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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
OF
PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND

RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS AND ORAL QUESTION PERIOD
(PRELIMINARY PROCEEDINGS)

FOR

TUESDAY, 23 APRIL 2024

[1:31 p.m.]

[Hon. D. Compton in the chair]

Responses to Questions Taken as Notice

Questions by Members

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Hon. H. Perry: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

Question to the Minister of Health.

Everywhere I go, I hear concerns about health care. In the spring of 2018, while the Liberals were still governing, the Conservative health critic got very upset in this House. At that time, James Aylward was the party's leader, and he claimed the system was completely broken. As evidence, he pointed to the fact that 9,000 Islanders were on the patient registry.

Patient registry numbers (further)

My question to the minister is: There were 9,000 Islanders on the registry during the Liberal government. How many Islanders are on the patient registry now? How many people are waiting for a family doctor?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Hon. M. McLane: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

We've talked about the patient registry at length on this session. It is around 36,000 and change. The hon. member always forgets to mention that more than 25,000 Islanders chose to move to PEI in the last five years and we welcome them with open arms. That does place stresses on our health care system.

The hon. member asked about the patient registry, but then in the next question, he'll be against the medical school.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Hon. H. Perry: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

So, he's staying on his lining of not answering the question, because he should know the specific number.

According to the government's online patient registry that they selectively update, there are 36,947. So, 947 is a lot more than just change.

The awful fact of the matter is a government that promises to fix health care has created a complete and total mess. When this government was first elected, there were about 13,000 people on the patient registry. The number now? Nearly three times that amount. It's a terrible record and it clearly indicated a government that is not up to the job of providing health care to Islanders.

In February, the Premier said the following: "About 1,000 Islanders will come off the patient registry this month. This month – in February 2024 – will be the first month in over a decade where our province has seen more patients come off the registry than went on..."

So, minister: What happened? Did the Premier over promise once again, or was this Premier simply not up to the job?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Hon. M. McLane: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

I'm not sure if the hon. member listened to our physician update a week or so ago. We have 23 physicians who have signed on to start in Prince Edward Island. They don't start tomorrow. It takes a while to ramp up their practices.

I would remind them we had 24 in all of 2023, so one more physician who signs on with our system will equal all of last year, and that is because we removed some of the bureaucracy in hiring. It's starting to show improvements and we'll continue to invest in our doctors. PEI's a great place to practice and I'm sure we'll attract more.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Hon. H. Perry: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

And 23 is a good number today because since the Premier made this 1,000 Islander promise, there's been a total of 23 people removed from the patient registry. Now, that's one doctor for every patient that's removed from the patient registry.

Does the minister think that this is an accomplishment, and how does he explain the embarrassing difference between 1,000 and 23?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Hon. M. McLane: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Again, we've answered these questions at length. I will table the physicians that we have hired and their specialties today. So, you will see that we have, I think, 13 family medicine physicians joining our staff in 2024. They will continue to add patients.

[1:35 p.m.]

If you do straight math, basically the last two years we've had over 6,000 people move to PEI per year. That's about 15 or 16 per day if I do my napkin math right. So, it does pose challenges to us. But things like the medical school and removing PRPC from a hiring process are starting to show improvements.

Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Hon. H. Perry: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

Let's do some basic math. If the Premier continues to remove 23 Islanders from the patient registry every month, it will take quite a while to reduce that list to zero. In fact, it will take 134 years. One hundred and thirty-four years.

My question for the minister: With this government's track record, do you think you are capable of reducing the patient registry to zero by the year 2158?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Hon. M. McLane: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

I think the family physician who is going to start in Kinlock will help. I think the family physician who's going to start in Summerside will help. I think the family physician who's starting in Tyne Valley will help. I hope the two that started in Kinlock will help. I hope that the family physician who's starting in Parkdale will help.

That should help, Madam Speaker.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Hon. H. Perry: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

If I go back into any of the *Hansard* or any of the news clips from the past five years, I'm going to get the same answer. The numbers just continue and continue to rise. So, with that, I think we'll be waiting a long, long time. I expect more promises from this government, of course – more bluster, more excuses – but I don't expect a lot of real action.

My question: Was it the minister who told the Premier the registry would drop by 1,000, or did the Premier just make that up to get a cheap headline from his Rotary speech?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Hon. M. McLane: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Again, we have questions about the patient registry, and the member wants us to delay the medical school. I'm not sure if we want PEI to be like BC, where 7,000 people packed into a rink to demand a medical school. I don't want it to get to that point.

We're investing in a medical school to create our own physicians here. We're removing bureaucracy. It's starting to show results.

We will continue to work on the patient registry. We don't control immigration and how good PEI is for people to live, but doctors are realizing that, too.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Hon. H. Perry: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

We also have empty promises from this government on long-term care. They don't know what to do, so they hand out \$25 million to private businesses. We know that government's own studies show that we need an additional 435 long-term care beds by next year.

Long-term care improvements (further)

Minister: How many new beds will be opened and operational by January 2025?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Hon. M. McLane: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Yes, obviously, long-term care is a big part of solving our patient problem. Back to the hon. member who asked the question, he's concerned about ambulance response times, but he doesn't want us to invest in long-term care that will improve those response times because they're a block at the hospital and they can't put people in beds. So, we're investing in both private and public in order to do that, to free up our acute care hospitals and to give seniors the care that they deserve.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition.

Hon. H. Perry: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

That's just one of the problems. There are so, so many problems with this government, and so few solutions that this government puts forward. So many excuses and so many promises; they are a government that will say anything, they will blame others, and they will do absolutely nothing.

As our population ages, and demands grow, why did this government ignore the needs in long-term care for so long?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Hon. M. McLane: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Again, for about the 11th time in this session, the exact same question; I'll give the same answer.

We continue to invest in public and private long-term care facilities. We're investing in home care so that people can stay home longer. We do have workforce challenges, so we always have to balance those needs, but our home care visits have gone up from 900 a month to 2,500 a month.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-West Royalty.

G. McNeilly: Accessing health care is a struggle, especially for Islanders who are sick on weekends and are dealing with any number of medical issues. Adding to that, if you're seeking medical help for a sick child, waiting in a busy emergency room adds to the stress and anxiety of the patients.

Code silver at QEH

Question to the Minister of Health: Can you confirm that there was an incident at the QEH on the weekend that caused staff to issue a code silver?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Hon. M. McLane: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

I'm not aware of every code that happens within our system. We understand with ER,

it is very challenging. We have invested in security to –

[Interjections]

Hon. M. McLane: We have invested in security in order to protect our workers. We understand they're under some significant challenges in all of our facilities, so it's important that we protect them as much as we can.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-West Royalty.

G. McNeilly: The Minister of Health has to know if something of this importance happened or didn't happen.

[1:40 p.m.]

Staff issue a code silver to lock down the facility to manage a threat from potential weapons, such as a shooter. The information is in the Health PEI All Hazards Plan.

The problem is the public doesn't know what the code silver is. What happens when they hear the alert about the code silver over the speakers? According to my constituent, it was a scary situation when it came over the speakers. Security didn't seem to know what exactly to do. They were evacuating people and telling them to go home. The police were called in to de-escalate the situation.

Question to the Minister: How will you and Health PEI inform the public of various safety precautions that can be put in place to deal with such a serious issue?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Hon. M. McLane: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

I'm not so sure the public understands code white, code silver, in all of our facilities. They are protocols that we use in order to keep our staff safe.

This is the society we live in these days. It seems that it has become more violent. The toxicity of drugs is increasing. It is placing

stresses on our health care workers; we don't deny that. We have a significant security investment this year at our facilities. It was very apparent when we talked to frontline workers that they want to feel safe in their jobs. We responded by providing that security to them. We'll continue to do that.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-West Royalty.

G. McNeilly: Thank you.

Question to the Minister of Housing.

The tiny homes project that's done by the Construction Association – very successful. Actually, the students here, at their school, are doing projects of such and getting them out there.

But the real problem, minister, is when I went and toured the facility last week, they were building homes. They had them up on the blocks, and I said, "Where are these homes going?" They said, "You know what? They're just going 100 metres down the road," because they need to move them not so that people can live on them, but so that they can get two more on there to build.

Tiny homes project

Minister, why are you not getting these homes out to Islanders when they need them? We're in a housing crisis. They can't live in the tiny homes. Why not?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Housing, Land and Communities.

Hon. R. Lantz: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Welcome to all the students who are here today. Indeed, I hope that some of you are participating in this program to help build tiny homes and considering a career in the trades. We sure could use it. There's practically unlimited work for you if you choose to enter the trades right now.

I'll take this opportunity, since we're talking about building, more than two weeks ago, some people on the other side talked about

April 16th as a significant date that we may know where we're trending in terms of housing starts in this province. In fact, we got very good news a week ago. Nobody has asked me a question about it. It's funny; when there's good news, no one wants to know on that side.

It turns out that the first quarter of 2024 was the best quarter in Prince Edward Island's history for housing starts in Prince Edward Island.

Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

[Interjections]

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-West Royalty.

G. McNeilly: I thought you were going to give me some information about the tiny homes and why you can't get anybody in the tiny homes. It doesn't make any sense.

Minister, that's great news. I mean, it cost taxpayers an awful lot of money to do that, but I'm asking about a simple program that the Province put on and we have no idea how people are going to live in the tiny homes. They're being built all over the province and you don't know where they're going.

How do you access one of the tiny homes under your watch, minister?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Housing, Land and Communities.

Hon. R. Lantz: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

The tiny home program – it's going to take a fairly significant capital investment upfront to create a tiny home community. We've got some services and roads to build. The important part now is that students across Prince Edward Island are getting valuable experience in working in the trades and building tiny homes that will house people in this province going into the future.

But tiny homes are only one investment we're making in housing across Prince Edward Island. As we know, we've got many programs. The PEI Housing Corporation is the largest landlord on Prince

Edward Island. We had a discussion here a few weeks ago about all the purchases we've made to add to our social housing inventory.

I am happy to say that we have added, since December of 2023, another 111 units to that inventory to take people off our social housing registry. Those are all across the province, in O'Leary, Georgetown, Montague, Summerside, Kensington, Charlottetown, and we'll continue to add to our inventory through acquisitions and new builds.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-West Royalty.

[1:45 p.m.]

G. McNeilly: That's fantastic, but in your budget, there's more of an investment in shelters and there's less of investment in actual housing and helping people get out of the shelters and into homes, minister.

We know that you haven't set up the promised Summerside emergency shelter or even awarded the service contract. The submissions were required by December 13th. That's four months, minister, and I know you had the proposals submitted. It makes no sense.

Shelter supports in Summerside (further)

Why are you taking so long to deliver the service contract and get the shelter built in Summerside?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Housing, Land and Communities.

Hon. R. Lantz: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

It turns out, as we've heard, that labour constraints are one of our big problems, and it turns out we're having some difficulty identifying someone to operate the shelter for us. We're getting there. We'll have a decision soon. We will see some activity on that site in short order. Has it taken longer than I would wish? Yes, but work is underway.

I would point out that there was a lovely story in the media not long ago about how

well the Winter Street men's shelter in Summerside is operating, the success they're having in moving people through that shelter and onto more stable housing in the community, so I commend them. I've toured that facility and they do a wonderful job.

We're doing good things, and we always encourage people to call the shelter support line, and we will ensure that everyone who needs a roof over their head, has one.

Speaker: The hon. Member from O'Leary-Inverness.

R. Henderson: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

In the last year alone, Maritime Electric has increased energy costs three times. More increases are expected. As part of their application for a previous increase, Maritime Electric disclosed their compensation levels for the senior executive team.

Guess what? Islander ratepayers are paying \$2.8 million in wages for four employees, approximately \$460,000 in salary bonuses, another \$183,000 in stock options – pretty generous contributions to retirement. It equals about \$700,000 per executive annually. This is a monopoly, and it is guaranteed a profit margin.

Compensation for Maritime Electric senior executive

Question to the Minister of Energy: Do you feel that these are reasonable salaries that Island ratepayers should be paying for?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Environment, Energy and Climate Action.

Hon. S. Myers: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Obviously, that's a good question. I think that we talked about, earlier in the session, some of the work that we're doing on the energy file, and we're looking into the ownership model and who should own and deliver energy on Prince Edward Island, who should produce energy here on Prince Edward Island. Obviously, under public ownership, there would be a lot more scrutiny over things like wages and those types of things, and they fall into probably

different categories than they do in the private sector.

We have a number of meetings coming up, including when the House closes today, about that exact file. We're looking forward to getting this moving in really high gear so we can show the Assembly, hopefully by the fall, what our results were and get some feedback from Islanders.

Thank you.

Speaker: The hon. Member from O'Leary-Inverness.

R. Henderson: Minister, I know the average Islander makes about \$43,000. I'm not trying to compare that to an executive, but I understand that big jobs do get big pay. I believe Islanders would be far more accepting of the wage increases of Maritime Electric if they had faith in the company, and its vegetation management was even at the Atlantic average, that we're better prepared for extreme storms, if we had three-phase power in rural communities....

Minister, some of these things are long overdue to get resolved here. When are you going to demand answers on behalf of Islanders and asking questions about these excessive wages next time when they request an IRAC appeal?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Environment, Energy and Climate Action.

Hon. S. Myers: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

I'm not 100 percent sure how they ended up in the filing. Somebody must have asked for them and they must have been taken back. Obviously, it was a concern enough of IRAC that they allowed it and published them. I guess from our perspective, IRAC is kind of the in-between who is supposed to be asking those hard questions.

What we need to do – and I've said this a number of times in here – is have really good legislation so that we can govern the whole electricity file better as we move into the future and really accelerate the growth of renewables and the growth of electrification, which is going to create an enormous amount of profits for somebody, if it's not

for the people. That's why we're looking at local or government ownership of Maritime Electric.

I guess that's the angle that I would take on it, and hopefully we'll have better answers here in the next six months.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from O'Leary-Inverness.

R. Henderson: Minister, these four people earn far more, even just in stock options, than you do, and even the Premier, for that matter. Given the fact that these are significant increases, these salaries would actually even top the Ontario Sunshine List, in the top 20.

[1:50 p.m.]

The Province of Ontario publishes a Sunshine List of affiliated staff with government agencies, and I think that we need to look at something like that. It's done, actually, through the Public Sector Salary Disclosure Act.

Minister, would you be willing to advocate for such a public list of sunshine salaries here on Prince Edward Island?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Environment, Energy and Climate Action.

Hon. S. Myers: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Yeah, it would be all full of Liberals. But I'd be interested in hearing more about it. I'll be honest, I don't know a lot about Ontario's list, but I do have a number of meetings with small Ontario utilities coming up this week to talk about community energy and that type of thing, and I will be with Ontario energy experts for two days this week. I will ask them those types of questions. As you know, I'm willing to look at anything if it's for the good of the people here on PEI.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Third Party.

K. Bernard: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Over the weekend, our office followed up with some of the health care staff at the mental health ER. They thanked us for bringing forward the safety issues and the serious incident that occurred but were "traumatized by the minister's dismissive response."

Health care staff and patient safety (further)

Question to the minister: What changes have you made to improve safety in the mental health ER since the issues have been brought to light?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Hon. M. McLane: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

I wouldn't characterize my comments as dismissive. I would never do that to the staff that place themselves at risk in some of our facilities. We appreciate what they do. We understand that it is a new unit. It's new in Atlantic Canada for providing care to people in a mental health crisis. So, we will support those staff there.

Our director of mental health services met with the team the day after the incident occurred at the facility. We don't want these to happen. The staff doesn't want this to happen. So, we'll continue to work with them as best we can to protect them every day that they serve the people of PEI.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Third Party, your first supplementary.

K. Bernard: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

The question was: "What have you done?" The answer was: "We've met with them." But those on the ground tell us that the answer is nothing. There's been nothing done.

Nothing has been done to improve their safety. During the incident, panic buttons were pressed, but they didn't work, and they still don't.

Question to the minister: Why have you not made sure that these very simple things are fixed?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Hon. M. McLane: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Again, operationally, I would defer to the director of mental health services, who is a very strong advocate. I'm not aware of the operational changes that need to be made at the facility. I know it's important to sit down with our staff to listen to them, to understand why the incident happened, and to try to prevent them.

We know that the code whites, as we referred to before, have declined over time, which is a good trend, but we continue to work on de-escalation training with those mental health staff and we'll continue to do so.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Third Party, your second supplementary.

K. Bernard: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

You keep saying that you listen, and you understand, but how long will that prop up your lack of action, is what I would like to know?

Prior to this incident, staffing levels at the mental health ER were dangerously low. Now we're told, in part because of this incident, at least one staff member is leaving the unit, further reducing an already low staff complement.

No one is saying that this mental health service is not needed or not important, but similar to the medical school, experts told the minister that he was rushing ahead with something that could have serious consequences for Islanders.

Question to the minister: Do you feel that having a mental health ER that is seriously unsafe for both patients and staff is better than implementing the safety requests brought forward to you from the front line?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Hon. M. McLane: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

And to clarify, no concerns were brought to me directly as the minister with regards to the facility. We would defer to our operational experts on that unit.

Staffing levels is a challenge, especially in mental health facilities. We know that we need as many staff as we can. I've talked about security; enhancing security. We are moving those patients away from the general ER, which, again, another incident occurred. We are trying to provide care in a better fashion that's mindful of the crises that they're in, and we'll continue to do that. That unit is a great addition to our mental health system.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Borden-Kinkora.

M. MacFarlane: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

I'd like to take this opportunity to follow up on some of the responses the Minister of Health provided last week regarding the Prince County Hospital.

The minister confirmed that we have, in fact, hired one internist in the past 12 months; however, he also confirmed that we need six internists to reopen the Prince County Hospital ICU. At this rate, it will take six years to recruit enough internists to reopen the ICU, which is completely unacceptable.

[1:55 p.m.]

Process for health care hiring (further)

Question to the Minister of Health: I hope, minister, you can recognize that a hiring process that, as you say, takes anywhere from seven to 12 months is far too long. So, I'll ask you yet again, minister: Will you finally commit to reviewing your cumbersome hiring pipeline so that we can start to get the internists we need here on the ground to help Islanders?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Hon. M. McLane: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

I want to correct the hon. member. I did not say the hiring process takes seven to 12 months; I said life takes seven to 12 months, in order to move your family across the country, sell your house, have your spouse change careers and your kids change schools. We don't approach a physician on Friday and they show up to work on Monday. That's not reasonable and that's mischaracterizing our process.

We have removed PRPC. We have removed all Treasury Board regulations with regards to the hiring. They are extremely hard to recruit. Again, that is one of our rationales on the med school. If they come here and train to be a generalist and then they move on to be a specialist, guess what? They'll probably practice in Atlantic Canada.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Borden-Kinkora, your first supplementary.

M. MacFarlane: Just reading the quote you gave to the CBC media, minister.

Earlier this week, the Premier accused me –

[Interjections]

M. MacFarlane: Earlier this week, the Premier accused me of moving too quickly with a bill I brought forward on medical certificates. I saw a burden to our health care system, and as critic for our health care, I attempted to remove that burden, with full support of Island doctors. My constituents elected me because I committed to making health care my priority, and so I did.

Actions to fix health care crisis

Question to the Minister of Health: Do you agree with the Premier, minister, that moving too quickly to solve health care issues – particularly those at the PCH – is the problem, or do you believe that Islanders would appreciate some faster action on your part to fix the health care crisis?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Hon. M. McLane: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Again, I'll restate that I definitely support the reduction of the use of sick notes within our system. I would look to our neighbours in Nova Scotia, who did it in a thoughtful way, who created criteria where you have to absent for more than five working days or have already had two absences of five days or less within the last 12 months, which will greatly reduce the burden on our health care system.

They are also including nurses, dentists, pharmacists, physiotherapists, and social workers to further ease these burdens. If you have a bad back, I don't think you should go to an ER to get a note. We'd like to see a physio be able to write that note for you, but only under certain conditions.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Borden-Kinkora, your second supplementary.

M. MacFarlane: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Minister, the opportunity was right in front of you last week on the floor of this Legislature to fix that problem.

Last week, the minister told media: "...right now, we have to protect that staff so that they stay at the facility, so that they don't burn out."

Question to the same minister: What kind of message do you think it sends to the staff at Prince County Hospital, minister, when you side with employers over a very simple request from our doctors to remove the administrative burden of sick notes for three paid sick days?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Health and Wellness.

Hon. M. McLane: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

I will always side with our health care workers. I think it's important to note that

the hon. member has some legal training. In this House, we don't ask three questions, and five days later, bring legislation to the floor of the House to change something.

Again, we should take some consultation and make sure it's done right. We have jurisdictional – this is a problem across the country. So, again, to just simply ask three questions and then write on the back of a napkin is not the way we do things.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Souris-Elmira.

R. Croucher: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

I'm going to pick up where Charlottetown-West Royalty left off, but take a little different approach because I know our government is moving in the right direction.

Historically, housing starts across our province have been slowest in the first quarter of each year; in fact, averaging approximately a 40 percent decrease in first-quarter starts when compared to the rest of the yearly quarters. This House has heard lots from the minister and his department on the efforts being taken to improve housing starts on Prince Edward Island.

Housing starts and investments

Question to the Minister of Housing, Land and Communities: I'm asking this because I haven't seen any developments happening recently in District 1. What did the first quarter of 2024 look like for housing starts in our province?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Housing, Land and Communities.

Hon. R. Lantz: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Yes, traditionally, likely based on the weather and our ability to construct in the first quarter, it's been historically a slower quarter. We're starting to see – I think I mentioned in this House earlier this session that we saw an uptick in permitting late last year, which we expected to translate into starts early in this year, and that seems to be the case.

[2:00 p.m.]

Last year, in 2023, first-quarter starts were 75. This first quarter of 2024 was 328, an increase of 337 percent. So, I think we're starting to see some of the programs and policy changes that we've made starting to work their way through the system, and builders seeing the opportunity before them to take advantage of the need for more housing.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Souris-Elmira.

R. Croucher: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

I love hearing that from the minister. It needs to be heard. It's promising to see the progress happening and hopefully, it holds for the rest of the year and moves a little bit further east, minister. We need housing at all levels of the housing market, including public housing with affordable rent geared to income.

Question to the Minister of Housing, Land and Communities: What has been invested in public housing units in recent years, and just how many new units have been built?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Housing, Land and Communities.

Hon. R. Lantz: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

I don't have exact numbers with me. You heard me say just a few minutes ago that we've acquired 111 units, I think, since December of 2023, which adds to 100 and some units that we had purchased prior to that, that I tabled in this Legislature.

Just on that note, I tabled the appraised values after questions about whether we got value for money. It turns out we paid \$24.6 million for properties that were appraised at a total of \$24.8 million, so it seems we got a deal. I didn't hear that raised again after I tabled that information.

We're constantly on the lookout for opportunities to acquire properties. We're breaking ground on a record number of new builds. In fact, here in Charlottetown, about 140-some-odd units will break ground shortly. We'll start building roads and

services on our property in Hillsborough Park. I've had lots of discussions with the member about opportunities in the Souris area.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Souris-Elmira, your second supplementary.

R. Croucher: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

We just heard some great news from the minister, but here is what I'm really getting at. I know that there is a great demand for housing in my end of the province at all levels. I hear it every day from families in desperate need in our area. I've been lobbying hard behind the scenes, but now I will ask, on the record, as I did not hear any mention of Souris in the minister's announcement of builds when he was having his exchange with Charlottetown-West Royalty. I did hear a little mention of it there in his last answer.

Question to the Minister of Housing, Land and Communities: What is on tap for new housing initiatives in the Souris area? What can be done to move this much needed work along?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Housing, Land and Communities.

Hon. R. Lantz: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Let me speak directly to the constituents of Souris-Elmira and let them know that their member is lobbying very hard on their behalf for their housing needs in the district.

We're working on that. My staff that are watching know that I've passed along the member's concerns about the need for housing in his district. We plan fairly well in advance for our capital budget. We've got you on the radar. It may take some time, but we'll get some projects in the works.

I will say, in the meantime, there are opportunities through our Housing Challenge Fund, another phase of which we'll probably have through our Affordable Housing Development Program through our new Municipal Infrastructure Fund, for which Souris will be qualified to take advantage of.

There are many ways for us to advance the housing needs of the people of your district. I'm willing to work with you to take advantage of all those programs and initiatives that we offer.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Morell-Donagh.

S. MacEwen: The Minister of Housing looks suppld out there, Madam Speaker, so let's keep him on the up and down.

I'm happy with the public and private levers that are happening in District 7. I have another solution here. We have a *Planning Act* and regulations that allow one dwelling on a parcel of land. There are good reasons for that, of course.

There are exceptions, though: a garden suite, a tourism operation where the rentals are grouped together, a resort development, grouped senior housing, and, of course, the final exception is for housing that's in conjunction with a farm parcel. This makes a lot of sense. Housing is needed in order to attract the workers for the area.

The same issues, though, impact the aquaculture section, as well. These operations are just like the agriculture operations.

Housing regulation exception for aquaculture

A question to the Minister of Housing: Do you think that that same exemption for agriculture should be there for aquaculture facilities as well?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Housing, Land and Communities.

Hon. R. Lantz: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

[2:05 p.m.]

Let me say that I do know there are some ways in which agriculture and aquaculture are not entirely treated equally in terms of housing through temporary foreign workers; the way that those are treated. There are some ways I think we need to come together and treat each of those industries equitably.

However, in this case, they're treated as resource land, and there is possibility through the land division to have both a home and a resource building on a lot. If there are specific circumstances the member is inquiring about, I can help him look into those, inquire, and see if there are ways that we can adjust our regulations so that people in these resource sectors are treated equally.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Morell-Donagh.

S. MacEwen: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

These aquaculture companies can bring in new families to the community. We see agriculture operations across the province where they have multiple dwellings adjacent to the facility. They bring in workers, it brings new people to the community, it fills the schools; all of those things.

What we're looking for is a change in the regulations for planning. You might need a new definition for aquaculture, and I acknowledge the minister that agriculture and aquaculture aren't exactly congruent when we talk about federal regulations stuff, but from a provincial point of view, bringing that housing onto adjacent or in conjunction with the facility would certainly allow them to put more than one dwelling on and bring in workers who create homes there, and they live and work in the community.

Can you look into what it would take to make that exception going forward, minister?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Housing, Land and Communities.

Hon. R. Lantz: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

I think this issue is a perfect one for us to advance and consult with the public and our resource sectors as we shortly get into the consultation phase of our provincial land use plan. I want to thank the member for his really important statement about the importance of investing in our rural communities and the great investments that this government has made.

That may seem strange coming from the member from right here in Charlottetown,

but having toured this whole province with many of the rural members of this Legislature, it's amazing to see the work that happens, the industriousness, the hard work and productivity all across this province. I thank the member for pointing out the importance of those rural sectors. I look forward to having this discussion about our land use for our resource sectors as we get into our land use plan.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Morell-Donagh, your second supplementary.

S. MacEwen: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

The member knows as well; he and I were able to tour years ago many of these spots, as well. This is in conjunction with the provincial land use plan, I understand that. I'd like this change to be made prior to that. I feel it's a simpler change to make in the interim. I do know about unintended consequences, of course, with this kind of stuff, so I encourage the minister to look at it in the interim.

But there are also other things we can do, and that is part of a bigger land use discussion; for example, how to subdivide on certain types of roads in the province, where if a company has 13 acres on a road that we deem collector but it's really not that busy, and they're only allowed to put, say, one mini-home on it or one dwelling, where we need to be able to subdivide that to bring the workers. I think that's important.

I want the minister to look at both of these things in conjunction, but look at making the regulation change in the interim, and then the bigger discussion over subdividing land in the fuller land use plan.

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Housing, Land and Communities.

Hon. R. Lantz: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

He caught me a little bit off guard with this today, so I'm looking forward to digging into the details with him, and I know that the member is very diligent and he wouldn't be bringing this up if he hadn't done his homework. I really look forward to hearing exactly what he's got to say and what he's got in mind for changes to the regulations,

so we'll sit down and have a look at that and see what we can do.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Member from Charlottetown-West Royalty.

G. McNeilly: Question to the Minister of Housing.

We've heard this scenario many times before, but it bears repeating as the situations are happening repeatedly. This is about a direct result from one of my constituents coming to me. She was a single parent; has a young baby. They applied for housing with the hopes of getting support to be put on the registry. When the assessment was done, the worker told them that they didn't qualify because they were living with a relative and they were fine there.

Minister, this person is well educated, wants to work and contribute to society, and is living with relatives as a stopgap measure as they left an abusive situation. My constituent suggested that the worker told this person to stay there and – quote – don't bother working and to go on welfare. Not adding to the registry that you were trying to get to zero, putting it over to the Minister of Social Development, and not helping her or giving any hope to this young family.

Applying for housing supports

Minister, is that any way that your department and your colleagues in the department treat Islanders who are just trying to get support and help for them and their family?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Housing, Land and Communities.

Hon. R. Lantz: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

[2:10 p.m.]

Our social housing inventory in this province is set aside for those with low income, and that is essentially the major criteria to qualify for our public housing. If, indeed, this constituent does, then they should be eligible to at least be put on the waiting list.

I would say that the project that we've got going on here in Charlottetown, which I assume your constituent is here in Charlottetown – it sounds like this is a single mother who you say may have been in an abusive relationship. Our project that's partially funded through the federal government's Rapid Housing Initiative does set aside a certain number of units for women and children. I'm not sure exactly how those units are assessed, but, look, just based on your description, I think we should take a second look and make sure that if this person is eligible, that she's on the list and we can put her in a unit at some point in the future.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Speaker: The hon. Leader of the Opposition, final question.

Hon. H. Perry: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

Wind farm in Skinners Pond

Question to the Minister of Environment, Energy and Climate Action: Can you please give this House an update on the proposed wind farm in Skinners Pond? Is it still on schedule to be operational in 2025?

Speaker: The hon. Minister of Environment, Energy and Climate Action.

Hon. S. Myers: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

I believe it's 2026 that it's supposed to come online, but we're in the final stages of changing our corridor to get our transmission line in so that we can get the power to the market. I think there are probably briefings going to be offered to the western MLAs here – if it hasn't already started – very soon to bring you up to speed on that.

We've met with Invenergy; they're all a go-ahead. Every conversation I have with them is positive. They're positive with the timeline and we're positive with the timeline. We're also looking forward to getting the nice green energy on our grid to help offset some of the power load that comes from New Brunswick.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

[End of Question Period]