question. I am called upon to answer today. It is kind of like being the fire chief for a day. You do not expect the bells to go off, but in any event, I will do the best that I can.

The capital budget that was put forth has put the opposition in a complete sense of angst because it is so good. The opposition has been moaning and groaning inexhaustibly about not spending and not spending. Then, all of a sudden, we have a capital budget that goes up 14% and, look, the opposition members are so confused over it that they are screwing themselves into the ground. It is such a good story, such a positive thing, and such an

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investment in New Brunswick. The only thing that the opposition can come up with is some kind of a question such as this: What about a scrum note? Well, I think we are doing just great.

Mr. Legacy (Bathurst West-Beresford, L): This is going to be a lot more fun than I had anticipated.

Here is an example of progressive thinking. When we were hit with COVID-19, there was a lot of conversation about ventilation upgrades in schools. It seemed to be very important. It was a hot topic two years ago. Yes, that was yesterday's conversation. Here, we have a minister talking about world-class education and looking to upgrade our ventilation next year, only three years behind everybody else. Does the minister feel that this is indicative of world-class? Is this what the minister sees as "leader of the pack" policy and progressive thinking?

Hon. Mr. Flemming, K.C. (Rothesay, Minister of Justice, Attorney General, PC): There is certainly no shortage of ventilation and hot air across there. If the opposition would share some of it with the schools, it might be pretty effective.

It just shows you that the opposition is going back to COVID-19. This is a progressive budget. It has initiatives that are necessary and proper. It is a tremendous budget. It is a budget that the Premier, everyone on this side of the House, and I are infinitely proud of. It is a budget that is going to bring great results, bring great investment, and make New Brunswick a better place. Again, the opposition is going back to COVID-19, back almost two and a half years, to try to come up with something to criticize the budget over because there is pretty darn nothing about it to criticize. It is a great budget. It is a budget that we are happy with and proud of. It is the largest single investment of capital in the history of the province of New Brunswick.

Mr. Legacy (Bathurst West-Beresford, L): Mr. Speaker, here is what I picked up from the speech yesterday. In his first page of text, the minister brought up that the government is on track to reduce the net debt by \$2 billion. Last year, he was a little more reserved when he waited until almost the end of the speech to state that the government was well on its way to reducing the debt by \$500 million.

Now, I am not against debt repayment. I think it is healthy. Where it gets a little perverse is when it becomes the only meritable result that you have to your credit, especially when everything around you is falling apart and your constituents are crying for help just to deal with the cost of living. This minister is a one-trick pony. Does he want to tell us what his debt reduction conclusion will be next year? With all the opportunities that exist out there right now to help, that seems to be his only fallback position.

Hon. Mr. Flemming, K.C. (Rothesay, Minister of Justice, Attorney General, PC): There are no other takers.

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I am having a hard time here, because the repayment of debt is a responsible thing for a government, a company, or an individual to do. I have a very difficult time understanding how you can be criticized for paying your bills or how you can be criticized for meeting the obligations that a previous government undertook by borrowing money and issuing bonds or debentures. We are paying our bills, which is a good thing. It is an anathema to the members opposite, because paying bills never bothered them. They just borrow, borrow, borrow, spend, spend, and spend—borrow, spend, borrow, spend. We now have a responsible government in New Brunswick. We now have people who are paying their bills, meeting their obligations, improving their credit rating, and spending a billion dollars in the capital budget.

RENTS

Mr. Bourque (Kent South, L): Mr. Speaker, I would like to start with a quote that the minister gave yesterday. The minister said: “I have also been clear that if we find that the controls that we put in place to assist the tenants are not working, we will reconsider the rent cap.” My first question to the minister is this: What would these specific conditions be to reconsider the rent cap? What would trigger such a move? I am asking the minister to provide the specific thresholds that would make that happen. The minister has a background in engineering, so I am hoping that empirical evidence will be important in her decision. Please, minister, with this ever-so-important file, what are the conditions to reconsider the rent cap? Thank you.

Hon. Ms. Green (Fredericton North, Minister of Service New Brunswick, Minister responsible for Housing, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and thank you to the member opposite. You got the quote right. That is what I said. We have our historical data. We have the data that we have collected with the Residential Tenancies Tribunal that shows that since the beginning of July, 112 individuals have come to the Residential Tenancies Tribunal to ask that their rent increases be reviewed. We have reviewed those rent increases and have made decisions on all of those 112 files.

We will see how many individuals again start coming to the Residential Tenancies Tribunal. If there appears to be a significant number of landlords who are taking advantage of the elimination of the rent cap, then we will certainly sit down and make some decisions around what other triggers we can pull to protect the most vulnerable in our society. Our government cares about New Brunswickers. We care that they have affordable housing over their heads, and we have the tools in place to help them. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Bourque (Kent South, L): Well, Mr. Speaker, what is clear is that a lot of people received increase notices. They are not satisfied, and they do not know about the tribunal. I know that there are a whole lot more people than the 112 people. This government needs to do a better job of promoting that tribunal, for starters.

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[*Translation*]

Yesterday, I spoke with another very reputable economist who told me that, under the current conditions, a rent cap was entirely appropriate.

[*Original*]

We also know that there is an inequality of power—a natural inequality of power—between tenants and landlords when it comes to disputes on rent increases. What is currently proposed by this minister seems to be out of touch with the real needs. What about help for the people who are living in poverty? We can do better than putting them in a long lineup for a tribunal. What can this minister do to level the playing field? There is a natural inequality in power. Thank you.

Hon. Ms. Green (Fredericton North, Minister of Service New Brunswick, Minister responsible for Housing, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. There were a lot of different points in that question from the member opposite. The first thing that he was discussing was getting the word out about the Residential Tenancies Tribunal, so I will speak to that. We have already launched a campaign, which starts this month, to get more information out to the public about the Residential Tenancies Tribunal.

But I also need to count on my colleagues here in the House because, oftentimes, when vulnerable people are in a situation that they are concerned about, we are the first people they turn to for help. We have the connection to the Residential Tenancies Tribunal. We can act on their behalf. We can advocate for the tenants. That is on us. I ask all my colleagues to please, if you have vulnerable citizens who need help with housing issues, contact the Residential Tenancies Tribunal so that we know what is happening in the economy in the housing market. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Bourque (Kent South, L): Mr. Speaker, I would like to throw an olive branch to the minister. I feel that there is something that can be done. This is not regarding the rent cap, even though I still feel that the rent cap would work very well right now. Why is there not an onus on the landlords to justify whether a rent increase is reasonable? Why not put in a threshold? For example, if a proposed rent increase is above the consumer price index or another reasonable limit, the onus would be on the landlord to file a justification rather than having to act on a tenant complaint.

What I am suggesting is that the onus be put on the owners and not on the tenants. For the tenants, as I was saying, there is an inequality there. The owners have a much more vested interest. If they had the power, they would do it and they would get the increase. That would be much better. Will the minister consider that? Thank you.

Hon. Ms. Green (Fredericton North, Minister of Service New Brunswick, Minister responsible for Housing, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Interestingly, I took a little walk

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across the hallway this morning to speak to the member opposite because I do want to hear his ideas. As I have said since we started this discussion a couple of weeks ago, yes, we are considering everything as well as any changes for the Residential Tenancies Tribunal. Our goal is to have a balanced situation for tenants and landlords.

That is certainly an idea that I am willing to consider. We would have to have a discussion around exactly what that would look like, but that is absolutely on the table. I also indicated to the member opposite that we are looking at more changes to the *Residential Tenancies Act* in the spring session. Now is the time to be having this discussion about what that would look like and how we could work cooperatively with the landlords to help protect tenants more. We have introduced many changes to assist the tenants, and we will continue to do that. I would be happy to sit down with the member opposite and talk about what that might look like.

[Translation]

ENVIRONMENTAL TRUST FUND

Mr. LePage (Restigouche West, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The Environmental Trust Fund was established in 1990. It provides financial assistance for projects focused on protecting, preserving, and enhancing the natural environment of the province. Alternatively, the Report of the Auditor General of New Brunswick tells us that this fund had expenditures of over \$77 million over the past 10 years and an accumulated surplus of almost \$41 million as of March 31, 2022.

This year, the application period ran from November 1 to November 30, right in the middle of a municipal election campaign. The Report of the Auditor General notes that there is no plan for the \$41-million surplus. Can the Minister of Environment and Climate Change reveal to us the total funding that will be invested over the next year? Is part or all of the \$41-million surplus included in this amount?

[Original]

Hon. Mr. Crossman (Hampton, Minister of Environment and Climate Change, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Great questions from across the way. This is a great fund, by the way. As of yesterday, the last number I have is that 339 projects have come in.

We agree with the Auditor General. There is room for improvement. This did not happen in the past six months. This goes back 20 years. There were different governments during that time, I might add. There is lots going on, Mr. Speaker. The fund is being supported and will protect the environment, as it has for the past 30 years, as I mentioned.

(Interjections.)

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Hon. Mr. Crossman (Hampton, Minister of Environment and Climate Change, PC): Actually, three decades, yes.

There are great projects. I can list a few from your riding in a minute, if you want. There is a lot of money. Nothing is being left on the table. I must go back again. If people do not apply for it, Mr. Speaker, they cannot expect to get something. Some 339 applications are in. We should know in the early spring who the successful applicants are, and I am looking forward to working with you to continue making a difference and to meet the guidelines that the Auditor General has laid out in this report.

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Thank you, minister.

[Translation]

Mr. LePage (Restigouche West, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. That was an answer to a second or third question, but the minister is not answering my first question. I asked him whether the funds that were...

[Original]

(Interjections.)

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

[Translation]

Mr. LePage (Restigouche West, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I will continue, even if nobody is listening to what I am saying; probably because I am speaking in the other language.

Project applications to receive funding through the Environmental Trust Fund...

[Original]

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Order, members. Order. Proceed.

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Order, minister. Thank you.

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[*Translation*]

Mr. LePage (Restigouche West, L): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Since I only have 15 to 20 seconds left, I hope I will have time to finish my question.

The minister revealed the 339 projects to us.

(Interjections.)

Mr. LePage (Restigouche West, L): I would really like the members to listen. Thank you.

There are 339 projects. Could we get the total value of these projects, and can the minister tell us how much money is provided in his budget?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Crossman (Hampton, Minister of Environment and Climate Change, PC): Mr. Speaker, applications finished last Wednesday. The total will come in the near future. I do not have that here today, but once I do, you are certainly welcome to have that. There are lots of great projects, as I mentioned, and across the way... Last year, it was \$9.1 million actually, with 263 projects approved through the ETF. I am looking forward to the 339 for this year.

Also, on top of that, I know that the members on the opposite side of the House do not want to hear about success. We have all kinds of success here in the building today. In 2021-22, there was \$60 000 for the Eel River Bar First Nation; \$32 000 for the village of Eel River Crossing; \$25 000 for VALORES; and \$20 000 for the friends of the aquarium. Where is that located? There was \$40 000 for the Société d'aménagement de la rivière Madawaska. And, Mr. Speaker, all the projects I mentioned are in the opposition's...

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

RENTS

Ms. Mitton (Memramcook-Tantramar, G): Mr. Speaker, the Minister responsible for Housing has finally admitted that she will not protect tenants by keeping the rent cap in place in the new year. Tenants are terrified of losing their housing, if they have not already. They need protection, but they are getting the cold shoulder from this government. It is clear that there is an affordable housing crisis, yet this government is doing as little as possible, which is putting tenants in a precarious situation. If the tenants cannot pay the higher rent or are renocted, then they become unhoused. They lose their homes.

This province provides little to no protection for renters. What has changed since the rent cap was instituted nine months ago? Arguably, conditions are the same, if not worse, for



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tenants. How can the Minister responsible for Housing justify denying renters the protection of a rent cap next year?

Hon. Ms. Green (Fredericton North, Minister of Service New Brunswick, Minister responsible for Housing, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. When I listen to the language that is used and the inflammatory way the question is asked, it does not even make me want to answer her question. I can tell you that the member opposite in the official opposition asked many questions that make it easy to collaborate and make us want to work together.

Mr. Speaker, part of this is our own responsibility, including that of the member opposite, to make sure that people who are vulnerable get the help they need, and the help they need is at the Residential Tenancies Tribunal. We have put a number of different things in place over the past year. We have come back three times with changes to try to make things better for tenants. The member is right. People could become unhoused, and we are concerned about that, so we are doing everything we can to protect tenants and to make it a balanced approach for landlords as well. So I call on the member opposite to stop the inflammatory way of saying things and to work collaboratively to solve this problem.

Ms. Mitton (Memramcook-Tantramar, G): I do not appreciate the tone policing when I am talking about people losing their housing, Mr. Speaker. People have lost their housing, and people are at risk of losing their housing. And I do help the people who come to me. I connect them with the Residential Tenancies Tribunal. But there are limitations. There will no longer be a rent cap, and I am already getting stories about people getting 25%, 75%, or 100% rent increases coming down the line, and they do not know what to do.

This is unacceptable, but it is very predictable. It is exactly what we thought would happen, Mr. Speaker. Tenants across New Brunswick have been pleading with this minister and with the Higgs government to protect them from predatory rent hikes, especially in these market conditions. Yet, the Higgs government waited until the last minute to admit that it would not protect people with a rent cap in 2023. However, the Minister responsible for Housing did leave the door open to bringing one in if it turns out that the government is wrong again about the housing crisis. Will it bring in a retroactive rent cap in March when we are back in the Legislature?

Hon. Ms. Green (Fredericton North, Minister of Service New Brunswick, Minister responsible for Housing, PC): Mr. Speaker, last minute? This rent cap was a temporary measure from the beginning. When we put it in last March, it was to end at the end of the year. There is nothing last minute about any of this discussion about a rent cap. We were clear. It was a temporary measure. I have also said that we would consider it in the future, if necessary.

Mr. Speaker, as I stated in answer to another question, since July, we have had 112 individuals come to the Residential Tenancies Tribunal asking for their rent cases to be

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reviewed. Only 8 of the cases were found to be reasonable—8 out of 112. The work that the Residential Tenancies Tribunal does works. Those people do their job. They look at the...

(Interjections.)

Hon. Ms. Green (Fredericton North, Minister of Service New Brunswick, Minister responsible for Housing, PC): It works. And again, the member opposite is telling stories but does not have the exact individuals that she is talking about. She needs to go to the Residential Tenancies Tribunal with them.

Ms. Mitton (Memramcook-Tantramar, G): Mr. Speaker, these are specific stories about people. I am not going to name them in the Legislature, but I have connected them with the Residential Tenancies Tribunal. I am not sure what the minister is talking about there.

But the minister did say that there might be a rent cap. The government had not decided. It said that the rent cap was temporary but that it might be extended, so the members opposite are the ones that have created this instability and this confusion. They said that it might be extended. Even just yesterday in question period, the minister said that the government might bring one in retroactively. I am not sure what is being talked about, but here, we have...

We need rents to be stabilized. We need people's housing to be protected. The government has not acted with the urgency required to help tenants, to help renters. We also need long-term solutions. The New Brunswick Housing Corporation needs to have staff. It needs to have subject matter experts. It needs the resources required for nonmarket housing to be created. Will the Premier revive the NB Housing Corporation and invest the resources needed to address the affordable housing crisis with the urgency that it demands?

Hon. Ms. Green (Fredericton North, Minister of Service New Brunswick, Minister responsible for Housing, PC): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. We are in a housing crisis. This government has recognized that we have a housing crisis on our hands. It has not been made in the past six months. It has not been developing over the past year. This has been developing over decades. Part of the situation is being caused by the fact that people are moving to New Brunswick, which is fantastic, but we have problems with our success. Our housing stock is at 1.7%. That is not enough. Vacancy should be between 3% and 4%.

This government has recognized that there is an issue, and it has appointed its first Minister responsible for Housing in decades. With all due respect, I have been in place for six weeks. This is a decades-old problem. We are looking at all the solutions on what we can do to move forward and increase our stock. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.



[*Translation*]

ENVIRONMENTAL TRUST FUND

Mr. LePage (Restigouche West, L): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. A number of good projects submitted to the Environmental Trust Fund were not retained or only received part of the funding requested in the past. The Auditor General has revealed that the eligibility criteria are not clearly defined, that there is no standardized method for evaluating project funding, and that the department has no documented strategic or annual plans for the Environmental Trust Fund.

[*Original*]

(Interjections.)

Mr. Speaker (Hon. Mr. Oliver): Order, minister. Order. Order. Order, back and forth.

[*Translation*]

Mr. LePage (Restigouche West, L): Thank you. Mr. Speaker, at least you, unlike the minister, know where Restigouche West is located.

[*Original*]

We know that this government is heading toward another huge surplus.

[*Translation*]

Given that the report was tabled more than a week ago—and I hope the minister read it—will the Minister of Environment and Climate Change or the Minister of Local Government and Local Governance Reform answer us and unveil the investment plan for the \$41 million?

[*Original*]

Hon. Mr. Crossman (Hampton, Minister of Environment and Climate Change, PC): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Yes, I did read it. Did you?

There is a plan in place, with constant improvements. We always look at the education background. We look at what has worked in the past, what is being presently worked on, and what can be improved upon. There will be lots of improvements coming. We agree with the Auditor General that there are improvements to be made in that area, and we are looking to work with that. It is already taking place right now.

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The report goes back 10 or 20 years, and there is a lot happening with the Environmental Trust Fund right now. We do not have the exact total right now. We are going through the process of seeing who fits the criteria and who does not. Earlier, I mentioned some of the past projects up the member's way. There was \$30 000 to the New Brunswick Community College and \$40 000 for the Société d'aménagement de la rivière Madawaska. All the ones that I read this morning are in opposition ridings. Thank you.

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

