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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
(HANSARD)

Thursday, April 27, 2006
Morning Sitting
Volume 10, Number 1

THE HONOURABLE BILL BARISOFF, SPEAKER

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PROVINCE OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
(Entered Confederation July 20, 1871)

LIEUTENANT-GOVERNOR
Her Honour the Honourable Iona V. Campagnolo, CM, OBC

SECOND SESSION, 38TH PARLIAMENT

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Honourable Bill Barisoff

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THURSDAY, APRIL 27, 2006

The House met at 10:02 a.m.

Prayers.

Introductions by Members

G. Coons: I have the honour today of introducing in the House Jim Terrion Jr. from Prince Rupert. Jim was presented with the British Columbia Community Achievement Award at Government House. Jim has been the most avid supporter of the Terry Fox Run in British Columbia and over the last 14 years has collected over \$400,000. In one year he collected more than Vancouver.

Jim is hearing impaired, and in 1990 he walked across Canada to increase public awareness of the needs of the deaf and to raise funds for the World Winter Games for the Deaf. He must have forgotten something, because not only did he walk across Canada, but he turned around and walked back.

Terry Fox had a dream, and Jim has one also: to participate in the Marathon of Hope every year until cancer is beaten. Jim is accompanied by his proud mother Faye Terrion and his brother Mike. Will the House please welcome them today.

[Applause.]

Hon. S. Hagen: In the precincts today is a class of students — 23 grade seven students — from Hornby Island School led by Ms. Deborah Graham, who is their teacher, plus five adults. Would the House please join me in making them feel very welcome.

Introduction and First Reading of Bills

ADULT GUARDIANSHIP AND PERSONAL PLANNING STATUTES AMENDMENT ACT, 2006

Hon. W. Oppal presented a message from Her Honour the Lieutenant-Governor: a bill intituled Adult Guardianship and Personal Planning Statutes Amendment Act, 2006.

[1005]

Hon. W. Oppal: Mr. Speaker, I move that the bill be introduced and read a first time now.

Motion approved.

Hon. W. Oppal: I'm pleased to introduce Bill 32. British Columbians are living healthier and longer, but planning for the possibility for future incapacity, both individually and collectively, is timely and extremely important.

The purposes of Bill 32 are, first, to provide adults with the best tools possible to plan for their own future if they choose to do so; second, to ensure that British Columbians who do not plan, or whose plans fail, will be well-served by modern guardianship law. To these

ends, Bill 32 clarifies and modernizes the laws governing how decisions are made for adults who are incapable of making decisions about their own personal care, health or financial matters. Bill 32 will increase certainty and protection for adults when they become most vulnerable.

The Adult Guardianship Act will be amended to reflect modern guardianship principles of individual autonomy and dignity and to provide appropriate protections. This will enable the long-awaited repeal of the Patients Property Act, an act that's over 40 years old and is based on 19th-century English law.

In addition, Bill 32 amends several statutes to strengthen, simplify and synchronize three personal planning instruments to provide, first, a representation agreement that will be the only planning tool for an adult to appoint a substitute to make personal and health care decisions. This instrument will continue to be available for all adults in British Columbia. Next, an enduring power of attorney will be the primary instrument for capable adults to appoint a substitute to make decisions about financial matters. Finally, an advance care directive will enable capable adults to refuse, in advance, consent to health care in non-emergency situations and without involvement of a substitute decision-maker.

Bill 32 is the culmination of review and consultation that began after the proclamation in 2002 to change the adult guardianship and planning laws that had been introduced in 1993.

Mr. Speaker, I move that the bill be placed on the orders of the day for second reading at the next sitting of the House after today.

Bill 32, Adult Guardianship and Personal Planning Statutes Amendment Act, 2006, introduced, read a first time and ordered to be placed on orders of the day for second reading at the next sitting of the House after today.

Hon. S. Hagen: I believe that the class from Hornby Island School that I introduced a few moments ago has just entered the precincts. So could we give them another round of applause, please.

[Applause.]

Orders of the Day

Hon. M. de Jong: I call in this chamber continued committee stage debate on Bill 21 and, in Section A, debates on the Committee of Supply — for the information of members, the Ministry of Community Services.

[1010]

Committee of the Whole House

EMPLOYMENT AND INCOME ASSISTANCE STATUTES AMENDMENT ACT, 2006

(continued)

The House in Committee of the Whole (Section B) on Bill 21; S. Hawkins in the chair.

The committee met at 10:10 a.m.

On section 5 (*continued*).

C. Trevena: Madam Chair, I'd like to take up where we left off yesterday evening, very briefly. The minister was talking about the approach by the Information and Privacy Commissioner to the Minister of Labour and Citizens' Services to make sure that in future, there are changes in respect to information-sharing agreements through legislation, which is all well and good.

However, this bill will be going through on existing legislation, and this existing legislation has caused the Information and Privacy Commissioner some great concern. I would like to again ask the minister why he is proceeding with this section of the bill, when there have been these serious concerns raised by the Information and Privacy Commissioner — so serious that he is approaching another minister to make changes in the structure.

Hon. C. Richmond: Yes, we have sought an opinion from the provincial Privacy Commissioner on the merits of this proposed legislation. The ministry provided the Office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner with a copy of the amendments for the commissioner's review.

Ensuring privacy protection in information-sharing agreements is something both this ministry and the commissioner take very seriously. The commissioner acknowledges that there are some good reasons for the exchange of personal information among or between governments and is satisfied that the provisions of the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act will provide adequate assurance that appropriate checks and balances are in place to safeguard this information.

We are amending our legislation so we can more effectively participate in cross-government research projects and initiatives, which will ultimately benefit our clients, and explore new methods of improving service delivery. It is a priority of this government to protect the confidentiality of personal information. This change does not alter that priority.

Our clients can be assured that all of the personal information they provide to this ministry is collected, used and disclosed in accordance with the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act. The Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act has been in place since 1993 and is the strongest privacy legislation in Canada and among the strongest in the world.

[1015]

C. Trevena: Minister, this is what you read to me last night as well. I am very aware that you have consulted the Privacy Commissioner and that the Privacy Commissioner has seen a draft of the bill. The Privacy Commissioner was concerned about the bill, so concerned that he responded saying: "My strong view is that legislation authorizing information agreements should list the purposes of such agreements rather than relying on language of part 3 of FOIPPA. A listing of

purposes for information-sharing agreements allows the public to know the scope of the information-sharing envisioned...."

The minister then responded to the Privacy Commissioner, and the Privacy Commissioner was so concerned that he again responded to the minister about these amendments, voicing his concern about the breadth of them and saying that the amendments in this bill give your ministry considerable information-sharing powers, and raising concerns saying that he wants to take this further and asking for consultation on the legislation.

I would therefore like to ask the minister, without reading into the record the statement again about the protection of people's personal information — we do hope that people's personal information is protected, because it is very personal information when we're talking about income assistance recipients — why, when these concerns have been raised by the Privacy Commissioner, the minister still believes that it is a good idea to move on at this stage with these amendments. Why not hold back on the amendments until the consultation, which the minister has clearly welcomed, with the Minister of Labour and Citizens' Services has taken place?

Hon. C. Richmond: First of all, quoting from the letter from the Privacy Commissioner, he says: "Among other things, clear, consistent and substantive governmentwide approach to both legislation and policy on information-sharing agreements would be desirable. Therefore, I have asked my staff to initiate a discussion with the Ministry of Labour and Citizens' Services to provide a framework for future legislative policy initiatives with respect to information-sharing agreements."

Just to reiterate, our Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act is the strongest privacy legislation in Canada and among the strongest in the world. The government believes that the most efficient and effective way to manage information and privacy is to rely on the high standards of FOIPPA. Leaving privacy protection to individual pieces of legislation restricts government's ability to respond effectively and swiftly in circumstances where sharing information benefits clients.

I would also like to add here that in such a case before the FOIPPA act is amended, if we were asked to share information with another level of government, you can rest assured that our concerns are similar to yours. We will go to any end to protect the privacy and informational privacy of our clients. We would not disclose any information that was sensitive and personal. If any information-sharing were done, it would be on a broad basis with no names attached. There would be an information-sharing on maybe the number of cases that pertain to such and such a situation, but we would not share information with any other agency or level of government that would in any way infringe on the privacy of an individual.

C. Trevena: The minister quotes quite correctly from the letter that he received from the Privacy Com-

missioner earlier this week, when the Privacy Commissioner talks about the consultation for a framework for future legislative and policy initiatives. We're talking about the current legislative and policy initiative, and this is the concern — that we are discussing apples and oranges here. We have the Privacy Commissioner saying we have to look at future legislative initiatives, and yet this bill is proceeding currently, not in the future.

While it is wonderful that the minister has such faith in the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act, he should also further consult, possibly, with the Privacy Commissioner.

[1020]

The Privacy Commissioner, in his response to the draft of the bill, tells the minister that when it comes to privacy protection, FOIPPA, the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act, is the legislative floor, not the ceiling — which means that it's the foundation. This isn't the all-encompassing act that will protect privacy. This is the real concern, and this is the concern I have.

The minister gives assurances that people's names are not going to be shared without consultation, and so forth and so on, but we have seen the government's record in selling of computer disks where there is personal information. We have seen that it is not possible to protect people's personal information. We are talking about very sensitive information when people are applying for income assistance and, later on in the bill, when people are applying for disability benefit.

I would like to ask the minister on section 5(b), which clearly widens the ability for information sharing.... There was already a reference to the United States. This does cause great concern that there is the possibility of sharing information with a state of the United States or agency of the United States, because there seems to be no reason why information about British Columbia income assistance recipients should be shared with the United States.

However, under the present legislation, it is information-sharing agreements over matters relating to social programs. Section 5(b) in the current bill clearly widens that to say "any of the following." It deletes the issue of "financial arrangements or other matters relating to social programs." I would like to know why this has been taken out and why this is being widened in such a way.

Hon. C. Richmond: The amendments in this bill, Bill 21, do not create the authority to enter into agreements outside of B.C. This authority pre-existed under B.C. Benefits legislation, so this is not new. It doesn't create the authority. It just extends what is already there, which is pre-existing.

The only change to this section is to make clear that when the ministry enters into such agreements outside of B.C., it does so on behalf of the government of B.C. This amendment simply makes that intention explicit. There are a number of reasons why the ministry enters into agreements outside of B.C. Reasons include the need to avoid duplicate payments of assistance to the

same person or to ensure that clients who are in receipt of assistance don't have to provide the same information over and over. An example of this is to support eligibility determination for the bus pass program.

So just to repeat, the amendments in this bill do not create the authority to share information outside of British Columbia. It just extends the pre-existing legislation which was put into law under the B.C. Benefits legislation. The Lieutenant-Governor-in-Council will still be required when the minister enters into agreements on behalf of the government of B.C. with another government outside of B.C. or with public bodies if the purpose is other than the administration or enforcement of either act or another provincial act.

[1025]

C. Trevena: In the minister's reading of prepared answers written by his staff, I would hope that his staff could prepare an answer which answers the question I asked previously. Why is this widening the sharing of information from the previous legislation, which says, "financial arrangements or other matters relating to social programs," to "any of the following"?

Hon. C. Richmond: I'm sorry if the member doesn't like answers that are provided by my staff, but they're very accurate, and they know the legislation intimately. We're trying to be accurate here and portray exactly what is going on.

Under the old act, in section 30(3), it merely said that the minister or ministry did not have to go back to the Lieutenant-Governor-in-Council every time they wanted to share information, which was "only for the purposes of administration or enforcement." It means that they don't have to go back to cabinet every time they want to share that type of information with another government or another agency.

In the old act there's a whole litany here, under section 30(2) of the old act: "With...prior approval of the Lieutenant Governor in Council, the minister may enter into any of the following...." It pretty much follows the new act, with the exception that on sharing financial information, we don't have to go back to the Lieutenant-Governor-in-Council every time we want to do it — anything pertaining to this act, the Income Tax Act, the Immigration Act, a social benefit program operated by a government, an agency, a public body or a legal entity referred to in subsection (2).

The alignment of services and programs across government will improve how we deliver services to our clients. Our stakeholders and clients have told us time and again that it can be time-consuming and frustrating to provide the same information to government over and over again. That's a written response from my staff.

[1030]

C. Trevena: I'm very pleased that the minister wants to be accurate. I just wanted him to answer the question. The minister has now answered the question, so I thank him for that.

In subsection (2.3), the changes include information-sharing "not required for the purpose of sharing for research purposes personal information...." I wondered what sort of research purposes the minister might be considering when we are talking about income assistance information.

Hon. C. Richmond: The ministry enters into research agreements for three purposes:

(1) To evaluate the effectiveness of ministry programs or other ministries' programs. An example is to evaluate the impact of education programs on income assistance clients. We needed to enter into a research agreement with the Ministry of Advanced Education. This was necessary to identify the education programs that our clients were taking.

(2) To identify joint clients — clients that have been served by other ministries or other agencies. For example, the Ministry of Children and Family Development and the Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance both offer programs to help children in need. A research agreement between the two ministries helps identify how many children use programs offered by both ministries and why. This allows the ministry to identify gaps in service or possible areas for program improvements.

(3) To research the background of clients to help develop programs to help income assistance recipients become independent. For example, the ministry has conducted research agreements with the Ministry of Education to identify the education levels of ministry clients. This research has also identified the educational attainment of children who grow up in welfare-dependent families and was used to show that children of welfare-dependent parents are less likely to graduate from high school. This, in turn, has helped the ministry develop effective employment programs and other initiatives to increase independence.

C. Trevena: I thank the minister for that.

I come back to my original concerns that we are talking about sharing highly personal information about individuals who are dependent on the ministry for their existence. So I want to raise my concerns, once again, that this is going ahead despite the concerns raised by the Information and Privacy Commissioner and that it is taking the ability to share this highly personal information away from having to get an order-in-council with the approval of the Lieutenant-Governor and being able to do it through the ministry on its own.

I think these are highly questionable and cause high concern. I hope the minister can continue to assure the people of B.C. that income assistance recipients and people — once we get further on with the bill — who receive disability benefits and PPMB benefits — that their personal information and highly sensitive information is fully protected....

[S. Hammell in the chair.]

Hon. C. Richmond: I have another response that I think is fairly complete, which should satisfy the member's doubts about why we're doing this. The authority

for information-sharing agreements in the employment and assistance legislation was simply imported from B.C. Benefits legislation. At the time, there were no specific provisions for information-sharing agreements in FOIPPA legislation, and research agreements were simply treated as any other information-sharing agreement. This led to some confusion as to which type of agreement was required — for information-sharing or for research.

However, for the purposes of research, personal information needs to be shared only for data-matching purposes and only to authorized researchers. Once the data match has occurred, all personal information is destroyed, and only aggregate information is reported. For example, a research agreement between this ministry and the Ministry of Advanced Education needs only to report on data as to the number of MEIA clients who completed high school education. It does not need to and should not report on specific clients who do not have a complete high school education.

[1035]

Since these provisions were originally drafted in B.C. Benefits, FOIPPA has recognized information-sharing agreements as distinct from research agreements. The amendments in sections 5 and 12 of Bill 21 ensure we align with FOIPPA by expressly providing for research agreements and that such agreements must comply with section 35 of the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act.

Section 5 approved on division.

Sections 6 to 8 inclusive approved.

Section 9 approved on division.

Sections 10 and 11 approved.

Section 12 approved on division.

Sections 13 to 15 inclusive approved.

Title approved.

Hon. C. Richmond: I move the committee rise and report the bill complete without amendment.

Motion approved.

The committee rose at 10:37 a.m.

The House resumed; Mr. Speaker in the chair.

[1040]

Report and Third Reading of Bills

EMPLOYMENT AND INCOME ASSISTANCE STATUTES AMENDMENT ACT, 2006

Bill 21, Employment and Income Assistance Statutes Amendment Act, 2006, reported complete without

amendment, read a third time on the following division and passed:

YEAS — 43

Falcon	Reid	Coell
Ilich	Chong	Christensen
Les	Richmond	Bell
Bennett	van Dongen	Roddick
Hayer	Lee	Jarvis
Nuraney	Whittred	Horning
Cantelon	Thorpe	Hagen
Oppal	de Jong	Taylor
Bond	Hansen	Abbott
Penner	Neufeld	Hogg
Sultan	Hawkins	Krueger
Lekstrom	Mayencourt	Polak
Hawes	Yap	Bloy
MacKay	Black	McIntyre
	Rustad	

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S. Simpson	Fleming	Farnworth
Kwan	Brar	Cubberley
Hammell	Coons	Thorne
Simons	Gentner	Routley
Fraser	Lali	Dix
Trevena	Bains	Karagianis
Ralston	Krog	Chouhan
Wyse	Sather	Macdonald
	Conroy	

[1045]

Hon. M. de Jong: I call second reading debate of Bill 28 and — for the information of members, if and when that bill completes — then second reading of Bill 29.

Second Reading of Bills

PARK (CONSERVANCY ENABLING) AMENDMENT ACT, 2006

Hon. B. Penner: I move that the bill now be read a second time.

I am pleased to present this bill for second reading and for consideration by all members of the Legislature. The bill, of course, is entitled Park (Conservancy Enabling) Amendment Act, 2006, which will amend both the Park Act and the Protected Areas of British Columbia Act.

The amendments to the Park Act are intended to create a new conservancy designation to protect special areas recently set aside by this government's decisions

respecting the central coast and north coast land and resource management plan areas.

This legislation also amends the Protected Areas of British Columbia Act to establish the first 24 conservancies encompassing more than 540,000 hectares resulting from these land use decisions. Included in these new conservancies is the nearly 103,000-hectare Kitasoo spirit bear conservancy on Princess Royal Island. These amendments confirm and demonstrate British Columbia's international leadership in the establishment of protected areas. We have a protected area system to be truly proud of.

Earlier this year the Premier announced the historic collaborative land use deals respecting the north coast and central coast of British Columbia, marking the completion of almost ten years of negotiations with first nations, industry, environmentalists, local governments and many other stakeholders. This government has listened and worked hard to ensure protection of some of the most ecologically significant areas in the province and indeed the world.

The magnitude of these land use decisions can be measured by the attention and interest they've attracted around the world, including front-page headlines in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Boston Globe* and others. These are internationally significant land use decisions because they involve an internationally significant land mass.

The conservancies will preserve some of the world's largest intact temperate rain forests, protecting some of B.C.'s most spectacular landscapes and securing habitat for a number of species, including the rare spirit bear. In fact, my colleague the Minister of Agriculture and Lands points out that even the renowned publication *Pravda* carried news coverage about this announcement on our mid-coast. I wasn't aware that he had a subscription to that publication. However, things never cease to amaze me.

Interjections.

Hon. B. Penner: Maybe it was leaked to him from the opposition. That's right.

Altogether, these two coastal land use decisions will result in approximately 1.2 million hectares being set aside in one of the most ecologically diverse regions in the world, creating over 100 new protected areas over the next few years. This is in addition to 600,000 hectares of existing protected areas in that region.

These land use decisions are internationally significant also because of the way these deals were reached — using a consensus-based model, highlighting this government's relationship with first nations and listening to the needs of local communities, environmentalists and industry alike.

With these historic land use decisions, British Columbia has been able to rebrand its forest products and send a signal to international consumers and the marketplace that we can manage our resources in a sus-

tainable manner, in a way that is unparalleled anywhere else.

[S. Hammell in the chair.]

I'd like to begin now discussing the new conservancy designation by addressing the amendments to the Park Act, after which I'll address amendments to the Protected Areas of British Columbia Act.

The new designation will allow the true spirit of the land use decisions and the emerging new relationship with the first nations to be realized. It sets aside protected areas, but it also ensures that the people living on the north coast and central coast are given the ability to continue to live and prosper in their communities.

[1050]

As I mentioned, first nations have been involved in this process from the very beginning. I would like to take this opportunity to describe how we've been working together. I will read now a few highlighted passages from a letter that I will shortly be sending to the first nations involved in the government-to-government process to establish these conservancies. This letter is intended to provide certainty for the management and operation of the conservancies.

Quoting from the text of the letter, it says:

The conservancy designation protects for future generations amazing coastal landscapes, areas of importance to first nations and areas that will provide wonderful opportunities for the public to enjoy coastal and marine environments on the north and central coast of this province.

The province wishes to build a new relationship with first nations based on principles of mutual respect, reconciliation and recognition of aboriginal rights, as well as a shared vision of increased economic certainty and prosperity for all British Columbians. The land use decisions for the central coast and north coast demonstrated the province's commitment in this regard, as the province and first nations work to develop unprecedented government-to-government arrangements that built on the excellent work of the public planning tables.

Likewise, the desire for this new relationship is reflected in the collaborative efforts of coastal first nations and the province in developing the conservancy designation. The conservancy designation explicitly recognizes the importance of such areas to first nations. The amendments to the Park Act provide a framework for first nations and the province to enter into agreements for the administration and management of conservancies and other protected areas, including first nations carrying out activities necessary for the exercise of aboriginal rights and for access for social, ceremonial and cultural purposes.

Conservancies are areas set aside to (a) protect and maintain their biological diversity and natural environments; (b) preserve and maintain social, ceremonial and cultural uses of first nations; (c) protect and maintain their recreational values; and (d) ensure the development and use of their natural resources occurs in a sustainable manner consistent with the other purposes for which a conservancy may be established. These purposes are intended to work together to ensure that conservancies offer a range of uses and benefits for all British Columbians.

Consistent with the wishes of first nations and coastal communities, a number of the conservancies will be managed to enhance tourism opportunities. Conservancies may also allow for a range of low-impact and compatible economic activities that are consistent with the purposes of conservancies' negotiated collaborative management arrangements and approved management plans for conservancies.

In support of the conservancy designation, the province commits to working with first nations to establish collaborative management arrangements respecting the conservancies and other protected areas. These arrangements may take the form of negotiated management agreements or less structured protocols, where appropriate and requested by first nations. Further, the province commits to working with first nations and others to prepare management plans to guide the protection, management and operation of these conservancies and other protected areas.

That's the text of the letter, and that letter is now part of the public record. I believe it shows this government's commitment to the protection of these special places and our willingness to forge new relationships with first nations.

In addition, our government commits to putting management plans in place for conservancy before park use permits will be considered or issued for activities that are not currently conducted in that area. These management plans will be developed cooperatively with the respective first nations in accordance with negotiated collaborative management agreements. The preparation of management plans will provide appropriate opportunities for other British Columbians to provide input into the management of these significant areas.

I would like to provide some clarity as to what activities will be permitted in conservancies. Let me state clearly that commercial logging, mining and large-scale hydroelectric power generation will be prohibited in conservancies, and this is made clear in these amendments. There will be a provision to permit local run-of-the-river hydro projects. However, applications for a permit to develop local run-of-the-river hydro projects will only be considered within conservancies for the purposes of supplying power for approved uses in a conservancy or to nearby communities that do not have access to the main B.C. Hydro power grid and are currently generating electricity through such means as diesel power generators.

[1055]

I think most British Columbians would agree that switching to this green power source would result in a net benefit for the environment, and the local communities would certainly see a vast improvement in the air quality of their pristine valleys.

Just last week I had a chance to visit Hartley Bay with the Premier, and one of the first things we were shown upon our arrival was the location of their old diesel generator. In the background I could hear the sound of roaring water, and I asked members of that first nation if they'd investigated the possibility of utilizing run-of-the-river hydroelectric projects to replace their dependence on diesel power for providing electricity to their community.

I was told that, in fact, they are currently actively examining that possibility. They have retained a consultant, and they believe they have the opportunity to provide renewable, zero-emission electricity for their community, utilizing a run-of-the-river project that would supplant the diesel generator up to eight or perhaps even nine months of the year. That could result in about a 75-percent reduction in their reliance on diesel fuel, which in my view, would be a positive development.

Provisions will also be made for allowing roads through a limited number of conservancies for the purpose of providing access to natural resources lying beyond the conservancy. The issue of access was discussed during the land use planning processes and the subsequent government-to-government negotiations.

At this point I would like to address the amendments to the Protected Areas of British Columbia Act, which will establish the first 24 new conservancies resulting from government's land use decisions for the central and north coast LRMP areas. To emphasize the ecological value and uniqueness of these newly designated areas, I would like to take this opportunity to mention a few.

Members will have to forgive me as I attempt to pronounce some of these areas. The Mahpahkum-Ahkwuná/Deserters-Walker Conservancy, at just 931 hectares, is one of the smallest of the new conservancies. It is located 20 kilometres north of Port Hardy and protects several small, unique islands and provides ecosystem representation in the Queen Charlotte Strait Ecoregion. This conservancy is part of asserted traditional territories of the Gwa'Sala', Nakwaxda'xw and Kwakiutl first nations. Apologies to first nations everywhere.

An Hon. Member: Spell it out.

Hon. B. Penner: I will probably spell this later for the good people at Hansard.

The Lax-Ka'gaas/Campania Conservancy covers the entire 20,500 hectares that make up the island and is located 65 kilometres south of Hartley Bay and 120 kilometres southwest of Kitimat. The island is marked by Mount Pender, which rises up to 700 metres while the majority of the northern portion is lowland topography, large expanses of muskeg and occasional shallow lakes and wetlands. Several rare and unusual plant communities occur within this conservancy. A number of safe anchorages and excellent recreational opportunities exist, including hiking and spectacular white sand beaches, which are a particular attraction.

The Gitxaala Nii Luutiksm/Kitkatla Conservancy, 28,000 hectares, is located on Porcher Island adjacent to the community of Kitkatla, roughly 45 kilometres southwest of Prince Rupert. *Gitxaala* means people of the salt, which is a reference to the oceanfront location of the community on Dolphin Island. *Nii Luutiksm* means a special or treasured area, and it is especially fitting for this conservancy. Gitxalla, Kitkatla Inlet is

often referred to as the KitKatla grocery store. The inlet provides a wealth of traditional resources that have for millennia sustained the local inhabitants.

Traditional harvesting of seaweed, roe-on-kelp, cockles and salmon are a few of the items that first nations people have relied on. This inlet has a very high habitat rating for waterfowl due to its high habitat-carrying capacity. A grey whale rubbing beach is also a special feature within this conservancy. Recreational values are very high, with good camping, kayaking, fishing and diving opportunities. The conservancy is situated in the asserted territories of the Gitxaala, Metlakatla and Laxkw'alaams first nations.

[1100]

Hunwadi/Ahnuhati-Bald Conservancy, at 34,532 hectares, is located on Knight Inlet and connects to Bond Sound about 125 kilometres east of Port Hardy. Special features in the conservancy include a largely intact, old-growth ecosystem, representative of the northern Pacific ranges that support grizzly bears, salmon and marbled murrelets. This conservancy is in the asserted territories of the Da'naxda'xw, Kwicksutaineuk-Ah-Kwa-Mish and Mamalilikulla-Qwe'Qwa'Sot'Em First Nations, and I won't say that again.

Last — but certainly not least, in fact, because it's the largest of the 24 conservancies to be designated this year, at about 103,000 hectares — is the Kitasoo Spirit Bear Conservancy on Princess Royal Island. It is located approximately 90 kilometres northwest of Bella Bella and 120 kilometres south of Kitimat. This area, which is adjacent to the K'ootz/Khutze Conservancy, protects the rare and special ecosystems that are home to the kermode or spirit bear as well as marbled murrelets, bald eagles and other wildlife. This conservancy is within the asserted territories of the Kitasoo and Heiltsuk First Nations.

These are but a few of the 24 conservancies to be designated this year, with approximately 86 more to follow in the coming year, creating a protected-area system in this spectacular part of our province that will stand as a legacy for all British Columbians.

I'm proud to introduce these amendments to build on our world-class parks and protected areas system and demonstrate this government's willingness to work with first nations, environmental groups, industry and communities to find solutions that keep everyone's interests in mind, building a stronger and more prosperous province for everyone.

On an administrative note, I want to point out to all members that the Office of the Clerk has been provided with copies of all the maps that depict the boundaries of the new conservancies. These maps are available for viewing if any member would like to see them.

Mr. Speaker, I move that this bill be referred to a Committee of the Whole House to be considered at the next sitting of the House after today.

S. Simpson: I'm very pleased to have the opportunity to get up and speak to Bill 28, the Park Amendment (Conservancy Enabling) Amendment Act. This bill is an important piece of legislation. There's no

doubt about that. It clearly is a key component in the package of work that needs to be done around the LRMPs in the north and on the coast. It is a piece of legislation that we know will create these conservancy areas that, while they are similar, they are somewhat different than our class-A parks.

As the minister says, this piece of legislation will protect some 540,000 hectares of land in these 24 conservancy areas, and ultimately — from reading the materials that came with the bill — we'll see some 1.2 million hectares protected over time in what will probably be upwards of 109 conservancy areas by 2007. This, of course, is in addition to what we see as the some 600,000 hectares of existing parks, primarily class-A parks, in the affected areas.

This legislation, as we know, really is a result of a number of initiatives over an extended period of time. It's a result of what have been government-to-government discussions between the province and the first nations, discussions that were complex, no doubt, and challenging to conclude — to the point that they are concluded. I'll speak a little bit more about that soon, because there clearly are questions that continue to be in front of us about the impacts of the LRMP and how the LRMP decisions will be implemented and how these decisions around the conservancy areas will be implemented.

[1105]

What we can be proud of.... Frankly, this is something that, as the members of the House will know, was an extremely long process. It was a process that was initiated by the NDP in the 1990s. The LRMP process was a process initiated by the NDP government. It was the NDP that really commenced those meaningful discussions with first nations around questions of integrated land use planning.

Those discussions evolved, as the Premier acknowledged at the time that he made the announcement announcing the north and the mid-coast agreements. He said it was really, for more than a decade now, I guess, a time when two governments, both the NDP and the current Liberal government, worked on finding solutions for a sustainable approach to these communities. Both governments, the previous government and the current government, can take credit for having done this work in conjunction with first nations, with the environmental movement, with local communities, workers and business interests.

We know that this piece of legislation, in particular, is a necessary piece of legislation in that it does create a key piece of this agreement, which are these conservancy areas — the portion of land — the 1.2 million hectares — of new protected areas.

The concern, and there is a concern here, really is around some lack of clarity with this legislation, and I do want to talk about that a little bit. There are a number of unanswered questions in this legislation, and they are questions that hopefully there are answers for. They are questions that certainly we will discuss at the point when we get to committee stage. They regard the implementation of Bill 28 and how the bill will be im-

plemented, how the initiatives in the bill will be implemented and, ultimately, questions around the management of the conservancy areas and what the long-term impacts of that will be.

The first of those questions really relates to the issue of consultation outside of first nations, and that's consultation with other interests. It's consultations with local communities. It's consultations with the environmental movement. It's consultation with workers. It's consultation with some of the business interests that are no longer able to access that land. It's not a question of whether it would have materially changed a lot of what is in this legislation, but it is a question of whether those interests should have been part of this discussion in some way, shape or form. What we know is that they weren't.

I have spoken to a number of those interests — local communities, environmental interests, others — who all support the principle behind Bill 28, certainly, but they are concerned that they were not part of the discussion. They are concerned that they didn't have an opportunity to speak at a table with the people who were going to make the decisions around the crafting of this legislation. They didn't have an opportunity to have their input into how, in fact, this legislation should evolve. There is a question here about why those organizations weren't part of that discussion.

What I would say is that the first nations have done the right thing here. They came to the table, and they represented their interests. That's exactly what the first nations should do. The responsibility of government, though, is to come and represent the interests of the others who are affected by these decisions. It's the responsibility, I believe, of the government to have ensured that they engaged those groups — whether they are local governments, regional districts, environmental interests, the people who work in those communities or the businesses that are engaged in those communities. The government should have had a process that engaged those interests in a discussion to ensure that their interests were reflected in the government-to-government negotiations that the minister has spoken about previously.

[1110]

At this point, and in the representations that I've had made to me, it does not appear that the government in fact had those discussions with those interests. I'm sure the first nations came to the table and represented the folks of their communities and their interests, and they did that appropriately — and rightly so. But I'm not so sure the government came to the table and fairly represented all of the interests that might have been at the table from the non-aboriginal communities.

We really need to look at that question of consultation, and that seems to be one of the pressing issues here. I would hope that we'll see, as other components of the LRMPs come forward — and there are a number of pieces that clearly will have to evolve over time with this — that the government will do a better job on that side of the ledger.

The second issue on the table that is not at all clear is really a question around funding for conservancy areas. What we understand is that there's \$1 million here. I assume it's an interim funding or a transitional funding to allow some dollars to go towards the management of these 24 conservancy areas over this next year or period of time. Then what we'll see, presumably, is additional dollars come to the table.

What's not at all clear here, though, is how that \$1 million is going to be spent. Is it enough money? We hear from the minister that the management structures have not been worked out. We don't know how these areas are going to be managed. We don't know what the framework for that is — whether they will be managed by the government, whether they will be managed by first nations, whether they will be managed by some combination and partnership of the two.

As a consequence, we have this number, \$1 million, which frankly, for 540,000 hectares of land and 24 distinct areas, is not a lot of money. It's not a lot of money to provide those kinds of services that we might want to expect in our parks. Now, we do know that our park system is seriously underfunded and that we don't have the kind of staffing and resources in the parks that we should expect to have in British Columbia. As a consequence, maybe \$1 million will be enough for the status quo, because the status quo is not very good. So maybe that will do it.

What we don't know is... There's no indication here about what the \$1 million will purchase in terms of staff and resources. We also have no indication about what the expectations are around future costs and what the minister and the government anticipate in terms of providing ongoing funding — presumably through the Ministry of Environment — to be able to support these areas, particularly when we go to 1.2 million hectares, when we more than double the area that's covered in this particular piece of legislation and when we go to over four times as many areas that have to be managed.

We do know that it will be a challenge for the government to be able to do this. We really do need to know where the dollars are — both this year and into the future — to be able to pay for this, and that's not at all clear.

The other issue that's not clear here, and we'll need to explore this a little bit, is what has happened here. With the creation of these areas, what's the situation in terms of resource interests that no longer are going to be able to access that land? The minister hasn't told us. Will they be compensated? Will forest companies that are in those areas be compensated? And if they are going to be compensated, how will they be compensated? Will it be more annual allowable cut somewhere else? Will it be dollars? How is that going to occur? I think it's a fair question to know how that's going to happen, so people understand exactly what occurs here and what expectations there are as we transition these economies.

[1115]

We know from discussions that have been had that we are looking in these areas to transition these

economies to more green economies, more effective economies under the circumstances of this plan. It will be telling, what the expectations are around compensation for those companies and, in fact, what expectations there might be around those companies continuing to provide employment opportunities in those communities in relation to that.

Now, I know this piece of legislation is about parks, but when you take out 540,000 hectares of land — 1.2 million hectares of land, ultimately — there's a lot of economic activity that's going to move. We really should be able to expect that the government, at the time it puts forward the legislation to create those protected areas, should also be able to tell us at the same time what the expectation is about how the compensation and the dollars move on those protected areas.

Hon. Speaker, we know that these conservancy areas, in some ways, change... They are different than class-A parks. They allow some things to occur that are different than class-A parks. Some of these may or may not be bad things. We don't know that. We know that we have hydroelectric opportunities, independent power producers. Run of the river is an allowable activity here on a small scale, on a local scale. I'll be looking forward to having more discussion about what this means in terms of run of the river when we sit down in committee stage, to have assurances that the power opportunities being created here are ones that are, in fact, beneficial.

The minister spoke about Hartley Bay and how they deliver much of their power through generators. The minister is correct. Small, locally controlled run-of-the-river hydroelectric power, if it can replace that kind of generator operation, may very well be a positive thing. But we need to have that discussion, and the legislation, in itself, is not as clear as we might like about that.

There's discussion in the legislation around roads and the provision of roads to be able to access resource interests that are outside the protected areas but where you may need to cross through. We know that at this point — I believe, in the schedules — there's one area in particular that's identified to allow those roads, but we have an awful lot of protected areas here, and we will want to talk. I think it's important that we understand what the criteria are for determining when roads will be allowed to be built, on what terms they're allowed to be built, how that's developed, how reclamation of those roads works and what are the reasonable expectations about the allowance of what may be temporary roads in and then out again.

The management of the conservancies is a critical area. The minister spoke about the government-to-government discussions that are going on to create the templates or the structure for what management of these areas might look like. I don't have a problem with that. I think it's appropriate. The first nations and the government need to have those discussions. But those management areas will impact communities. They'll impact environmental interests. They'll impact business interests as well. All of those interests are potentially impacted.

They have the potential, as well, to impact economic opportunities as we try to shift these economies in these local communities. We're all supportive of doing this. When we transition these economies over to more green economies, it's going to mean looking for opportunities, whether they're around tourism, ecotourism or other kinds of opportunities that may avail themselves of these areas. There are all kinds of possibilities here that we haven't explored at all. The question will be: how do people have a discussion around this?

I did have an opportunity — and I thank the minister for this — to get a briefing from some of his officials on Bill 28. I thank him, and I thank the staff who provided that briefing. It was informative. What that told me, among other things, is that there isn't clarity on how this is going to work. It's a problem if all the discussion around the creation of this template happens at one level without other participants being able to have their voices heard at the table, and then they will be heard when we get down to the individual management plans for the areas.

[1120]

That's what I was told: this discussion of the template happens at one level, government to government, and then we in fact will go down to a second set of discussions, which will be around specific management areas, and that's when there will be a greater opportunity for other voices to be heard at the table.

The problem with that is that there will no doubt be decisions made at that big table, the first table, that will significantly impact how that second set of discussions happens. They can be around who manages, how they manage, where decisions get made, how information comes to bodies, how budgets get put together, how money gets spent. All of these are legitimate questions. They're questions that should be answered, and they're questions that should include the input of folks who have an interest outside of the two governments — the first nations and the provincial government.

I would refer back to my earlier comments around consultation. It is exactly the same situation. The first nations, quite rightly, are at that table. They're looking after their interests. They're speaking for their people, and that's what they should be doing. The government has a role at that table, and part of its role is to ensure that local communities, environmental interests and all of those groups that have been stakeholders to the LRMP process over the last decade, that have a vested interest in the success of the LRMP process, have an opportunity to be heard. Right now I'm being told by those groups that that's not necessarily happening.

In addition, in our discussions with some of the first nations around this, we're being told that, yes, there is going to be.... They understand these government-to-government discussions around the broader template, around management, will happen, but they absolutely have seen this piece of legislation come forward, and they clearly have no sense at this point, from what they're telling us, what that looks like. The legislation is being put in place before there has been meaningful

discussion with them around what these structures might look like. I know they're anxious to get into that discussion and to begin to evolve that.

There are unanswered questions there, and we'll need to see what those answers look like as this evolves. What we will be doing is hoping to flesh some of this out in committee stage with some questions around these issues. I'm hopeful that the minister will be able to provide some additional clarity on what this looks like.

In addition, there's a question about what the impacts are on other areas of the province. As we know, there are a number of areas of the province where we have current parks, where we have protected areas that may evolve into parks, where there are significant first nations and aboriginal interests. Are we going to be looking at the creation of conservancy areas rather than class-A parks in some of those areas? We don't know that, so what kind of template is this? What kind of precedent is the creation of these conservancy areas for other parts of the province?

We'll be looking to talk to the minister about that, about what his vision is for the future. Are we going to see more and more conservancy areas, which some would say are less than a class-A park, or are we going to start to see these replacing class-A parks in terms of the future protected areas in the province? I'll look forward to hearing from the minister on this.

Another issue related to this really is the question of permitting while these are put in place. I know there have been requests made to the minister — and we'll be asking for a confirmation of this — that in these areas, until we get these conservancies in place, that we get management plans in place; if there are things occurring there, an infrastructure is put in place that ensures we know what is and isn't allowed to occur here. That includes putting the overall management plans in place — that at a minimum, there won't be permitting for activities in these parks.

As the legislation points out, the minister has fairly broad authority to be able to permit uses in these parks under his jurisdiction. What we're going to be looking for is some assurances that that authority isn't going to be used, or is going to be used at a very minimal level, in future until such time as there actually are management structures put in place, and there clearly are visions for each of these areas.

[1125]

What we wouldn't want is the minister going ahead and approving a number of activities in these conservancy areas that may impact the ability for them to be developed in the way that we hope they are developed and to be put in place before, in fact, the management structures are put in place.

Part of the concerns that have been raised to this side of the House come from the province's record around our park system, and that's part of where the challenge comes from. There's a certain amount of this bill.... As one stakeholder said to me when I was talking to them about Bill 28, "You know, there's a 'trust me' component to this legislation," as there is with a

number of things that the government does. There's this "trust me" component, this: "Trust us. We're going to do the right thing."

You know, hon. Speaker, there are concerns about that as we look and say: "Okay. Well, what does "trust me" really mean?" We start to look at the record of the government on parks when we start to look at the record of the government on environmental stewardship. What are some of the things we see? The list is a long list that we could go through, but I will identify a couple of these things.

We know that shortly after taking office, the government removed land from what was the Chilcotin LRMP to accommodate mining interests. That was a decision of the government. That was the government's view of environmental stewardship.

We know that the government has reduced parks funding and cut over 800 positions out of parks since it was elected in 2001. We know that the government introduced parking meters into 41 public parks. We know that the government has developed the park lodge strategy to commercialize and privatize great amounts of our parks, yet we don't quite know what's going to happen because this strategy is not being spoken about, but we'll see. We'll see, but the park lodge strategy that will create resorts in parks....

We know that the government has instigated a policy to remove a certain amount of quality ALR. We believe that some of the structures around the restructuring of the Land Commission have in fact created that circumstance where we are threatening, particularly, some of our class one and two soils.

We know that the results-based regulations.... That approach to policy has led to a situation.... Because the government has reduced its staffing and gutted staffing in many cases, it's created a situation where, in fact, we can't do the audit in oversight that we need to do in many of our forests, in many of our protected areas. As a consequence, we are degrading these areas because the staff.... We don't have the resources to be able to do the job.

We know that we've seen a situation with climate change where the government has said: "We will be third-best." But other than saying that, there are no results-based measurements in the climate change plan. It's a plan that is woefully inadequate. It's a plan that doesn't look at how we measure and how we identify progress. It's a plan that doesn't tell us how we report progress.

As members here will know, climate change probably is a growing concern unlike any other in this country right now. We saw recently a letter signed by 90 scientists who are saying this is the issue we need to deal with. They were pleading with the federal government to move forward on effective climate change.

Unfortunately, the government has been silent in joining that voice — for the government to come forward and say: "We, too, join with those 90 scientists to say that we have to move forward." Unfortunately, we haven't heard the government say that. Maybe the government is going to move forward and say some-

thing on climate change, and we'll look forward to that should it in fact occur.

The people of Vancouver — the people of British Columbia — value our parks. They value them very much. We know that, and we know that parks in British Columbia are an important part of our legacy as a province. Unfortunately, I don't think the people of British Columbia are overly confident, when it comes to this government acting as the stewards of our parks in a way that people believe should occur.

[1130]

That concern in local communities is compounded, particularly in the communities that are affected by the LRMP, and has been compounded by other decisions or lack of decisions or lack of action in some cases around the LRMP on the coast. What we're seeing here is the fact that we need to start to talk about that.

The minister and other government ministers will know that the socially responsible investment fund of \$80 million that was supposed to be there for local communities has been killed by the government. It doesn't exist. It was a commitment that has not been fulfilled. We now have local government, regional districts, up and down the coast passing resolutions saying: "We're not sure we support this any longer, because we've lost the funds that we were told we would have and now aren't there — \$80 million, much of that private dollars for investment and venture capital."

Those kinds of decisions by the government to make commitments and then not fulfil them — part of the government track record, clearly, on many issues — are ones that concern people up and down the coast as well.

We will be supporting the bill, certainly at second reading. We support the principle of the conservancy areas. We support moving the LRMPs forward in a way that will make them successful. We think they are important. We think this is an important initiative, and we do look forward to that, so we will be supporting second reading here.

Clearly, what we do need to do is.... We have many unanswered questions here about how this will in fact work. As they say, the devil is sometimes in the details. We'll be looking for those details and that clarification in committee stage, and I look forward to that opportunity to have a more detailed discussion with the minister at that time.

Hon. B. Penner: I'd like to just close debate with a few comments in response. I know we'll have more time to do this in committee. In fact, much of what the member was saying sounded more like he was in committee stage, at least in those portions when he was actually speaking in a somewhat relevant way to the bill and not delving off in topics completely unrelated to the legislation that's before the House at this time.

I'd like to point out that when this LRMP process is implemented and by next year when the additional protected areas are added through legislation, British Columbia will have nearly 14 percent of our total land base locked up in parks and protected areas and con-

servancies. That's more than any other place in Canada. In fact, I believe that's more than any other place in North America.

I can understand why the critic had to speak about topics other than the bill in order to speak as long as he did, because it was very difficult to find things to criticize when we have by far the largest protected-area system in North America. I understand the opposition's role is to try to find something negative, and I understand he's put a lot of energy into doing that when it comes to this bill.

[Mr. Speaker in the chair.]

Communities, industries, first nations and environmental groups were consulted. I think the critic seemed to have forgotten something here. He said there was a lack of consultation, when in fact for ten years there have been negotiations with industry, with communities, with first nations and environmental groups and government. This has all been pretty publicized. It's been in the newspapers a lot off and on over the last ten years or so, so it's hardly been done in secret. Everybody knows what the general plan has been and where we're at. There was the announcement, of course, on February 7. Now we have the legislation before the House, so members can debate it and ask questions if they see fit.

The member expressed concern again around small hydro. I know we had small hydroelectric projects that are also called run-of-the-river hydroelectric projects, which are done with very little impact on the environment. They are always, of course, assessed in terms of their possible fisheries implications and other things and would not be approved if they have significant fisheries impacts. We debated this at length during the estimates debate for the Ministry of Environment a couple of weeks ago, but perhaps that's already a distant memory for some members.

Let me point out that while the member was segueing into completely unrelated matters to talk about climate change rather than the content of the bill, he was saying that we need to do more to address climate change. Yet at the same time there was a tone of criticism in his voice with respect to run-of-the-river hydroelectric projects that can help these communities get off of diesel.

[1135]

Well, the last time I checked, the combustion of diesel results in greenhouse gas emissions. So if we're really serious about doing something, instead of talking about something, let's get out and support doing something for these remotely located first nations up and down the coast, which are looking for tangible ways to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions by utilizing a green, clean, 100-percent renewable, zero-emission form of electricity.

Rather than trying to somehow foster concern and paranoia, let's say: "Look, we have a permitting process that's rigorous." Local first nations are saying that they are trying to find a way to tangibly reduce their fossil fuel combustion and thereby reduce their greenhouse

gas emissions. Let's actually salute that initiative rather than trying to find ways to criticize.

The member also talked about management plans and how.... On the one hand, I think he's concerned or criticizing the fact that we haven't finalized all these management plans here while we're introducing legislation. On the other hand, he's saying that we need to make sure people have input into the process. Well, that's exactly what the management plans are for. They allow people to have input in discussing the specific management plans for the different conservancies and protected areas that we're talking about.

That's exactly what we're doing. Again, the member was striving very hard to try and find some way to criticize something that's in fact very positive and has some incredible support, I believe, across British Columbia — including some environmental groups that took part in the process, including industries that have been active in those areas, including communities, including first nations and including government.

We will be engaging in dialogue with people as we formulate these management plans. It's not a fait accompli. We are interested to hear what people have to say. Frankly, in answer to the critic's comments, it would be presumptuous for us today to stand here and say: "Here's exactly everything that's ever going to happen in these protected areas." I don't know what will come through the management planning process, but I imagine a number of things.

The member expressed concern — and I know there are some other environmental groups who have mentioned this — about what kinds of activities would be permitted and whether or not.... I think the critic is worried that the minister has too much discretion or maybe even unfettered discretion. We'll get into this more in committee stage, I'm sure. But I want to just draw people's attention, if they're following this debate, to section 6 of the bill. It's Bill 28, the Park (Conservancy Enabling) Amendment Act, 2006.

Section 11 gives guidance about what kind of uses can be permitted in these areas, and it states as follows in subsection (10): "A park use permit must not be issued to authorize the following activities in a conservancy: (a) commercial logging; (b) mining; (c) hydro electric power generation, other than local run-of-the-river projects; (d) any other activity unless, in the opinion of the minister, the activity will not restrict, prevent or inhibit the development, improvement or use of the conservancy in accordance with section 5 (3.1)."

That test, which the minister must apply, is as follows. Conservancies are set aside (a) for the protection and maintenance of their biological diversity and natural environments; (b) for the preservation and maintenance of social, ceremonial and cultural uses of first nations; (c) for protection and maintenance of their recreational values; and (d) to ensure that development or use of their natural resources occurs in a sustainable manner consistent with the purposes of the paragraphs I've just mentioned.

So there are criteria. There are a number of criteria established in the legislation to provide guidance for

any minister who happens to occupy the office when applications come forward requesting permitted uses in conservancies. So it's hardly unfettered. I've just read what the legislation says that the rules are, which the ministers are supposed to consider in making their decision. That's the guidance. Then, of course, there'll be the management plans.

It's still too early to say what will come from that management planning process. I know in other parts of province it's taken years to develop management plans for newly created protected areas or parks.

Lastly, let me just address the member's comments that we've reduced park staffing by 800. Well, that's simply false. I'm not sure where he gets that number. But if you go back and check the rolls in 2000 or 2001, B.C. Parks was not employing 800 people — certainly not through direct government employees, in any event.

[1140]

I can tell you this too. During the 1990s when the other party was in office, the NDP, they did establish new parks. While they were doing that, they actually cut the parks budget. So it made it very difficult to manage.

I understand the member's criticism. He's worried that perhaps we aren't adding enough money to look after these new conservancies. I think he will acknowledge — or most people following this debate will acknowledge — that adding money while we're creating new conservancies is far better than what happened in the 1990s, when the budget was actually cut while the new areas were being created.

With that, I would like to move second reading.

Motion approved.

Hon. B. Penner: I'll try this for the third time today. I move that the bill be referred to a Committee of the Whole House to be considered at the next sitting of the House after today.

Bill 28, Park (Conservancy Enabling) Amendment Act, 2006, read a second time and referred to a Committee of the Whole House for consideration at the next sitting of the House after today.

Hon. G. Abbott: I call second reading of Bill 29.

HEALTH STATUTES AMENDMENT ACT, 2006

Hon. G. Abbott: Mr. Speaker, I'm pleased to now move second reading of Bill 29.

The Health Statutes Amendment Act, 2006, makes important amendments to the Health Act and the Medicare Protection Act, which will enhance the confidentiality of personal health information while at the same time permitting its use to improve health care and support the sustainability of the health care system.

The amendments will create a new level of accountability and clear rules for the collection, use and

disclosure of the personal health information contained in ministry and health authority databases. The collection, use and disclosure of personal health information will only be permitted for specific health-related purposes.

This bill also makes several minor amendments to the Health Professions Act to complete the work begun during our first mandate. All of the legislative changes in the Health Statutes Amendment Act support our goal of innovation and service quality for health care for British Columbians. Quality, patient-focused health care is the bottom line. We already know we have the best health outcomes in Canada, but we need to do better.

Bill 29 amends the Health Act by adding seven new sections that build on existing provisions regarding the collection of information by the B.C. Cancer Agency and the health status registry. A key provision of the bill is that information can only be collected for health-related purposes that are set out in the bill.

The bill also amends one provision of the Medicare Protection Act pertaining to the confidentiality of information collected to administer the Medical Services Plan. Bill 29 will amend section 49 of the Medicare Protection Act to allow only those disclosures from the Medical Services Plan that are consistent with the health-related purposes set out in the Health Act.

The changes to the Health Act will permit the Minister of Health to designate or create databases that contain personal health information as "health information banks." These databases are invaluable in delivering patient care. They are also used for health research, as well as planning and administration in the health care system. They are vital to the sustainability of the health system in British Columbia.

To ensure that health information banks are comprehensive, the bill will make it mandatory for health care bodies and organizations to provide information. It's important that health databases be as complete and comprehensive as possible to ensure they are effective in enabling quality health care decisions.

The proposed amendments significantly restrict the circumstances in which personal health information may be released outside of the Ministry of Health. They also restrict sharing of personal health information to specific organizations, health authorities and other public bodies such as Health Canada or the College of Physicians and Surgeons.

The specifics of any large one-off or regular sharing of personal health information must be set out in an information-sharing agreement that is approved by ministerial order. Such an agreement can only be made with a health-related organization. These information agreements would put limits and conditions on the use of that information.

[1145]

As part of the ministerial orders that create or designate health information banks, an individual responsible for administration of the health information bank must be identified by name and position. Access to information will be restricted to only those individuals

with clear authority, accountability and the demonstrated need to access personal health information for health-related purposes.

The designation of health information banks and the approval of information-sharing agreements by ministerial order is intended to elevate decision-making above the sharing of data to the highest level of the Ministry of Health and to maximize transparency and accountability to the public. All ministerial orders designating databases as health information banks will be published for review by the public in the Gazette. This will ensure maximum transparency. In addition, a list of all health information banks as well as a list of all information-sharing agreements will be published, consistent with the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act.

Existing databases currently governed by the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act will be brought under this legislation through ministerial order. These include the client registry, the provider registry and the chronic disease management registry. New health databases will include the public health surveillance system, diagnostic imaging databases, a laboratory information system and an enterprise master-patient index system. Most of these names may mean little to patients, who just want to get the care they need, but they can be assured that the fundamental purpose of health information banks is to improve patient care and evidence-based decision-making.

These databases are also an important tool to facilitate health research and management of the health care system. With the electronic health record we are taking advantage of new technology that will make patient information available to health care providers from anywhere in the province. All the evidence across many jurisdictions shows that availability of comprehensive information drives better health care decisions and better health outcomes.

The proposed legislation supports the first ministers' commitment to "accelerate the development and implementation of the electronic health record," as part of the ten-year plan to strengthen health care. The province, along with provincial stakeholders and national partners, is developing a secure network of electronic health records that will eventually contain information from doctors' offices, laboratories, radiology clinics, hospitals, pharmacies and other places where people access health care.

British Columbians want the best health care possible. To meet this expectation, health care providers need to know a patient's key health care history. With complete and accurate information, health care providers can better help patients manage chronic disease and improve health outcomes. Accurate and complete electronic health records are vital to an effective, sustainable health system.

This bill is an example of our government's commitment to utilize technology and leverage investment opportunities. The ministry has partnered with Canada Health Infoway on several electronic health record projects. About \$120 million worth of funding from

Infoway is contingent on the province having proper legislative authority to establish these databases to ensure confidentiality. I'm pleased to point out that the province's Information and Privacy Commissioner, the office of the chief information officer, as well as Canada Health Infoway have been working closely with ministry staff and have reviewed and accepted the draft amendment.

British Columbia is already an acknowledged leader in developing electronic health care capability. Electronic health projects are becoming essential tools for health care professionals to deliver safe, quality health care and to assist the ministry and health authorities with better management of the health system.

The Health Statutes Amendment Act, 2006, will also result in some minor changes to the Health Professions Act. Changes to the Health Professions Act will, among other things, correct some drafting errors and omissions in the 2003 legislation. It will continue the legal existence of four of the current regulatory colleges. It will make some technical changes to the current ownership restrictions that apply to personal service corporations of some health professionals and clarify that the right to recover debts for services extends to corporations that are entitled to provide the services of regulated health professionals.

[1150]

Finally, and most importantly, it will strengthen the protection of the public by clarifying that professional responsibilities and liabilities are in no way affected by a health professional's relationship to a corporation through which his or her personal services are provided.

Most of these amendments to the Health Professions Act are in response to requests or concerns of the regulatory colleges for the professions being affected by our regulatory reform initiative. We believe that these changes, while minor and technical, are important and will ensure that transition to the Health Professions Act is completed with minimal financial impact to the regulatory colleges and individual professionals. We're making every effort to ensure the important work being done by B.C.'s regulatory colleges is recognized and can continue without interruption or financial hardship as they transition to the Health Professions Act.

In closing, the Health Statutes Amendment Act, 2006, reflects our ongoing commitment to modernizing the system to improve patient care throughout the province and to ensure that delivery of safe, quality health care by health care professionals can be sustained.

I look forward to hearing the comments of other members and to debating committee stage of this bill. I do know that the hon. Health critic has comments on this. Whether he wishes to do them now or wishes to adjourn debate.... I understand from the critic that he would prefer I move adjournment of debate. I'm sure he will be exercising his comments with respect to this at the next opportunity, so I move adjournment of debate.

Hon. G. Abbott moved adjournment of debate.

Motion approved.

Committee of Supply (Section A), having reported progress, was granted leave to sit again.

Hon. G. Abbott moved adjournment of the House.

Motion approved.

Mr. Speaker: This House stands adjourned until two o'clock this afternoon.

The House adjourned at 11:52 a.m.

I know that we are pressed for time here today, and just on record, I'd ask for about an hour's time with some of your senior staff over the next two weeks. If that could be arranged, that would be very much appreciated. If the minister would confirm that that will work for her?

[1015]

Hon. I. Chong: Certainly, the most appropriate.... For the critic or other members of his caucus who happen to have questions in relation to the financial items in the ministry's service plan, I would ask that if he is able to summarize or itemize those particular items and send them over to the ministry in advance so that they can have all that data, that will ensure that the hour and half that he has with them will be extremely productive and effective for him.

N. Macdonald: I'll just confirm that I will do that. I'll organize the areas that we want to look at, and I appreciate very much the opportunity to meet with senior staff to do that.

Once again, today we're going to be jumping all over the place in the next 40 to 45 minutes, and then I understand that we're going to move to seniors issues for a short period of time. Then probably we'll be moving on to women's issues or perhaps for a short period of time coming back to local government, depending on how quickly members who have issues take.

There's one question that I was just going to ask around policing. I know it's something that I will have to raise with the Solicitor General, but the implications for communities, for local government, are fairly high. Around local policing there is conversation around the fact that.... I think there are statements by the government that policing costs for communities under 5,000.... They are going to have to pay portions of the cost for policing, and I just want the minister to talk about what sort of conversations she's had with the UBCM and how this is rationalized based on the fact that this is a cost that the province picked up in the past. It is now being downloaded to these communities. I'm sure that many of them have expressed the concerns that they have, so I'll just give an opportunity for the minister to explain where they are going and how this is not a download.

Hon. I. Chong: To the member: he may recollect, because I know he did spend some time in local government, that the matter of policing in small communities has been an issue that has been around for a number of years. I know it was around when I was in local government, and in fact, it goes back to the 1980s.

Certainly, it has been talked about at UBCM since the 1980s when we had different various administrations, whether it was the Socreds or the NDP government and now our government. It's not anything new. I guess what is perhaps difficult is that municipal governments change every three years. Back then it was every two years. Sometimes the corporate memory is lost, but it's not an issue that has been suddenly raised,

PROCEEDINGS IN THE DOUGLAS FIR ROOM

Committee of Supply

ESTIMATES: MINISTRY OF
COMMUNITY SERVICES AND
MINISTER RESPONSIBLE FOR
SENIORS' AND WOMEN'S ISSUES
(continued)

The House in Committee of Supply (Section A); D. MacKay in the chair.

The committee met at 10:13 a.m.

On Vote 21: ministry operations, \$236,621,000 (continued).

Hon. I. Chong: Hon. Chair, before we begin with questions, I think it's appropriate — at the beginning of every opportunity — to introduce staff for the benefit of the members opposite. I know the critic is aware of who they are, but members come and go during the debates. To my right is our Deputy Minister of Community Services Sheila Wynn. To my left this morning is the Assistant Deputy Minister of women's, seniors' and community services program Barbara Walman. Behind myself, again, Mr. Dale Wall, who is the assistant deputy minister of local government and Shauna Brouwer. She is the assistant deputy minister for management services. With that, I'll be happy to take questions.

N. Macdonald: First, the minister has always been very gracious about offering opportunities to meet with staff. There are a few financial items that we would like to go through in more detail, perhaps, over a longer period of time.

[A. Horning in the chair.]

certainly with our government. It's been one that has been a longstanding issue.

It has finally come to a place where the discussions that took place a number of years ago were to address the inequities that existed, the disparities that existed, because you did have a number of communities that were paying for policing and the smaller communities who weren't. Some of the larger communities — and I know the member will know this through attending UBCM — felt that it was time to put more balance in it.

The original way that it was structured was that as soon you hit 5,000 you would be required to pay this new policing cost. What we attempted to do when we became government in 2001 and we listened to communities.... We said: "Is there not a way that we can deal with this?" They were prepared to deal with this, but in a more graduated way, so that you aren't suddenly at 4,998 in population, and a family moves in, and you're at 5,001, and you've got this cost, and you've had no way of anticipating it.

Since 2001, for five years now, we have been very proactive with UBCM and the municipalities and said that we're prepared to take a look at this. We're prepared to develop a formula that allows for the policing costs to come in. Finally, I think, we came to an understanding that this was going to be happening. It was supposed to happen a number of years ago, but it was once again delayed to make sure we could work out those intricacies.

Again, the member is correct. If he wants to work out or ask for those details with the Solicitor General, I would encourage him to do so. But the approach that we have taken has now finally allowed us to get to this point where, effective in 2007, the structure for policing financing will in fact take place.

I think we have.... Well, I know we have given ample opportunities for dialogue, debate and input to see how we move into this direction, as well as ensuring that we can deal with the small communities in a fair way.

[1020]

As the member can appreciate, some communities have said that some people have not been paying their fair share of policing costs for too long, thereby being subsidized in that area. So I would not express it in the way that he has: that it's a downloading. In fact, many municipalities have had, you know, a subsidy for a number of years, and it was time to address the subsidy, and this is what's now happening.

N. Macdonald: It's a matter on which I will spend most of my time with the Solicitor General, but I would just, on one final point on this.... I mean, it was very clearly something that the province paid for in the past, and now they're asking these local governments to pick up the cost. Therefore very clearly in my mind, it's a download. Rather than having that debate, I would just.... I mean, our positions will differ on that one.

I've heard from a number of communities under 5,000 that point to the additional burden that this is going to place on them. They would raise other issues that we canvassed somewhat yesterday around other

costs that have flowed down to them, and they raised the issue of.... I guess I'll ask the minister: with costs flowing down to these smaller communities, in particular, what additional ways does the minister see for them to raise funds? It seems that, inevitably, you're going to be asking residents to pay more and more in property tax, and at what point does the minister feel that that's going to be too difficult a burden for many people to handle?

Hon. I. Chong: Before responding to that, I'll just go back to the comments that the member made and, in particular, to his characterization of this being a download, because he's right. We will disagree on this point. If what he is saying is that the attempts by his previous government to do this was also a download, then I guess he would have to accept that that's what the previous government had also tried to do. It's just that their attempt to find an approach that would work didn't come to fruition. They weren't able to have the dialogue with UBCM the way we have had to ensure that it was going to take place.

If the old system is what this member and his caucus are advocating, then I guess I would need to understand if that is the case, because I'm certainly interested in that. The old system required that you did not pay for your policing because you had less than 5,000 people, but the moment you had more than 5,000, you paid for it. Is that the system that he is advocating that we go back to? Because then you will have many communities who are saying that well, that's not the fair approach.

So I can tell the member that I've heard from communities. I've heard it when I was elected as a local government member; I've heard it since I've been an MLA. From all accounts, they have said that the inequity that existed in the old system was just not fair. We had to find a better way to approach it. So as I say, it's been a long outstanding issue. It wasn't one that this government initiated in the sense that to deal with policing and the restructuring of police financing, it had to come into play. We've done it in a fair and, I think, balanced approach and in an effort to reduce the inequities that exist amongst communities.

If he's advocating that we go back to the way it was, where as soon as you have a population that goes over 5,000.... Then I think he will hear from a number of other communities who would disagree, because so many small communities that were incorporated 20, 30, 40 or 50 years ago are coming to that point. They were very, very worried, and they, too, wanted to have a fair and balanced approach.

In regards to his questions regarding the ways of local governments and how they are able to deal with some of the extra costs, etc., well, I can say to him that last year the Premier announced at UBCM the additional dollars for the small community protection grant. That's \$27 million, a doubling of it, so another \$27 million will be added over the course of the next four years. That's not a small sum going to small communities.

[1025]

I also indicated the fact that traffic-fine revenue-sharing has been returned at 100 percent versus 75 percent, which was the initial promise.

We've also looked at a number of other initiatives that we've seen small communities wanting to grapple with. This is one of the reasons why we've had a partnership with UBCM whereby we've advanced funds to them in so many ways to assist them in their communities and helping them grow so that they can meet the challenges and take some pressures off their existing budgets.

The crystal meth program is one such example. The tourism dollars that we provided — \$25 million, not a small sum of money — again, for those small communities that had no way of raising those dollars to market and to diversify their economy, especially the tourism economy.... Those are just a few ways. There are many more. If you were to check the UBCM website, you'll see a very large list of sums of moneys that we have advanced to them to allow them to help their communities to grow.

I'm sure we will get other requests over the course of the next number of years. We're always open to ideas. We also want to ensure that communities have a way to provide services to their communities, and where senior levels of government can play a role, we certainly are listening to that.

N. Macdonald: Maybe just coming back to the point one more time, with policing. Right now communities below 5,000 do not pay for policing. Whether they pay for it or not, it makes no difference to the other communities. It doesn't change how much they pay. It's not as if there's a pool of money that they are contributing to. It only matters to the province. Right now the province is paying for it, not other communities. Communities over 5,000 are not paying for the policing of communities under 5,000; it's the province.

If you are asking communities under 5,000 to participate, that only affects the province's money. You're changing that. In the past the province used to pay for it, and now it won't. That's a download, and there are a series of these. We can have arguments around semantics, but the reality.... I guess when you ask who I represent.... In my area, I have two larger communities that are over 5,000, and you know, at a certain level they would probably share the minister's perspective. I mean, they pay; a community under 5,000 doesn't. So there's a bit of, "Well, that doesn't seem fair," but it doesn't really affect them.

I have a number of communities that are under 5,000. If you're one of those communities, your perspective would be different. Your perspective would be that there are certain inefficiencies in running small communities. It seems that whenever we have the language of fairness, very often the fairness works very poorly for small rural communities. In trying to do the same thing for everyone, you have a community that will never have the economy of scale on any matter, so they are constantly being squeezed.

With the policing issue, it's very much that way. It is an additional cost. This was one area. You know, the minister has characterized it as a subsidy, and in a way, it is how provincial government supports rural areas. It is one way, and it's a way that worked, and now it's being changed.

I know that we will disagree on this. I know that, appropriately, I would be spending time with the Solicitor General, and we will. We'll go through that with the Solicitor General. As with a number of things, we'll just probably agree to disagree on this one as well. I'll give an opportunity for the minister to respond to that if she would like. If not, I can move on to the next item.

Hon. I. Chong: Again, I'll respond very quickly, because I know the limitation of time.

I guess what I'm hearing from the member is that he prefers the traditional approach in dealing with policing. He feels that municipalities under 5,000 should not pay and that the moment they reach 5,000 or 5,001, then they should have to pay for 70 percent of their policing costs without regard to the fact that they, too, will be in a situation where they are suddenly faced with police costs that they did not have prior to going over the one extra body.

If that is the approach he's advocating, then that's fair enough. We will disagree. He believes that's the best approach. We don't happen to believe that is the best or balanced approach.

[1030]

N. Macdonald: I'll give the minister the last word, as I should, and I'll move on to the transition program. This is something that the member for Cariboo North talked about somewhat. I hope I don't repeat some of the questions that he had, but just to clarify: I have six communities that have been involved with the transition program — Midway, Port Alice, Tahsis, Tumbler Ridge, Port Edward and Gold River.

I guess, just a question: is the minister aware of any other communities that the transition service will be helping in the near future? Are you in the midst of working with any other communities?

Hon. I. Chong: The member is correct in listing the number of communities that have availed themselves of the transition services: Gold River, Sayward, Tahsis, Tumbler Ridge, Port Edward and Port Alice, which is still ongoing. The only one that currently is in the pending state, I guess, because it's relatively new, is the community of Midway.

N. Macdonald: Some of the questions that the member for Cariboo North raised with the minister yesterday evening were around the program changing. The community that I represented went through a significant transition with the mill. This was in Golden, with Evans Forest Products. The mill was shut for a short period of time — that was in 1996 — so the experience that I had was of a community that was forced

to really look at where it was going to go. It faced some very, very difficult situations.

Now, at the time, the job protection commissioner was in place. That program brought tremendous resources, and there was at that time a commissioner, a very capable man, who came in and assisted in a process that allowed the mill to reorganize and get back on its feet. I'm happy to say that it successfully employs 500 people now and remains the cornerstone of the community's economy.

Some of the concerns that I had around Midway and the discussion we had in the fall were around the program that Community Services is able to offer to communities that are going through this sort of a change. The transition program, as I understand from last night, has been in place for a long time. It hasn't changed, but there are a series of communities that will be going through things that I think are similar to what my community went through in 1996. For my community it was successful, but I see in place different mechanisms for the provincial government to assist a rural community.

Without the job protection commissioner, you now are basically with only this program. Does the minister think it's going to be adequate to deal with communities that are going to go through the shock of losing perhaps their major employer? In the communities that are listed here — certainly a majority, probably all of them — that's what's going on. They're losing their main employer.

They have the immediate problem of losing local tax revenue, but they also have the substantial job of going through sort of a rebirth if that industry is permanently gone. How are they going to reorganize themselves? That's a huge job. It demands a tremendous amount of provincial resources if you're going to seriously do it. Do you think this program actually offers that sort of support?

Hon. I. Chong: The purpose of the community transition program in this ministry is really about working with communities which are affected by a closure or significant downsizing of a major industry, as I indicated last evening. Those communities are facing unique challenges and therefore require solutions based on their particular case.

[1035]

The goal is to work with those impacted municipalities or towns to assist them so that they can retain municipal finance viability, and that's important as well. But the member, I think, will understand that when a municipality or a village or a town is going through changes as a result of a significant downsizing of a major industry, things will not be the same as they once used to be.

Our ministry, in that sense, comes in to see how we can help mitigate or provide assistance, whether that's sometimes in a financial way or more likely, to begin with, in a human resources or staff way, where we can help them, guide them, through a number of options.

It's important that the communities that are affected know that this ministry will work across government, that we will coordinate a number of ministries to ensure that that community will not be devoid of all services. We are there to assist in finding ways to protect the municipal services — perhaps not all of the municipal services that the citizens once had, but at least to assist in a role that we have to play, to assist in protecting municipal services and responding to other issues, such as access to health services, local schooling, perhaps some counselling. Those are the things that our ministry is able to do by coordinating that across government, across ministries, to provide that.

There's also a responsibility, because they are local government. They themselves have to take a look at where they are, where they're going to be and where they think they want to be. If they believe that they can diversify their economy; that a transition study would be helpful in having a look at what their particular assets are, where they're located; that they think they may want to move into tourism development; or that perhaps they want to bring in a different kind of industry, that's where a community transition study would be most helpful.

If the locally elected officials determine that's not where they want to go and that, in fact, the town will be reduced in size, the transition study will be helpful in identifying that and, also, in determining what their immediate needs are and, in some cases, in reducing services until they can fulfil those needs when the population rises again.

I can tell the member, having gone up to the town of Port Alice about a month ago and having met with the mayor — who I think was extremely, I guess, innovative, particularly in his leadership — that when they realized the significant impact of the loss of that industry to their town, he immediately did their inward-looking at their services. They acknowledged that because of the loss of some of the population, because of the loss of the tax base, they should scale back on a number of municipal services. They did close down their recreation community for a time. Now they're hoping to be able to re-establish that with a new industry.

I hope the member understands that community transition services are there to guide a town, a municipality, a local government, to assist them to see what their viabilities are.

[The bells were rung.]

Hon. I. Chong: I hear the bells. I know we are being once again called away, and I'll allow you to recess until we....

The Chair: I'll declare a recess, and members can go and vote on division.

The committee recessed from 10:39 a.m. to 10:48 a.m.

[A. Horning in the chair.]

On Vote 21 (*continued*).

N. Macdonald: To continue where we left off.... The example of Midway. Could the minister just outline the resources that were available for Midway, the work that was done there and continues to be done there, as an example that we could use for the program, please?

Hon. I. Chong: In the village of Midway — and I'll just provide the member a very quick status update.... As he was aware, Midway had contacted our office and asked that they have some assistance and support. Starting in November of last year, November 2005, our staff did meet with the mayor and council and a wide range of stakeholders, and that will continue on an ongoing basis as needed.

Again, every case is dealt with on its own basis as to what is necessary. Work commenced on March 1 — so about six weeks ago — to develop a community transition study to help determine the economic, social and financial needs of the community.

[1050]

As I indicated, with a community in transition, oftentimes when they first hear news of a change or are aware of a change, the local mayor and council need to get together to understand what it is that they would like and determine what their next steps are. In this particular case, they determined that they wanted to commission a study. They wanted to take a look at their economic opportunities, the social and financial needs of the community. We said that certainly we could provide assistance in having that study take place — in particular, financially. I believe a grant of \$45,000 was advanced to Midway, and that amount will be used to ensure that this study is able to proceed.

Once the study is complete, though, there may be recommendations or suggestions within that study report. Then it would be another step where our staff would work with the community and the council in particular to see exactly how they wish to address this. As the member can appreciate, a study may have a variety of options. But the council may limit themselves to a few, or they may wish to exercise all of them. That would be another step we take to see exactly how they want to implement that.

That's where we are right now. Our staff continue to regularly make contact. Also, it's incumbent on the town or the village itself to contact our ministry if they were to encounter any stumbling blocks so that we can help the process keep moving ahead.

N. Macdonald: I'll just make one comment on this, and then I'll pass it on to other members to ask questions. I realize we have some time constraints in terms of dealing with local government. I think we're going to be switching to seniors fairly soon and then possibly coming back to local government questions.

The experience I had with Golden was that the community had resources that went beyond the transition program. With the job protection commissioner, we had a tremendous number of resources that would

come from the province to help the community go through what in the end was a very healthy transition. Our forestry sector was changed.

The point I would make to the minister is that with Midway and with many of the communities that you'll be dealing with, the primary industry is forestry. Forestry is impacted tremendously by government actions. The province makes decisions on things like appurtenance. They make decisions on different costs for the industry, and it changes what the industry will do.

It's not like many other businesses where there are all sorts of factors that the government doesn't necessarily impact on. With forestry, the province makes decisions that cause the industry to react and act in a certain way. Sometimes those decisions have huge impacts for communities.

In the case of Midway, it's possible that changes to appurtenance might change what the company is going to do in a place like Midway. For the province to come in and have a program that brings in, perhaps, a very limited amount of resources.... A \$45,000 transition study, while appropriate, is a relatively minor investment in that community considering the impact for everyone that lives there. Not to judge how appropriately it will work out, but I compare that to what was available to our community. It's something that I would raise as a concern. It's something that I would hope the minister is going to look at.

With that, I'll give the minister the opportunity to respond if she wants to. I mean, it was more of a commentary than a question. If she doesn't need to, then I would turn it over to one of my fellow members. I think the minister probably does want to respond and give an example of this program and some of the success she feels that it has had, so I'll give her that opportunity.

Hon. I. Chong: Very quickly, I do want to stress that I think the program has had successes. As I say, we've identified Gold River, Sayward, Tahsis, Tumbler Ridge, Port Edward, and we're dealing with Port Alice and Midway now, who I think are seeing some opportunities here.

I also want to say that as recently as about two weeks ago, on April 10, there were some public hearings. The first of two public hearings was held in Midway. At that point there were approximately 65 community members who attended.

[1055]

The participants — and I think this was very effective on their part — brainstormed. When they did so, they brainstormed on socioeconomic development projects and scenarios for Midway's future. The whole purpose is to allow the community to take a look at what projects or scenarios that they may wish and how they want to see their community be shaped in the future.

I do believe that transition studies are important. I do believe that communities in transition do benefit when we're able to provide them resources in looking at that. But if the member is suggesting that every time a community that has a major industry finds itself in particular financial struggles, it's up to government to

come in and save that particular industry, then I would have to point out that that has happened in the past. It hasn't worked. I mean, he knows all too well — I think he does, and I know his members must know — the disaster that occurred when the government of the day tried and kept pumping money into Skeena Cellulose. We know that didn't help that community in the end.

I think it's important that when a community does go through a significant challenge, as a government we can provide assistance. We can find ways to facilitate meetings and bring the community leaders together to discuss, to brainstorm, to determine what their future is. At the end of the day I know that good suggestions are made, and we will facilitate to ensure that some of those ideas can come to light. But at the same time, I think we do have to leave it up to the community leaders in various communities to be able to make the decisions they think are best for their community. If it's to allow an industry to flourish or to diversify with another industry, that, too, will be their decision.

G. Coons: Thank you, staff, for being here, and minister. I was actually going to bring up the situation with what happened in Prince Rupert. The other side indicates that they refer to it as a waste of money, but in the north we saw that as an investment. We take it very seriously when governments decide not to invest in northern and rural areas, and we're seeing it right now across the province. The money that was committed to the north was money that helped those communities thrive and make it through situations that they are now struggling through again.

I was going to start off with an acknowledgment to the staff and to the minister about how they are handling the situation right now, so I'll get to that before I get to my other questions about the transition programs that this government sometimes has in effect.

I want to acknowledge that the responses from the minister and the staff are very encouraging in respect to the situation in Prince Rupert and following up on the Kennedy report. Our community is very optimistic and looks forward to a timely and positive conclusion, especially since our region was hit with another blow with the sinking of the *Queen of the North*. We're seeing a huge hit of 60 percent less traffic coming into Prince Rupert and coming into the region. I can't reiterate the importance of this assistance — the community transition program assistance — that was promised to our community, and we look forward to a timely and positive conclusion to that.

I do want to touch briefly on what my colleague from Cariboo North was discussing last night. Again, as my colleague mentioned, we were on a four-day trip to Haida Gwaii-Queen Charlotte Islands. We heard the frustration. We saw the fear of communities facing prolonged land use uncertainty, an economic downturn in the coastal forest industry, the devastating effects of the current situation of the sinking of the *Queen of the North*, tourism — a big hit on small and larger businesses, and this for at least two to three years. We know that.

I've talked with mayors. I've talked with regional district directors on the islands, and they need help desperately. They're crying out. The mayor of Port Clements is definitely responding to our communications that we had passed back and forth. I contacted his spouse last night, and we were in contact. They definitely need assistance in new initiatives and infrastructure.

[1100]

I'm just wondering. To the minister: what other ministries does the minister work with, and are there currently any cross-ministry initiatives that could come into play and that could save island communities on the Queen Charlotte Islands?

[H. Bloy in the chair.]

Hon. I. Chong: Hon. Chair, welcome.

I also want to make comments on his remarks about investments, particularly investments in the Prince Rupert area. As I say, there are different ways of making investments and assisting communities. I can tell the member — and I know he's aware — that in order to support economic development in that area, the government committed \$30 million for the conversion of the Fairview Terminal and the container facility there. Those are some investments that we have made in the north.

We've also established the Northern Development Initiative Trust, of which Prince Rupert is also a member. That trust is there to support new economic opportunities and also cross-regional economic advancements throughout the north. You know, the member may want to disregard some of the kinds of supports that this government has provided. But I can tell you that there have been substantial investments and commitments made, and we continue to meet with people in the north to see how they want to diversify their economy. Those are just a number of examples.

In particular, though, the member is referring to matters regarding the Queen Charlotte Islands. He knows that I was there last December, as well as himself, when we celebrated the incorporation of the village. I met with the mayor, and she showed me the town. We had a very quick tour of the town, and she was most excited about the opportunities that lie ahead for her. I have no doubt that with her energy and her council, they will accomplish many things.

I think it's important that communities know — and I do believe they know, because we stressed this, whether at UBCM or at other area associations that we attend — that this ministry, as the ministry responsible for local governments, acts as a one-window approach into government, into all other ministries. We do work cross-ministerially, and if we are contacted for assistance as to where they may direct their inquiries to because they're not exactly sure, then we are the ministry that can provide that information to them.

G. Coons: Just a few comments on the development trust initiatives. I'm hearing this with the LRMPs —

that there are existing funds out there. But those existing funds are meant for specific reasons. That's what this government is doing. They're playing with the lives of residents in the north and rural communities by claiming there are existing funds. Those funds were designated and put forth for specific reasons, not for communities in transition. I would hope the minister realizes that.

I'm hearing the same thing with the Minister of Agriculture and Lands, saying that the north coast and central coast can access the north Island development fund. There is no way that the north Island is going to let Prince Rupert access any of their development funds.

The minister also talks about the \$285 million for the northern development initiative that's available to the north and central coast. I don't think the Cariboo regional advisory committee or the Prince George regional advisory committee or the Peace regional advisory committee are going to let their funds funnel through the central coast and north coast so that the government doesn't have to meet its obligations for the funds that were promised. I'm talking about the socially responsible investment funds.

I hope the minister gets off of these other existing funds that are not accessible, especially the northern development funds, which in some cases you need to leverage by another \$2.50 for every dollar you try to access. I don't think that is what the funds were initiated for.

[1105]

But getting back to my question. Sandspit is unincorporated, and their tax base is limited. They rely on forestry, fishing, tourism — all drastically hit. I know Sandspit is a proud, hardy community. They want to survive, and they will survive. I hope it's with the minister's blessing and with some action taken on their behalf to make sure that unincorporated areas get access to community transition funding.

Are there any vehicles available to Sandspit in that area?

Hon. I. Chong: To the member: I hesitate to start this way, but I don't think he serves his community particularly well when he suggests that the development trusts that have been established to encourage local communities to diversify — to take a look at their economic opportunities and how they may wish to diversify — are funds that are not accessible to them.

The people who serve on the board of the trust are primarily local government appointees. If he's suggesting that the local government appointees are not doing their job, then perhaps he should take it up with them.

These are trusts that were set up outside of government to allow the local communities the opportunity to discuss amongst themselves what it is that they believe is necessary for revitalization, for economic opportunities — whether it's done in a local area or whether it's done on a regional basis. I know that some of them are still setting up some terms of reference. That's fair enough, because this was their opportunity to do that.

If the member is suggesting that the people who are serving on the boards of these trusts aren't doing a good job, then I would suggest that he take it up with them.

Specifically in relation to his questions regarding Sandspit, I can also tell the member that I have not received — I have just checked with my staff — any letter directly from the mayor or the representative from Sandspit. I know the member may think it's appropriate for the ministry or the minister to go out to communities, to actively seek requests for assistance, but that isn't the role. It is about locally elected officials having the opportunity to sit down themselves to make a determination as to what direction they wish to take. Once they decide that they want assistance from the ministry, then they have every opportunity to call the ministry, and we will therefore work with them to see how we can facilitate their particular community that may be in transition.

G. Coons: Just one comment about the city of Queen Charlotte. Yes, it was incorporated. We were there. We had a wonderful time.

I'm not talking about Queen Charlotte. I'm talking about Sandspit and Port Clements in the areas that are seeking and needing assistance. Yes, they will be getting in the information, but I wanted to make sure that the minister clarifies how the community transition funds would be available or what vehicles an unincorporated area could access.

My last question is about small community grants. I believe it was announced by the Premier that small community grants would be doubled. Communities all over British Columbia, especially in my region — whether it's Bella Bella, Bella Coola, Port Edward, Stewart — rely heavily on these grants to maintain services and to keep taxes reasonable. I think it's vital to know, especially in these smaller communities, what these grants are. Stewart, for example, has a 95-percent residential tax base, compared to other places that may have a 95-percent commercial tax base.

Two questions. Is the minister considering a floating grant that would take rural communities into consideration, or would it be a set amount? Correct me if I'm mistaken, or just answer my question — whether or not small communities know their grants for the next couple of years.

[1110]

Hon. I. Chong: Thank you to the member for North Coast for the benefit of the question that he has asked.

The small community protection grants are allocated using a formula that is, in fact, described in section 3 of the local government grants regulation. If the member wishes to have a look at that section, he can do so to familiarize himself with how that allocation is made.

What's important is that when the Premier made the announcement last year at UBCM that we would be doubling the small community protection grants, I know it was a surprise to many of the small communities — and a welcome surprise at that.

What we have been doing is working with UBCM to complete a consultation process with them, because they see this as a unique opportunity — first time ever that this has happened — to have a look at the formula to make sure that whatever changes that need to be made.... That a new formula, if it were to be developed, would be the right formula....

We are doing that. We are encouraged by their comments at the UBCM level. What will happen is that we are hoping, by the end of May, to have something more concrete available. But if UBCM thinks they want more time, certainly we'll provide that. As I say, it is a unique opportunity to have a look at the formula, and they're very much engaged in that process.

K. Conroy: We're moving on to issues around seniors — that part of your ministry.

In reading over the service plan, I want to talk a bit about the proposed initiatives that this ministry is putting into place to ensure that seniors have the enhanced opportunities to participate in community life and improve their well-being.

As I travel around the province talking to seniors individually and in seniors groups, in communities like Prince George, Kamloops, Victoria, the lower mainland, Kelowna and throughout the interior, I am getting the impression that seniors are for the most part not experiencing these enhanced opportunities. The initiatives I see coming from the ministry are the 1-800 help line, the seniors guide, the website, the Council on Aging, as well as various programs funnelled through the UBCM.

What I would like to know is where the ministry goal is to actually improve social and economic well-being for seniors. What major initiatives are being undertaken by your ministry to achieve those goals?

Hon. I. Chong: I thank the member for West Kootenay-Boundary for her participation in these estimates debates.

I think what is important, and what she has already acknowledged, is one of the initiatives this ministry was able to be very much a part of. That is the Premier's Council on Aging and Seniors Issues. As she may be familiar with, that was established last October, and it is expected that this November — end of November — the council will report out.

This council has been travelling around the province, bringing in experts and also having communities engaged to the extent that input is being received either by e-mail or by presentations or by letters, so that we don't have any preconceived notion on what those recommendations are — what solutions may be out there that seniors themselves want — to improve their quality of life, to improve their community involvement.

[1115]

I do know — and we both know; all of us in this House know — that seniors are living longer and living healthier lives. They do want opportunities to participate in their communities. Some of them want to continue to work.

One of the specific mandates that the Premier's council has, in fact, is looking at the issue of mandatory retirement. While that seems very easy to change, I can tell you that when you get input from other individuals, they somehow feel that we should re-establish other thresholds. We are listening to everyone. I do believe that ultimately, at the end of the day, there will be a change made to that.

I'm hearing from seniors, as I'm sure this member is — especially those well into their 70s — that 70 is the new 50. When they say that, it just brings a smile to everyone's face in the room, because they absolutely feel that.

Seniors also want to participate in their community by volunteering with young people, and that's another encouraging aspect of it as well. So we take a look at how across government we might be able to enhance programs that currently exist in other ministries to provide those kinds of opportunities.

In the area of social and economic well-being, that is important too. The member will note that when we provided some initial work with UBCM, \$2 million was advanced to UBCM for them to engage their communities, their local governments, on how they may want to increase participation or provide safer communities for seniors. That was designed particularly to see that seniors have input. Simple things such as building designs or lighting make a difference in neighbourhoods and quality of life. That's important.

The other part of the economic side of it. As the member knows, the Minister of Finance increased the SAFER grants that were provided. We've also reduced the income taxes for our low-income individuals, primarily for seniors, basically eliminating the provincial tax. We can't do anything about the federal side. I can tell you, having just done a few tax returns recently, I know that reducing the provincial income tax is something we were able to do. So for those earning \$15,500 a year or less, of which there are seniors, they no longer have to pay for that part of it.

The member will also be aware of a number of programs that are listed for seniors, in particular, through the seniors handbook. More importantly, though, we want to ensure that seniors have access to information, which is one of the reasons why the website and the help line were established. Some seniors were saying: "We hear others who have this. We don't know." What we're trying to do is encourage more sharing of that information around the province. Coming from an urban area, I can tell you that I know the seniors here avail themselves of services or programs that they know much better than those who live in the rural areas.

I am very pleased that a number of MLAs on both sides of the House have a supply of those seniors booklets and will put them in their office, because I know that every year I get asked for them. I saw the member for Saanich South, the Health critic, recently have in one of his ads: "Come and pick up a seniors guide." I think it's great that he is making sure his constituents know there is a book that allows for that.

There are a number of initiatives that we continue to work on. This ministry works across government to ensure that when it comes to programs for seniors, where we can provide additional information that we gain as a result of going out to the community and hearing from groups, we will provide that to those ministries where they might wish to change or enhance or better those particular programs.

K. Conroy: I'm going to focus on some of those initiatives the minister talked about and just ask questions around them. I'm going to start with the council on aging, seeing as you brought that one up first. I think one of the issues with the council on aging is that there were preconceived topics that people were allowed to speak to when they did presentations to the seniors council. In fact, the groups I talked to in Prince George said they were only allowed to speak to transportation and making connections, the information network.

They all acknowledged that seniors can submit written presentations, but we all know, especially those of us who are working with seniors, that seniors want to talk about their issues. They want to enter into dialogue. They want to have feedback. For the seniors in Prince George, their issues in that community are around housing issues. It's extremely important for them, and they did not have the opportunity to dialogue with the council on issues that are very, very specific and really very important to their community.

There is concern from a number of groups around the province that when they go to make presentations to the council, they can only speak to these issues, and that anything else has to be done in a written format.

[1120]

There's also concern from the people I talked to around the province that the locations have been very selective and not very inclusive around the province. So I'm asking if the ministry is in fact going to be conducting any more site visits or community visits, for instance, in the West Kootenays. The north Island has not had any. The only visit to the north, the entire north, was to Prince George. That's halfway up our province, so it doesn't even begin to cover the true north.

It's a huge distance to cover, so all those seniors are grateful that they have the ability to respond electronically or handwritten. They really feel that it is very, very important to have the opportunity to have the dialogue with the council. The other issue that's come up with the different groups is whether there are going to be more meetings and more of an opportunity for open dialogue from these different groups throughout the province.

Hon. I. Chong: The member will know, by checking the website, the mandate that was provided to the council. It was a unique opportunity, because of our aging demographic change, where the council wanted to be able to take a look at the implications of a demographic shift where one in four will be seniors in about 25 years.

In order to deal with that emerging trend, the council wanted to bring in experts, to bring in people who wanted to present on specific topic areas. I want to assure the member that we are not directing the council specifically. The presentations that are being chosen are, in fact, ones that the council has deliberated on or talked about amongst themselves as to what they felt was important. The subject matters which I know come to the top of mind, not just for seniors but for everyone, are housing and health. Those are government programs or services that are in place.

I believe the seniors council felt it was important that, while they're important and existing, they focus on emerging trends and changes. Again, we don't direct the council, specifically, as to what the presentation should be. They want to focus on the future, acknowledging that government currently does have a number of programs and services, and that they need to continue to work on those.

The site visits, as well, are determined by the council. I'm not familiar with their schedule or.... Well, I am when I check the website. I haven't been able to go to every particular meeting that they've had, but I know they've had them around the province. I know the next one is scheduled for Vancouver, and then another one will be in Cranbrook. So I think they've tried to select locations where the council felt they would get a variety of information from the community as well as to take a look at those communities, because the council has members who come from rural communities as well as from urban centres.

I can say to the member that originally when the council was set up, the applications that came in.... We had over 200 applications, and at one point close to 65 percent were all from Victoria and Vancouver. The difficulty, of course, was that we wanted to reflect as much as possible the seniors around the province, which is one of the reasons, if you recall, that we extended the deadline for applications so that we could encourage people in the north, in the east and the southeast to apply for it. We were able to get a good representation in that regard.

The council, when they have their meetings, do have particular subject matters they want to explore. They do that so they can focus on that particular subject, because if they made it a free-fly, they thought that would make it more difficult for them to provide recommendations. At the lunch break, I believe at every particular site visit that they're at, council members — and there are 18 of them — spread themselves around the room, go to the various tables and then allow the community to provide whatever feedback they have or whatever issues are on their mind at the time. The council members come back at the end of the meeting and bring those back and say that this is what they heard. So there certainly is an opportunity for voices to be heard at these meetings.

[1125]

Of course, a letter or an e-mail where a senior wishes to be very focused on what they want to say is helpful too, because then the chair and the council can

really review that and have something in front of them. That's why they've made it a point at every location to ensure that they know there are various ways to contact — by letter, by e-mail, to check the website for more information and that sort of thing.

Again, I'm not directly involved with the council. Our office provides support to them. They very much have a free rein in that sense to determine what issues they think are important to deal with the focus of seniors in the future. I'm probably going to be as surprised as the member, when we get those recommendations back, as to what they want to see implemented. I think sometimes we have preconceived notions of what seniors are thinking. Certainly, that's not going to be the case. They're going to tell us, as a result of their meetings around the province, what they want or what direction they see that this province should take in regard to seniors.

K. Conroy: I think seniors had an expectation — because the mandate is how to support seniors independence, and health was one of the bullets in the mandate — that they would be able to talk about that in their home communities. That was an expectation. They also said, "Yes, there is informal input," but they recognize that in those informal discussions, it's not formal. It's not in writing. It's a conversation with a member of the council. There's concern about that.

There is also concern about the fact that the meetings are recorded, so the presentations are on public record. Those are part of the final report recommendations, and they want to make sure that all of the written submissions have the same amount of importance as the verbal reports that are given to the committee.

Hon. I. Chong: I would expect, as happens in select standing committees when people make verbal presentations.... Those who actually provide them in written format are, I believe, given the same consideration. It's just that the volume of whatever the subject matter is that is brought forward is, perhaps, what will be given the weighting as to what recommendations may come out of that.

Again, I am happy to, as a result of the member's comments, convey those concerns to the council. I mean, they still have two more meetings to go. If they think they can still change the structural format that they have, maybe they would like to do so. I know that they've got Vancouver and Cranbrook still to go. Perhaps there's an opportunity for them to change it slightly to take in those suggestions from the member opposite.

K. Conroy: I'm sure the minister knows that Cranbrook is on the very, very far side of the Kootenays; it's not in the centre. It's very difficult for people in the Kootenays and the southern Okanagan to get over to Cranbrook, so it's a long drive and a long trip for a presentation. It's another thing to pass on when we're planning meetings across the province. If we can make them more central, it's easier to get to.

I just want to move to some of the UBCM funding. One of the issues that's come up is the conference that was to be held in April. The conference was on initiatives around housing and support services for seniors. That conference was cancelled, and in the message that went out — it was on the government website — it was cancelled till the fall to accommodate meetings around emerging issues. I would think that housing and support services to seniors are a rather critical issue right now. I've had different comments from people. What are the emerging issues that are stopping the conference from going ahead?

[1130]

Hon. I. Chong: I wanted just to find out whether we could give the member the correct information as to why the forum was cancelled. Because it is a UBCM-planned event, I don't have any information as to what the reasons for that were.

As the member may be aware — and I'll just provide the background — when \$2 million was provided to UBCM about three years ago now.... I think it was in March of '03 or maybe March of '04. My memory escapes me, but I remember the announcement was made. The understanding was that this was provided to UBCM so they can work with communities to take a look at issues regarding seniors, in particular seniors housing and how communities could work to ensure that they are also considering the emerging trends that are happening in their areas.

Phase one of that initiative, as I understand it, included a number of community consultations and a series of information-sharing activities. They also developed the website. They had workshops, questionnaires, presentations at all the five area association workshops in 2005. I do recall in UBCM in 2004, when I attended that conference — I believe it was in Kelowna — that the information-sharing was particularly important, because some communities had already begun to make their communities more senior-friendly, and also to look at particularly housing options and how to partner with groups in their communities. So that has, in part, been phase one.

I believe the second phase was to continue on to include communities, inviting them to participate in a process where they can dialogue more, where there were more workshops that could be hosted — that's, I think, what the intention was — extending that into this year, into 2006. I believe the intention is still there to do that. I can't give the member a definitive answer as to why that was cancelled. We will see whether we can contact UBCM and find out whether it has been rescheduled for another date, and if it has, perhaps I can provide that information to the member.

Again, phase one had been completed, and they were just wanting to continue on, because I think they got quite a bit out of that.

K. Conroy: We'll go on to another.... The Premier's congress on aging is definitely from the government. We've had one to date — October 28 in Vancouver. Are

there going to be additional congresses held, and are they going to be taken out of the lower mainland and maybe go out into some other part of the interior and the province somewhere?

Hon. I. Chong: The Premier's council was launched last October, and the congress that was held was basically to launch the council and introduce the council to a number of people. While I know it's always difficult being in Vancouver, the lower mainland, it's always where you can get people in a large enough space, as well, and have enough focus on that so that people are aware of when you'll launch it. Also, the media has some interest in what's going on, so you can actually make this known around the province.

But that congress was, as I said, held to launch the council. Then the council thereafter came together and decided their workplan for the year, what communities they were going to visit. That's the reason why the member has indicated where they have chosen some site locations. That is how the council has decided to proceed.

[1135]

I don't know whether they intend to come back, bring all the recommendations together and have another congress. I would think that after they finish all their site visits and all the information they've gathered as a result of e-mails and letters, they are just going to put that together and then work on a report for recommendations to come to our government by November of this year. At this point I haven't been made aware that the council wishes to have another congress, but if that were the case, then I would be happy to hear from them on that.

K. Conroy: It was our understanding that at the congress in October, it was announced there was going to be another one in April that they were talking about, so we just wondered what had happened to it. I will take the minister's word that it is something they're going to be determining.

I just want to move on to seniors advocacy. I hear that a lot from seniors when I travel around the province — the issues around people who are supporting seniors issues, the different community groups that are working on behalf of seniors, for seniors. A lot of them are seniors who, like you say, are very active seniors. I have 70-year-old seniors calling me about issues with their 90-year-old parents. They're very active, the seniors who I am meeting with.

A concern that comes up is that the provincial Seniors Advisory Council has been changed. It's not an advocacy role that is working throughout the province. We have talked to community groups that have had very small amounts of funding taken away but which were hugely beneficial to the community groups, where there could be a seniors advocate in the community.

They were for the most part retired seniors who were working with seniors in the community, and all they were getting paid for was their gas and coffee

basically — if even that. There were very minimal expenses, and they were very small grants. Those were taken away from many community groups around the province. When I meet with these groups, they talk about how they are just so effective in the communities. They provide so much support to the communities, and it is not an incredible amount of money that could support these groups.

For instance, when I was in Kamloops meeting with seniors, I met with a very effective group. They have a facility, and it's based in the mall in Kamloops. It's called the Seniors Information Referral and Resources Society, where people can just drop in. They can pick up copies of the seniors book that we referred to earlier. They can get all kinds of information around seniors — around housing, around where they can go for different supports.

They struggle to provide their supports, and yet their supports are so needed in the community. They have hundreds of people coming in and talking to them about the different issues that the seniors are facing. They are concerned about the lack of support for groups like that throughout the province. It's not just in Kamloops. It's throughout the province that I talk to different groups.

It seems to me shortsighted that for just the sake of a few dollars, really, we could be providing great support to these different groups throughout the province through the Senior Citizens' Association of B.C. They've also expressed concern about the lack of support in that way. These groups are well-connected in the community. They provide an incredible amount of support, and many of them have said: "We could do so much more with just a little bit of ongoing, sustained funding."

Hon. I. Chong: I thank the member for raising this issue. I, too, have met with seniors around the province and have been doing so almost from the first time I was elected in 1996. I continue to hear from them. I also acknowledge that many of the seniors — so from the time I was first elected in 1996 to now, ten years later.... I have aged those ten years, getting closer to being a senior myself.

[1140]

I have seen a change, as well, in the approach to how seniors provide services to their communities. While I know that in some communities there are a number of seniors who would like to continue on with the same program that had been in place, I've also talked to seniors who said they felt it was time to take a look at providing services to seniors in their communities in other ways. So we have, as I say, encouraged that to take place.

I know that services continue to operate in about 49 communities throughout the province. What they have been able to do is partner, many times, with the health authorities, because many times the services and the inquiries that had come into some of these organizations had a lot to do with more information about health and services such as that. So I do know that

health authorities have provided some assistance with that. But every community is different, and every seniors organization is quite different, and the services they're providing have changed.

I know in some they're still providing those voluntary tax filing services, and in some places they're not doing that. Some places they're just helping to fill out the form. Some places there are drop-ins for seniors to come in, just so they have social interaction. That is good as well. One of the reasons why we launched the Premier's Council on Aging and Seniors Issues was to allow for information and input as to how that mandate would be filled, how to support seniors in the future.

I think we're also going to have to have another definition for what we call seniors, because some seniors are telling me they don't want to be called a senior anymore because of that. Their needs need to be addressed, and the seniors organizations that provide those services are also seeing that they're having to change and provide services in a different way.

While we want to still provide information to those seniors who want it in terms of some basic information and access to information, it's one of the reasons why we continue with the handbook. It's one of the reasons why we have a seniors help line. It's one of the reasons why we've also connected with the B.C. NurseLine. Those are all ways to support seniors in our communities.

I'm always interested in hearing about new and innovative ways, but I can tell the member — and I know sometimes, perhaps, representing some of the rural communities.... Sometimes change is much more difficult in those areas than in the urban centres. But I've also heard from seniors organizations in some urban areas where they are interested in a new approach on how to support each other and support their seniors. A number of seniors centres that are thriving have connections with their local governments, and they're finding great support in that way as well.

We continue to work in this area. We continue to receive input and, again, welcome all the information that we have. I will take the information that this member has provided, as well, as another important piece of information.

K. Conroy: I thank the minister for that. I think it's fair to point out that a lot of these groups are doing new and innovative ways of providing services, because they have to keep doing that to keep their heads above water and in order to sustain their programs. Yes, they are connecting with municipal government, and non-profit groups are fundraising and getting grants, but they're just one grant away from losing the ability to provide the services. They talk about that quite often.

I do think that we need to look at another name. I went to a meeting, and I was referred to, at 48, as a junior-junior senior. The person talking to me was 55, and she was a junior senior. So you're right. They're feeling that they need some acknowledgment of that.

I think it's important to acknowledge that these groups do provide a lot of service in this province and often do it with very little funding. They provide incredibly important information and support. A lot of them are provincial groups. One that comes to mind for me is the B.C. Coalition to End Abuse of Seniors. That's an incredibly difficult situation and comes across in many, many different ways.

This group, I know, struggles with funding. It provides services across the entire province. It's doing advocacy work with other groups across the province to ensure that seniors are not facing abuse situations in their homes and the facilities they live in with their own families, in their communities. It's an organization that ends up saving government money, because they can provide the kinds of services that seniors need. In the long run, it's very cost-effective to provide groups like this with money.

[1145]

I think it's important to acknowledge there isn't a formal advocate for seniors in the province. I'm wondering if the minister is concerned about the lack of that. Is there any intention to put a position like that in place for the seniors of this province?

Hon. I. Chong: I appreciate the member bringing that suggestion forward. I can say that it hasn't been brought more formally to my attention as to that's what people would want, but I would certainly hope that if this is a truly expressed desire of many seniors around the province, they do make it known. I suggest they make it known to the Council on Aging and Seniors Issues so that when they put together their recommendations, they can take into account many of the emerging issues that will focus on the future needs of seniors. I would hope that is where that suggestion would come into play.

I just want to quickly provide some information to the member regarding comments that she made about seniors groups and organizations. Rightfully, the B.C. Coalition to End Abuse of Seniors, a group that I have met with a number of times.... They do fabulous work. I've been to a workshop where they do a sketch, role-playing. I found it incredibly empowering — and for seniors there.

It was a wonderful group. We did provide them with \$20,000 to support the development and distribution of materials and programs to educate the public on the abuse of seniors, because I think it's very important that people acknowledge that abuse of seniors is not necessarily from their partners. It can also come from family members who are children — adult children. That's what I think was very startling for many people in the workshop, to acknowledge where abuse comes from — members of your family. You don't expect it, and it's even more devastating when that does occur. They made a very strong case as to why that education needed to take place, and I agreed with them, so we funded it.

We also recently funded the Greater Victoria Elder-care Foundation, for them to put on the first-ever seniors festival. They're hoping that this will expand.

Again, it's about encouraging seniors to be more involved in their communities and, if they wish to volunteer, to provide services to each other.

Another emerging issue for seniors is the independence related to mobility, which is transportation. The BCAA Traffic Safety Foundation has a mature drivers program, and I attended that workshop as well. Many of them were in their seventies, and they were still driving, but they were wondering whether they would be in their eighties. This was a very helpful workshop. It deals with road safety programs. Seniors have some comfort knowing, when they reach that age where they might think they want to continue on driving, that they will acknowledge physically whether they should or should not.

We do find a variety of ways to support programs for seniors, and we will continue to do that. But for specific suggestions as to the future, those are what I'm hoping the seniors council will provide.

Just before I adjourn, I want to give the member an update regarding the postponement of the UBCM seniors housing and support services conference. I just received this information, and this has been put out by the executive director of UBCM. They unfortunately had to, they say, postpone the previously scheduled May 25 to 26 conference that was scheduled for Richmond. They've postponed it till September. They do discuss that there are some emerging issues. It's on the website at www.civicnet.bc.ca, if the member wishes to take a look at how they have indicated the reasons as to why that occurred.

With that, Mr. Chair, I would move that the committee rise, report progress and ask leave to sit again.

Motion approved.

The Chair: Committee A will now stand adjourned.

The committee rose at 11:49 a.m.

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