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HANSARD

Wednesday, October 7, 2020 — 1:00 p.m.

Speaker: The Honourable Nils Clarke

YUKON LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

2020 Fall Sitting

SPEAKER — Hon. Nils Clarke, MLA, Riverdale North
DEPUTY SPEAKER and CHAIR OF COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE — Don Hutton, MLA, Mayo-Tatchun
DEPUTY CHAIR OF COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE — Ted Adel, MLA, Copperbelt North

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Hon. Ranj Pillai	Porter Creek South	Deputy Premier Minister of Energy, Mines and Resources; Economic Development; Minister responsible for the Yukon Development Corporation and the Yukon Energy Corporation
Hon. Tracy-Anne McPhee	Riverdale South	Government House Leader Minister of Education; Justice
Hon. John Streicker	Mount Lorne-Southern Lakes	Minister of Community Services; Minister responsible for the French Language Services Directorate; Yukon Liquor Corporation and the Yukon Lottery Commission
Hon. Pauline Frost	Vuntut Gwitchin	Minister of Health and Social Services; Environment; Minister responsible for the Yukon Housing Corporation
Hon. Richard Mostyn	Whitehorse West	Minister of Highways and Public Works; the Public Service Commission
Hon. Jeanie McLean	Mountainview	Minister of Tourism and Culture; Minister responsible for the Workers' Compensation Health and Safety Board; Women's Directorate

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Yukon Legislative Assembly
Whitehorse, Yukon
Wednesday, October 7, 2020 — 1:00 p.m.

Speaker: I will now call the House to order.
 We will proceed at this time with prayers.

Prayers

DAILY ROUTINE

Speaker: We will proceed with the Order Paper.
 Introduction of visitors.

INTRODUCTION OF VISITORS

Ms. White: I invite my colleagues to welcome the visitors in the gallery who are taking an active role in democracy. We have Kevin Greenshields, Michael Thompson, Emilie Baker, Mary Sloan, Lucas Taggart-Cox, Telek Rogan, and Aaron Greenshields. Thank you so much for being here.

Applause

Hon. Mr. Streicker: I am not sure if I heard the name read out but, just in case, I would also like to welcome Michael and — I'm not sure if it is Alexander, or Gwynne-Timothy — Michael Thompson, who is one of my young constituents.

Applause

Speaker: Tributes.

TRIBUTES

In recognition of Culture Days

Hon. Ms. McLean: I rise today on behalf of all Members of the Legislative Assembly to pay tribute to Culture Days. Culture Days is an annual celebration of the nation's arts and culture that aims to foster appreciation and support for artistic and cultural life, to promote interaction, and to affirm that every citizen is the guardian of the cultural life of his, her, or their community.

This year's theme, "Unexpected Intersections", encourages artists and audiences alike to reimagine as they reconnect. Typically taking place over the last weekend of September, the event, like so many others, was modified due to COVID-19 — but in this case, for the better. This year, Culture Days was expanded into a four-week celebration running from September 25 to October 25. Here in Yukon, artists and organizations coordinated and presented a fantastic range of events for all interests and ages from September 25 to 27. Events included concerts, literary readings, workshops, art exhibitions, children's performers, storytelling, bike decorating, a haiku walk, and even a parade.

I have to pause and acknowledge how incredible it was to attend in-person events during this year's 2020 edition of Culture Days. In Yukon, we are one of the very few places throughout the country to have the privilege of holding in-person events. Over the course of the day, I heard many people express just how blessed they felt to live in the Yukon and to be part of this territory.

I am very proud of our talented and resilient Yukon artists. There are no words to describe the joy of seeing our youth gathering to decorate their bikes for the Midnight Sun Moppet Children's Festival procession.

I paused to listen to Ryan McNally and Paris Pick playing solo music along the waterfront as if, for a very split moment, things were already back to normal. My Culture Days weekend ended with attending "Airings and Endlings: Readings with Joanna Lilley and Ellen Bielawski" where I travelled through their words and poetry. The Yukon Arts Centre truly took all measures to keep everyone safe, and it was just a start.

As I stated earlier, this year's Culture Days have been extended and it is wonderful to note that Yukon artists are featured prominently outside the territory in upcoming events. For example, on October 13, Jan Stirling will be giving a talk in Coquitlam about the book she wrote on Ted Harrison. It is being livestreamed so that people can take part from their homes. It is inspiring to witness the creativity and adaptation that went into the 2020 Culture Days celebration. The amazing array of in-person and online performances, workshops, and exhibitions offer us new ways to experience, collaborate, and connect across our nation. You can search virtual opportunities through #CultureDays2020.

Arts and culture play such an essential role in Yukoners' lives and in the health and well-being of our communities. Yukon's arts and culture organizations and practitioners do so much to innovate, inspire, and share with audiences the unique voice and talents of our north. In times of uncertainty, artists provide an important lens and outlet through which we can connect and find meaning. With the current global situation, an event such as Culture Days preserves our strong sense of community.

Our thanks go to the Yukon Arts Centre, the Kwanlin Dün Cultural Centre, Arts Underground, the Yukon Historical and Museums Association, and all the many community partners who contributed to this year's events. Please join me in recognizing all the artists, organizations, and venues who helped bring this event to life under these exceptional circumstances.

Applause

In recognition of Energy Efficiency Day

Hon. Mr. Pillai: I rise today on behalf of the Yukon Liberal government and the Yukon NDP to pay tribute to the growing network of companies, government agencies, utilities, and many others who promote energy efficiency during this fifth annual Energy Efficiency Day.

We made special note of energy efficiency today, but of course this is a year-round commitment. Energy efficiency and the jobs it creates are key to the future of the Yukon. There are more than 436,000 Canadians who work in the energy-efficiency sector. These people are eliminating waste, reducing carbon emissions, and growing the economy. The recent release of *Our Clean Future: A Yukon strategy for climate change, energy and a green economy* is a milestone achievement in Yukon's commitment to fighting climate change and improving our energy efficiency. Energy, Mines and Resources

developed this strategy in partnership with Environment and Economic Development and will continue to lead by implementing 42 key actions from the strategy.

Energy efficiency is key to our clean future. Being more energy efficient is the first line of action in addressing increasing demands for energy. But even before the release of *Our Clean Future*, energy efficiency was a priority. The Government of Yukon enabled over \$120 million over four years — starting in 2019 — to implement energy-efficiency initiatives throughout the Yukon. This works out to an average of \$30 million annually.

Thanks to a joint investment with the Government of Canada, dedicated funding for energy-efficient retrofits for residential, commercial, and institutional dwellings was made available. Retrofit incentives are allowing Yukon homeowners, businesses, and institutions to upgrade insulation, improve window quality, and draft-proof their homes and places of business. This work saves money for home and business owners.

Good energy incentives also play a significant role in promoting the purchase of energy-efficient Energy Star appliances. These smaller changes continue to make a significant impact in reducing electrical loads and energy use in Yukon. To date, participants in our residential energy-efficiency rebate programs saved enough energy to power 4,273 average Yukon homes for one year. They saved \$13.8 million in energy costs and avoided emitting 55,000 tonnes of greenhouse gases. This is a significant accomplishment, and I want to acknowledge those homeowners and business owners who have stepped up and made these improvements. You are on the leading edge.

Heating accounts for 21 percent of Yukon's total greenhouse gas emissions. To help reduce Yukon's heating demands, we expanded our energy retrofit incentives to include commercial and institutional buildings. This means that good energy rebates are available to businesses, non-profit organizations, Yukon First Nations, and municipalities. As of August 2020, 32 commercial and institutional projects were completed through our energy retrofit program, significantly reducing their greenhouse gas emissions, and another 48 projects are in development.

Thanks to the Government of Canada's support, local government buildings are being retrofitted. This program focuses on improving energy use in larger buildings like community centres or main administration buildings in Yukon First Nation communities and municipalities.

These retrofit programs are delivering measurable benefits by relieving pressure on our energy-generation needs, reducing our collective greenhouse gas emissions, and creating green jobs that stimulate Yukon's economy.

Mr. Speaker, pursuing energy efficiency is a win-win for everyone. Our homes and workplaces will be warmer in the winter and have lower heating bills. We reduce our energy use and emit less greenhouse gases. We will create jobs and grow the economy in an energy-efficiency sector. We have a strong network of people in Yukon who are part of this movement —

homeowners, First Nation governments, communities, advocates, and the private sector.

Let's keep moving forward together in the name of energy efficiency for a healthy environment and economy for all.

Applause

Mr. Cathers: I'm pleased to rise on behalf of the Yukon Party Official Opposition to recognize today as Energy Efficiency Day 2020. This day focuses on sharing tips and tools with individuals and families in order for them to save energy and save money. Here in the Yukon and across the north, we have unique energy needs that set us apart from southern jurisdictions with respect to usage.

Canadian winters can range in severity from coast to coast, but here in the northern territories, we face limited daylight hours in addition to the cold temperatures, and we are not able to heat our homes any less than we do and still remain warm.

I would like to note that the minister — in talking about the government's new clean future initiative — we were pleased when they announced that they have continued forward with many of the energy-efficiency programs and initiatives that were started under the Yukon Party. I would like to also thank the government employees who, during our time, helped with the design of programs, including the good energy rebates and the microgeneration program, as well as changes made to the rural electrification program which allowed homeowners to install on-grid renewable energy programs and to borrow money to install those things — whether they be solar panels, wind, or hydro.

There are a number of programs that Yukoners can subscribe to here to help curb energy usage and promote efficiency. Initiatives such as the good energy program — which the minister has previously talked about the success of in this House; I believe he mentioned it again here today — began under a Yukon Party government when I was the EMR minister and am pleased to have seen these continued by the current government.

The rebates for appliances, home heating, renewable energy, home retrofits, and more have resulted in significant reductions in what would have been estimated for greenhouse gases without those programs being in place and helping Yukoners who made the personal choice to take advantage of them and reduce their own energy footprint.

The microgeneration program — as I touched on before — allows people who are interested to generate energy from their home and sell it back to the grid at a slight premium, and it's helping contribute to our green energy production here in the territory.

I encourage Yukoners to learn more about the steps they can take to conserve and even generate energy and the options that are available to them through programs such as this as well as taking other steps throughout their lives to reduce their energy use and become more efficient.

Applause

Speaker: Are there any returns or documents for tabling?

TABLING RETURNS AND DOCUMENTS

Hon. Mr. Mostyn: I have for tabling a letter written to Xplornet.

Speaker: Are there any further returns or documents for tabling?

Are there any reports of committees?

Are there any petitions?

PETITIONS**Petition No. 2**

Ms. White: I have for presentation the following petition, with 469 signatures. It reads as follows:

THAT the classroom and shared learning spaces at Porter Creek Secondary School are inadequate to the diverse and unique learning needs of the Music, Arts and Drama program, also known as the MAD program;

THAT the spaces at Porter Creek Secondary School are small, shared and take away from how these students learn;

THAT the bells interrupt the flow of learning and MAD students are ridiculed by regular students and feel very unsafe;

THAT the MAD program has been taken away from a facility, the Wood Street Centre, that had a 150 seat black box theatre with state of the art sound and lights, costume and set construction room;

THAT at Porter Creek Secondary School MAD students have one classroom that can't accommodate 28 students and have limited access to a drama room which must be shared on and off with regular classes

THEREFORE, the undersigned ask the Yukon Legislative Assembly to urge the Minister of Education to either move the Music, Arts and Drama program back to its home of over 20 years at the Wood Street Centre at 411 Wood Street in Whitehorse, or move it to the Guild Hall at 27-14th Avenue in Whitehorse, or another suitable location such as the Yukon Arts Centre at 300 University Drive in Whitehorse for the remainder of the 2020-21 school year or until another suitable home is found.

Speaker: Are there any further petitions?

Are there any bills to be introduced?

INTRODUCTION OF BILLS**Bill No. 17: *Enduring Powers of Attorney and Related Amendments Act (2020)* — Introduction and First Reading**

Hon. Ms. McPhee: I move that Bill No. 17, entitled *Enduring Powers of Attorney and Related Amendments Act (2020)*, be now introduced and read a first time.

Speaker: It has been moved by the Minister of Justice that Bill No. 17, entitled *Enduring Powers of Attorney and Related Amendments Act (2020)*, be now introduced and read a first time.

Motion for introduction and first reading of Bill No. 17 agreed to

Bill No. 15: *Corporate Statutes Amendment Act (2020)* — Introduction and First Reading

Hon. Mr. Streicker: I move that Bill No. 15, entitled *Corporate Statutes Amendment Act (2020)*, be now introduced and read a first time.

Speaker: It has been moved by the Minister of Community Services that Bill No. 15, entitled *Corporate Statutes Amendment Act (2020)*, be now introduced and read a first time.

Motion for introduction and first reading of Bill No. 15 agreed to

Speaker: Are there any further bills for introduction?
Are there any notices of motions?

NOTICES OF MOTIONS

Ms. Hanson: I rise to give notice of the following motion:

THAT the Legislative Assembly establish a seniors advocate as an Officer of the Legislative Assembly prior to the conclusion of the 2021 Spring Sitting.

Mr. Adel: I rise today to give notice of the following motion:

THAT this House supports the paid sick leave rebates in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Speaker: Are there any further notices of motions?
Is there a statement by a minister?

MINISTERIAL STATEMENT**Wildfire management for Yukon communities**

Hon. Mr. Streicker: Mr. Speaker, I rise today to highlight important work to make the City of Whitehorse a wildfire-resilient community. Yukon's 2019 wildfire season was one of the most complex and challenging in recent memory. Recent fires here and elsewhere made it clear that we need to be ready for longer and more intense fire seasons in the future. There is a national discussion about solving this problem and the Yukon is helping to lead that discussion.

In 2019, the Canadian Council of Forest Ministers developed proactive steps that wildfire management agencies must undertake. The Government of Yukon is supporting these recommendations by taking a new strategic approach to the challenge of how to create wildfire-resilient Yukon communities. We are proud of the work that we are able to do every year alongside our local government and non-profit partners through the \$850,000 FireSmart funding program, which has supported community-selected hazard reduction projects for over 20 years. We are committed to doing more.

This new approach includes the creation of proactive community wildfire protection plans. The government is making these plans a reality by investing in the FireSmart funding program, creating additional opportunities with \$1.27 million in new hazard reduction funding and by using an innovative new federal funding model to apply for new infrastructure projects, like fuel breaks. For example, the

Whitehorse south fuel break is contributing to wildfire risk reduction while also providing access to marketable fuels for Yukon's biomass and forest industries.

This summer, the Government of Yukon began work on the 400-hectare fire-risk reduction project south of Whitehorse. The Whitehorse south fire hazard-reduction project represents the launch of Wildland Fire Management's new strategic vision to create wildfire-resilient Yukon communities. Once completed in 2024, this project will leave behind a fireguard along the Copper Haul Road between the Mount Sima ski hill and the forests south of Mary Lake. The completed fireguard will provide firefighters with a defensive line from which they can better protect the city.

We know the risk to Whitehorse is a wildfire that starts south of town and is driven by our dominant south winds. A variety of fuel reduction techniques will be used in this area, including conifer tree removal, prescribed burning, and planting fire-resistant aspen saplings that will replace conifer forests. Our investment in this fireguard expands on the City of Whitehorse's hazard reduction work on the Copper Haul Road's right-of-way. Thanks to strong intergovernmental partnerships like this one, we have been able to develop a fireguard that will reduce the city's wildfire risk, invest in the local economy, and leave us with a valuable natural capital asset.

This project also presented an opportunity to further support and partner with Yukon First Nations Wildfire. Forty firefighters with Yukon First Nations Wildfire supported work on this project, helping to take advantage of the opportunity in a relatively low fire year. The crews treated about six hectares of the Mary Lake shaded fuel break and worked alongside Government of Yukon and First Nation initial attack crews. The project provided valuable work experience in fuel management for all crews. The forest fuels that are being removed during this project will also offer a major opportunity to support Yukon's developing biomass sector.

Mr. Speaker, opportunities like this to provide the biomass and forestry sectors with merchantable wood are positive steps to making quality product available to the broader community. Guided by our community wildfire protection plans, we look forward to similar fuel break projects around all of our communities in the future.

Mr. Hassard: I am pleased to rise today to respond to this ministerial statement on the government's wildfire risk reduction work. It also gives me the opportunity to say hello to Emilie Baker, who is here with the students from MAD today.

Mr. Speaker, Yukoners have always understood the very real risks that we all face from wildfires. Whether it was the wildfire that wiped out chunks of the newly created community of Faro in the late 1960s, the Haeckel Hill fire in the early 1990s which came within view of Porter Creek, or the most recent fires of 2019 that encompassed vast tracts of Yukon, Yukoners have always known that this threat exists.

While they may be a natural process that maintains the health and biodiversity of the boreal forest, when they occur near our communities, they can put our property and lives in

danger. Because of this, we know that the government needs to take proactive action and that Yukoners need to be vigilant and aware of the risks. FireSmart is one of the tools that we have to help residents manage the risks in our communities. It is a program that allows local groups to select areas for fuel reduction treatment, provides them with funding to manage the necessary contracts, and creates jobs for Yukoners at off-peak times of the year. It also gives local citizens access to harvestable firewood for their own use.

Another way to reduce the fuel loads in the forest is to allow wood product businesses to have increased access to wood. Over the years, my colleagues and I have advocated, along with groups like the Wood Forest Products Association, for increased access to wood for businesses that need it.

We are pleased to see the recent larger scale firebreak work occur in Whitehorse as well. We also agree with the general vision of creating more fire-resilient communities and support the work needed to get us there. It was great to see the Yukon government engage with Yukon First Nations Wildfire to conduct work throughout the summer. This offered steady work during the pandemic when a lot of other opportunities were closed. We did hear from some Yukoners who were disappointed that the leftover fuel would not be made available for local use.

In his response, I would like to hear from the minister about whether that was true and, if so, what the rationale was for not allowing citizens to access the wood like they have been accustomed to with FireSmart projects in the past.

As well, we are curious as to whether this engagement with Yukon First Nations Wildfire will be replicated in the future or even possibly expanded.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, we would like to hear if private sector businesses in the wood products sector will be provided with opportunities in this new plan. We would of course encourage the minister to consult with the Yukon Wood Products Association to explore this. It would be great if the minister could touch on these issues in a little more detail in his response.

In closing, we support efforts to make our community more fire resilient and safer for all Yukoners.

Ms. White: We all know how important it is to feel safe in our communities, and our Wildland Fire Management staff and staff across industry work extremely hard to provide us with that safety, so we want to recognize the work they have been doing each and every year toward that goal.

There are many professionals in Yukon who have worked long and hard to get us here, and I thank them for their dedication to a future free of wildfire risk. It's great to see Whitehorse south has a reduction project and is setting a precedent in creating both access and supply for forest fuels that can be used toward renewable energy. I hope we keep seeing this approach as Wildland Fire Management continues its ever-growing work of dealing with forest fuels. We hope we mirror the success in other Yukon communities, because all communities will benefit from increased firesmarting. Not only

will it make communities safer, but it will also provide work opportunities and local biomass sources for heating.

We have learned many lessons from other Canadian jurisdictions in crisis, and I look forward to Yukon setting an example that others can follow prior to a wildfire emergency.

Hon. Mr. Streicker: First of all, I would like to thank the Leader of the Official Opposition and the Leader of the Third Party for their supportive comments on this initiative to move more toward prevention. I'm glad to hear that everyone in the Legislature is supportive of this, and I will pass those comments on to the department. I thank them for their comments.

I will just answer a couple of the questions that were raised by the Leader of the Official Opposition. We have met with the Wood Products Association. The Minister of Economic Development, the Minister of Highways and Public Works, and I have met with them to talk about creating a supply chain and making sure that it is establishing this industry and is supported throughout. I think, starting several years ago, we began meeting with them to talk about this issue.

I will have to ask the technical question about the leftover wood. I know that there are times when that wood is definitely made a product and actually built into the RFP of the contract, thinking that we can then help to do more treatment area and also get low-cost wood into the marketplace so that we can help kick-start the biomass industry. But there are some places, for example, where we are doing prescribed burns, where that is obviously not going to happen. So I just have to ask the technical question of the department.

The last question I caught today was: Will the relationship with Yukon First Nations Wildfire be replicated or expanded? I'm happy to state that last year we entered into a three-year contract with them. That was the first time, since I've been here, where that has been the case. That helps give us both some stability and planning. We are working to replicate and expand this work in conjunction with them because it is a great tool. When we are lucky enough to have a year where there is very little wildland fire, it's a great thing to be putting those firefighters to work in a productive way that's going to help protect all of our communities.

Speaker: This then brings us to Question Period.

QUESTION PERIOD

Question re: Wood Street School experiential programs relocation

Mr. Kent: The Liberal's school reopening plan has drawn criticism from many Yukoners — particularly the relocation of the Wood Street programs to different locations. Parents, students, and teachers — both past and present — involved with the music, art and drama — or MAD — program have started a Facebook group and they have organized protests and petitions against the plans to relocate their program to Porter Creek High School.

Can the minister tell us when the decision was made to relocate the Wood Street programs? Who from the school community was consulted on this move beforehand?

Hon. Ms. McPhee: I'm very pleased to be able to rise to address this important issue. I have spoken about it numerous times in the media and I met with representatives of the MAD supporters and on at least two occasions with officials from the Department of Education. Also, we have provided to that group and the superintendent responsible for that school and those programs in those schools their direct e-mail so they can have questions and issues addressed almost immediately.

As a result, the experiential programs — what Yukoners need to know, Mr. Speaker, is that the experiential programs are supported by the new curriculum in our Education department and our schools throughout the territory. They in fact should be expanded. They focus on student-centred learning and the expansion of experiential programs, and experiential learning is really the future of education.

I can happily note that the program — in particular, the MAD program, which is only one of the experiential programs — was maintained. It became a priority when the planning was being done during the summer of 2020 to determine how we would return some 5,700 students in the Yukon Territory safely to their classrooms.

Mr. Kent: The initiatives the minister announced I believe were after the decision was made — the meetings that she referenced and other activities.

The question that I asked though was: What consultation took place with that particular school community before the decision was made?

Mr. Speaker, with respect to the MAD program, there have been efforts made to have it relocated to the Guild Hall in Porter Creek. This initiative is broadly supported by those involved, but so far, the Education minister has refused this request.

Why won't the minister relocate the MAD program to the Guild Hall as requested, and will the minister assure Yukoners that the program will be moved back to the Wood Street Centre for the next school year?

Hon. Ms. McPhee: I think what is extremely important for Yukoners to know is that, as a result of the many decisions that had to be made over the summer of 2020 to safely return some 5,700 students to schools across the territory — the decision was made to move the students in the MAD program — and in fact, all the experiential programs that were located at Wood Street — to other locations, primarily at Porter Creek Secondary School.

There are 28 students in the MAD program this term and usually about that number every term. They're attending from grades 9 through 12 and they are attending full-day classes at Porter Creek Secondary School. Many of the students have contacted us to indicate that they are enjoying the MAD program this year — some first-time students and some returning.

Mr. Speaker, I certainly appreciate the passion of the supporters, and we agree — the supporters and the department and our government — about the importance of these programs. This type of learning is critical. As I've said earlier, it should

be expanded. We must protect the concepts of having individual learning programs benefit our students.

Mr. Kent: Mr. Speaker, our focus here in this question today is on that MAD program. It's not the overall 5,700 students that the minister has referenced. Consultations on the return to school this fall were supposed to begin in May.

So that's the question that I asked the minister: What consultations on the moving of the Wood Street School programs — and, in particular, the MAD program — took place with that school community? I haven't had an answer yet, so hopefully she gets to is in this final question.

This final question, Mr. Speaker — we saw on social media last night that the MAD program property was removed from a storage room that was agreed to by everyone without informing those involved. In fact, we heard this space was committed to at a meeting involving the minister herself.

Given the sensitivity of this file, when did the minister find out about this? Why didn't she instruct officials to communicate this decision before it was carried out?

Hon. Ms. McPhee: It may be that when the member opposite was the Minister of Education he had detailed interference, I will say, with the operations of schools as he is suggesting I might have done yesterday. I did not. In fact, Mr. Speaker, the health and safety of students and staff has always been our first priority.

The consultations that took place during the summer of 2020 were extensive. They were consultations, work and engagement, really, with individuals who would be responsible for the education of students, administrators, teachers, educational assistants, superintendents, individuals who work at the Department of Education, and our school councils. There was consultation with First Nation governments and with municipalities and our concept of our education partners throughout the territory.

Were the consultations and engagements that took place during that period of time speaking to everybody possible? Absolutely not. I think that it is important for Yukoners to remember that this is a serious matter. We are in the middle of a world pandemic and we all must do our part. Decisions have been made so that students could return to school safely. The majority of students are back in school full time in this territory in a safe way.

Question re: COVID-19 pandemic impact on education system

Mr. Kent: For the minister, it would have just been common courtesy for her to reach out to the stakeholders that she initially met with and promised that storage space to.

I am going to move on. For the last month and a half, the Minister of Education has been unable to tell us where the over \$4 million from the federal government that was intended to assist with the reopening of schools will be spent. Yesterday, the minister finally relented and provided a large list of things where, in her words — and I quote: "... some of that funding will be spent initially."

This makes it sound like, over 40 days after the feds gave us the money, none of it has been spent. Can the minister

confirm for us: Has any of this money been spent, and if not, when will she actually start spending this money to support Yukon students?

Hon. Ms. McPhee: Again, Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the question. I certainly look forward to sharing more detailed information when the budget conversations come forward with respect to this funding.

I can indicate that the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in additional needs and costs in order for schools to safely reopen. The Department of Education has been able to reprofile some existing budget resources to meet these needs. I think it is a misnomer in the question — and perhaps the member opposite just isn't aware that we don't have a cheque from the federal government for \$4 million. In fact, the indication was that some of those funds have come during the fall of 2020 — we have not yet received those funds — and the rest of it will come in January 2021.

I can indicate that, as I have said — I answered this question last Thursday; I answered it again yesterday — I am happy to go through the list again of the kinds of things that the funds are going to be spent on or have been spent on from our current budget that will be reimbursed when the funds come from the federal government. Those include cleaning supplies — I don't have to go through the list, Mr. Speaker; I have done that twice already. They do include the safe return of students to school.

Mr. Kent: So yesterday the minister stated that she had identified a number of areas to spend the federal money on — once the cheque arrives, I guess, or whenever the federal government gives us the money.

One of those areas was — in her words — and I quote: "... our top priority, which is returning grades 10 to 12 to school full time." We of course agree with the minister on this priority, but her statement is vague and does not actually tell us what that money is being earmarked for.

Can the minister provide a tangible action or thing that this money will be invested in that will get students back to school in full-time classes? When will this money be spent — and the most important part, Mr. Speaker — when will those students get back to full-time learning?

Hon. Ms. McPhee: This is not a usual school year. The first consideration for planning for the 2020-21 school year has been the health and safety of students and staff and ensuring that all schools remain low-risk learning environments for Yukon students, based on the advice of the chief medical officer of health. We have had to adapt programming in order to follow the health and safety guidelines for schools, including adapting the programming for grades 10 to 12 students at the three larger high schools in Whitehorse — based on the advice from the school administrators — in order to ensure safe spacing, manage traffic flows, and limit the mixing of groups of students.

They continue this work; they continue the work to review and assess how those programs are being taught at their schools, how we can abide by the world pandemic rules, and how we can abide by the chief medical officer of health's guidelines for the safe operation of schools. That work will

continue as we go through the fall to get the students back into school in grades 10 to 12 full time at those three schools.

Mr. Kent: Again, yesterday, the minister stated that she had identified a number of areas to spend the federal money on. One of those items was personal protective equipment, or PPE, for the schools. I had heard that some schools have been directed to purchase PPE from their existing budgets, but I will give the minister an opportunity to inform the House if this is actually the case.

That additional PPE — will it be covered by the federal funding, or are schools expected to cover it from within existing resources? When are we expecting this federal funding to arrive in the territory?

Hon. Ms. McPhee: No school will be required to provide PPE from its own school budget. There is support for the requirements for what students need, what students are required to have, what is safe for their return to the buildings with respect to personal protective equipment, with respect to increased custodial needs, with respect to increased cleaning supplies and services, and as a result, those requirements — those costs — will be and are supported by the Department of Education throughout the territory.

Question re: Wood Street School experiential programs relocation

Ms. White: In August, the Department of Education announced that the experiential learning programs at the Wood Street School would move into portables and classrooms at Porter Creek Secondary School. This news came as a surprise to staff and students. So we saw students, staff, and parents come out to protest the changes with rallies, but to no avail — the move went ahead anyway.

It's not surprising there are problems — inadequate space, interruptions, constant moving — and I guess the one big surprise is at least one mouldy portable classroom. To add insult to injury, the MAD program has now had their secure props, tools, scenery pieces, and memorabilia removed from a locked room at Wood Street School and placed behind dividers. No notice was given and no permission asked.

Why does the music, art and drama program continue to be treated as a second thought and not as the nationally celebrated program that it is?

Hon. Ms. McPhee: I am urging the members of this Legislative Assembly, the MAD supporters, and all Yukoners to hear my commitment — our government's commitment — to experiential programs. There is no second class anything, Mr. Speaker.

The experiential programs are supported by the new curriculum. They should be expanded. Please quote me: They focus on student-centred learning. The expansion of experiential programs is the future of education.

Ms. White: Today I presented a petition with nearly 500 signatures. An online petition has over 600 signatures. The petition is asking the Department of Education to move the music, art and drama program from Porter Creek Secondary School back to Wood Street or to a theatre setting such as the Guild Hall or the Yukon Arts Centre.

Students from across the Yukon have been attending this program for over 25 years. Three pages of today's petition were signed by Dawsonites. Students, parents, and staff are feeling like none of their concerns have been heard and their program is being subject to a death by 1,000 cuts.

What is this minister going to do to address the numerous concerns of students, staff, and parents that continue to be brought forward?

Hon. Ms. McPhee: I truly appreciate the opportunity to address this important issue. I also want to express our appreciation and my personal appreciation for the passion of the supporters of this type of learning. We agree on the importance of this type of learning.

I certainly understand that, while the supporters may not agree with the decisions or the current circumstances, it is important to remember that the programs are being supported, they are being continued, and they are being accommodated. Has there been an error, perhaps, yesterday with some equipment? Possibly — we will look into this.

In the midst of a global pandemic, Mr. Speaker, we have all had to adapt to the greater good. Yukon schools contain and serve some 5,700 students. Decisions have had to be made in an emergency situation quickly, to the benefit of Yukon students, and returning almost all of Yukon students to full-time classes with the exception of grades 10 to 12 in the three biggest high schools has been a challenge and a success.

Ms. White: Mr. Speaker, I guess we measure success in different ways.

It's unfortunate that students are missing out on many of the things that make the MAD program so great: the ability to create a community, a place where they feel safe to be who they are, and a place where they aren't bullied or ridiculed for not fitting in with the student body.

Mr. Speaker, I know all of this because I was one of those students. I'll ask again because I haven't heard the answer yet: How is the Minister of Education going to address the growing list of concerns — including location, inadequate space, loss of autonomy, and broken promises — of the music, art and drama program?

Hon. Ms. McPhee: Unfortunately, I don't agree with all of the preamble in that question, but I certainly agree on the importance of these programs.

Decisions have been made. Work has been done. Guidelines have been followed to protect the health and safety, safe spacing, and learning needs of every one of our 5,700 students in the territory. Not everyone is going to support some of those decisions, Mr. Speaker. I understand that. That's part of the job of making these decisions. But I think it is not appropriate to challenge the idea that the Yukon Territory having some 5,700 students return safely to classrooms across the territory — and objections by an important group of students — their needs must be addressed, and attention has been given to that and will continue to be given to that as we consider how to make adjustments over the next period of time to have all of our students safely return to classes — perhaps in spaces that they find to be more suitable.

Question re: COVID-19 pandemic impact on Yukon tourism

Mr. Istchenko: It's pretty obvious that COVID-19 has devastated our tourism sector. Hotel occupancy has been nearly halved and hundreds of people are out of work. The Minister of Tourism's initial reaction was to say it was "business as usual". Unfortunately, the minister's refusal to accept what was happening around the world has slowed the government's response to protect this industry.

The summer tourism season is now over, but last week, when I asked the minister where the tourism recovery plan was, she said that they're still working on it.

Well, over 1,000 Yukoners are out of work and 100 businesses have closed — actually, some businesses didn't even open this year — so it's time for a little urgency.

When will this tourism recovery plan be ready?

Hon. Ms. McLean: Thank you for the question. As I stated last week, our government responded very quickly to the crisis situation that we found ourselves in by supporting local businesses affected by the pandemic. Again, as I stated a number of times, we are the envy of other jurisdictions in this country.

Our Yukon business relief program has provided \$5.1 million to 434 businesses in the Yukon, and 165 of them are tourism- or visitor-related. Again, this is a grant; this is not debt. I think that's really important for Yukoners to hear that distinction here.

Tourism businesses, out of that relief program, received \$2.5 million. We have also allocated \$1.2 million out of the tourism cooperative marketing fund. We are very actively working on a recovery plan. We tabled a supplementary budget that has dollars specifically related to relief and recovery. I would be happy to go into more detail. We are working with our partners as we go forward.

I look forward to other questions.

Mr. Istchenko: Last week, I asked the minister what tangible actions she has taken to protect the tourism industry throughout the pandemic. Her response was that they are working on it. The minister also stated that her government shares the grief of the tourism industry. She talked about a supplementary budget in her first response; yet, earlier this week, when we were briefed by department officials, they said that the supplementary estimates actually grow the size of the Tourism department by nine full-time equivalent employees.

Can the Minister of Tourism and Culture explain how growing the department by nine FTEs while the tourism industry is crumbling and forced to do layoffs is her government sharing the grief?

Hon. Ms. McLean: I would like to get down to talking about some of the tourism recovery plans that we have in place and that we are working on with our partners. Right now, we are finalizing a survey to get the current pulse of the industry. We are working with TIA on that. We have a survey out right now with the Bureau of Statistics looking at it. It was to wrap up on Friday. It's now been extended by another couple of days. We have heard from about a third of the businesses so far. It is really important to get the current state of where businesses are

at so that we can ensure that the new relief programs that are coming will meet their needs.

In terms of the nine FTEs — those are specific positions to work at the border in Watson Lake specifically and at the airport. This is part of our COVID-19 response. These are really important positions to be in place. They will be working with visitors as they enter our territory and they will ensure that they have the correct information. Again, I really want to thank my department for working in a one-government approach on our team — team Yukon.

Mr. Istchenko: The tourism industry is on life support. There are businesses that don't know if they are going to have any winter tourism and some of the businesses that didn't even open up are not sure whether they'll be able to open up next year. It's horrible.

The extent of the Liberal recovery package specific to this industry appears to be to just grow the size of the department. This is out of touch with the reality of the industry and what those who depend on it are facing.

On August 24, the industry wrote the minister and asked for the travel bubble to be expanded to ensure that the industry can make it through the winter. Last week, I asked the minister about this and her reply was — she did not answer, but said she would provide a copy of the response letter. I still haven't seen a copy of that.

I'm wondering — can the minister, in the House today, just tell us — in this House — what did they say to the tourism industry when asked for the travel bubble to be expanded?

Hon. Ms. McLean: We have had really clear discussions with the tourism industry around this. We've discussed this for the last several days in terms of where we are with COVID-19 throughout the country. There are thousands of cases every day that are being reported throughout Canada. We are currently working on our own plan around a path forward — Yukon's plan for lifting COVID-19. This is what I shared with the industry.

There are clearly six criteria that are recommended through this plan — through the chief medical officer — to consider as we consider opening to other jurisdictions. This is what we discussed. I did put all of this in writing.

We're currently in phase 3 of our plan, which is the new normal. This began on August 31, as the six criteria are constantly being evaluated based on what is happening in other Canadian jurisdictions, as well as in Yukon. The chief medical officer clearly talked to us about number 4 on that criteria list, which is importation risk. He was very clear on this and that it would be evaluated constantly as we go forward. I shared all of this in a letter and I am happy to provide that to the member opposite.

Question re: Budget estimates and spending

Mr. Cathers: Last week, the Premier tabled a supplementary budget increasing spending for the last fiscal year, which ended on March 31 of this year. The largest portion of the increased spending was in the Department of Health and Social Services, amounting to \$5.2 million in the 2019-20 fiscal year. That is \$5.2 million in unbudgeted spending that went

beyond what the Legislative Assembly had authorized. This means that government spent over \$5 million more last year than what it was legally authorized to spend.

On Monday, I asked the Minister of Health and Social Services to provide a breakdown of that spending. The Premier responded and the minister responded, but neither one of them actually answered the question, so I will ask again: Will the Minister of Health and Social Services please provide us with a breakdown of that extra \$5.2 million in spending in the last fiscal year?

Hon. Mr. Silver: Mr. Speaker, just because the member opposite doesn't like the answer that we gave, that doesn't mean that we didn't answer the question.

I will reiterate. We gave a breakdown of exactly what these topics are of the overspending. We also said, as the member opposite knows, that, during Committee of the Whole, any question on any particular dollar or value in spending will be addressed.

We know that the member opposite's new leader is out there saying that we broke some rules of the *Financial Administration Act*. I will remind the members opposite: so did they. The type of spending that is happening here for Health and Social Services is a very similar type of overspending that the opposition did when they were in power here as well.

Again, there are these situations that happen — whether there is a pandemic or not — where sometimes these things do happen. We are not happy that they happened, but at the same time, for the health and safety of Yukoners who are travelling abroad or travelling and have extenuating costs, that is one of the considerations. It is not all of the considerations — it is primarily related to hospital stays outside of Yukon. There are also extended family care agreements and increased demands for mental health services and those types of things because we are in a global pandemic, Mr. Speaker, and some of this spending happened because of that as well.

Again, Mr. Speaker, to correct the record, we did answer this question last time. We are answering it again now. There will be an opportunity to expand on every single dollar of overspending, and we will absolutely have that conversation when we get past general debate and into the specific departments on *Supplementary Estimates No. 3*.

Mr. Cathers: First of all, I have to remind the Premier that a non-answer is a non-answer. While the Premier dismissed his breaking of the law as "some rules", the *Financial Administration Act* is the law. This is the public's money, and so far we have received only a vague explanation for that \$5.2 million in increased spending. We do know that some increased spending associated with the pandemic was needed, but some of the increased spending in the last fiscal year had nothing to do with the pandemic.

I also have to remind the Premier again that the \$5.2 million in spending by Health and Social Services was contrary to the *Financial Administration Act*. Whether he likes it or not, the Liberal government broke the law. The public deserves accountability from their government and has a right to know how this money was spent.

So will the Premier or the minister please actually provide us with a breakdown of this spending today?

Hon. Mr. Silver: I guess it is too bad that I answered his second question in my first answer. The member opposite just kept to his notes.

Again, we have addressed the fact that we don't like the fact that we went against the FAA. This has happened roughly four times in the last decade. This is the first time that we have done it. It has happened under the Yukon Party a few times, including when the members opposite were over here. It is something that I am sure they didn't want to do either, but when it comes to medical costs that occur outside of the Yukon, sometimes it takes a lot more time for this money to show up — for this need to show up — and that is one of the considerations.

I guess that the other extenuating circumstance that we have talked about is the fact that we are in a global pandemic.

I will correct the record. It is more than the \$5.2-million increase. It is actually a \$7.6-million increase, and we are not happy with that, Mr. Speaker. The other \$2.4 million was with Highways and Public Works — but again, this was related to — it was a very heavy snowfall year which continued into the summer with a lot of rain, as well — but there were extenuating costs where we didn't think we were going to have those costs.

Again, we will allow every single opportunity for the members opposite to ask every single question of that total of the \$7.6 million in Committee of the Whole with these departments. It is a pretty short time right now to go through all of those costs, but we definitely have said what these are for. We have explained it a few times now, and I am happy to go into detail in Committee of the Whole.

Mr. Cathers: We still don't have a breakdown of those costs, and the Premier's excuse for breaking the law — now that he has finally acknowledged that the FAA is the law and not just "some rules", as he called it — his excuse for breaking the law is that someone else might have done it first.

The public always has a right to know how government is spending their money. The Liberal government has gone to great lengths this year to avoid democratic accountability, increase the debt limit, hand itself emergency powers, and hide from Question Period. They have also broken the law by directly violating the *Financial Administration Act*. The public has a right to know what this \$5.2 million was spent on and to get a breakdown of that spending, especially since the government spent it illegally.

Will the Minister of Health and Social Services or the Premier agree to actually providing us with a breakdown of this spending now?

Hon. Mr. Silver: We offered the members opposite a briefing on this, where the departments would answer any questions that they had on the specific spending. That happened already — so yes to his question. We have also said, when it comes to Highways and Public Works — heavier snowfall than normal, higher utility costs, and responding to COVID-19 on things like personal protective equipment and overtime to support demand for technical support and increased cleaning — again, I answered his question.

When it came to Health and Social Services, the \$5.2 million was primarily related to costs of hospital stays outside of Yukon, extended family care agreements, and increased demands for mental health services and social and community supports throughout the Yukon.

During Committee of the Whole, every single one of those categories will be broken down if the members opposite decide to ask those questions at that time. We have provided the members opposite with information. They know that the details of that information will come during Committee of the Whole; they know that we will continue with more information at that time; they know that they had a briefing on this particular topic; they know that we have answered the question. But the hypocrisy — saying that, again, now this overspending is something that's a huge concern to the members opposite when, three different times, they did the exact same thing.

Speaker: The time for Question Period has now elapsed. We will now proceed to Orders of the Day.

OPPOSITION PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS

MOTIONS OTHER THAN GOVERNMENT MOTIONS

Motion No. 226

Clerk: Motion No. 226, standing in the name of Ms. White.

Speaker: It has been moved by the Leader of the Third Party:

THAT this House urges the Government of Yukon to increase the proportion of Yukon government jobs based in Yukon communities by:

- (1) implementing its own policy 1.9 entitled "Decentralization Policy";
- (2) supporting current employees who wish to relocate to a Yukon community through remote work arrangements;
- (3) relocating community-focused positions including but not limited to regional economic development officers and community advisors when these positions become vacant; and
- (4) working with First Nation governments and municipal governments to ensure lot and housing availability to support decentralization efforts.

Ms. White: In the last nine years that I have had the privilege of serving in this Chamber, I have debated more motions than I can count. Motions we chose to bring forward for debate are all important, but today's motion feels different. If adopted, this motion has the ability to support the people, the self-determination, and the economies of rural Yukon in a real and powerful way. This is all to say that I'm excited to speak to and hear the perspective of others on the motion that the Yukon NDP has brought forward today.

This motion highlights four key points: (1) the existence of government's decentralization policy; (2) supporting current employees who wish to relocate to a Yukon community through remote work arrangements; (3) relocating community-focused positions to communities when they become vacant;

and (4) working with First Nation and municipal governments to ensure lot and housing availability within communities.

Mr. Speaker, the dictionary definition of "decentralization" is: "... the process by which the activities of an organization, particularly those regarding planning and decision making, are distributed or delegated away from a central, authoritative location or group." This concept, or the core idea of moving away from a Whitehorse-centric job posting, is important for many Yukon communities. This idea wasn't just created out of thin air but after an involved consultation process by the NDP government of the day, a process that was entitled "Yukon 2000". It was a visioning exercise that included every sector and every community. It was a map of how Yukoners saw the Yukon of the future. It was what they hoped for. It was used as a guiding star of government direction in the early 1990s, so much so that a decentralization policy was created and added to the Government of Yukon's *General Administration Manual*. You can find it there as policy 1.9. That policy came into effect on May 12, 1994.

It is important to note that this policy still stands today, 26 years later. This policy applies to all Yukon government departments. The purposes and principles read as follows: "The Government of Yukon is committed to achieving a fair distribution of government jobs throughout Yukon — that is, a distribution in which the proportion of Yukon government jobs located in rural communities reflects the proportion of the total Yukon population that lives in rural Yukon — in order to: contribute to the development of stable economies in rural Yukon communities; improve the accessibility and delivery of government programs and services to rural Yukoners; and support the desire of Yukoners to live and work in their own communities."

Mr. Speaker, I am highlighting this policy because it means that the tool already exists in the Yukon government toolbox to facilitate the calls to action in today's motion. All that we need is the political will to make this action a reality.

The Yukon government is the largest employer in the territory, with over 5,000 employees. Rural Yukoners understand that YG staffing decisions have a big impact on their communities. Everyone recognizes that Yukon government jobs are essential to rural communities. Government jobs bring certainty to a smaller economy. These jobs come with a certainty that jobs within the private market aren't able to guarantee, and we have just lived through an example of this through the pandemic.

Even during the height of the pandemic, Yukon government employees were hard at work, earning their paycheques. Their employer did not need to shutter a business or cut hours to survive the crisis. Having Yukon government jobs within communities means that there's more money spent locally, more kids enrolled in schools, and more folks to volunteer in essential community organizations like rural EMS.

I know that folks still remember the devastation to Haines Junction and Dawson City when the federal government decided to cut Parks Canada positions in both of these communities. The loss of these jobs and the importance of

decentralization is so important for rural Yukon — so important, in fact, that the Association of Yukon Communities passed the following resolution in 2014.

Mr. Speaker, I'm going to read that now. The title of the resolution is "Rural Employment Opportunities Within YG". It reads:

"WHEREAS:

"Haines Junction and Dawson City have experienced significant job losses due to Parks Canada staff reductions; and Rural Yukon communities have experienced staffing losses Yukon Government positions to retirements in the past five years; and

"WHEREAS:

"Hiring and recruitment of several positions within the Yukon Government, including Emergency Medical Services supervisor positions are located in Whitehorse when a rural community would benefit from the position and the incumbent would better represent volunteer ambulance providers and services; and each position staffed or removed in a rural setting has tremendous impacts on the communities including housing sales, local spending, student population, education positions, and community volunteer hours.

"THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED:

"That the members of AYC request that the Yukon Government undertake to develop rural Yukon staffing initiatives with the aim at decentralizing from Whitehorse, services and program positions that serve the wider Yukon.

"BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED:

"That the Yukon Government communicate regularly with communities on the needs and opportunities within each community to discuss functions that would be well-suited to be delivered within those municipalities."

Mr. Speaker, AYC lobbied the then-Yukon Party government and the then-Minister of Economic Development, Minister Currie Dixon, and they got nowhere, but it's important to know that, to date, there has been no definitive action on the issue by either the Yukon Party or the Liberal governments.

The issue of government jobs in communities is also a matter of fairness. Right now I'm thinking about First Nation citizens. In many cases, individuals might have to choose between taking a good Yukon government job and moving to Whitehorse, or not applying for that job and stay living in their community on their traditional territory. Mr. Speaker, that's an impossible decision, and wherever possible, we should try to avoid forcing anyone into making this choice.

I think it's important to note that we have just seen it initiated by the Yukon government for the next 18 months, where we will be encouraging indigenous citizens to apply for Yukon government jobs.

COVID-19 has shown everyone that there is an ability to work remotely when, in March, a large part of the public service was sent home to work. Offices were closed, and working remotely became the norm for many branches of Yukon government. What we saw was the exceptional ability of Yukon's public service to adapt and to deliver remotely. No doubt, the same kind of adaptation is possible to allow for more of our colleagues to live and work outside of Whitehorse.

So, where do we start? Well, the motion proposes two ways to go about it. We can support current employees who want to relocate and then relocate existing positions when they become vacant. This ensures that decentralization doesn't force anyone to leave the capital city, because I'm not talking about forcing anyone to move.

For employees who want to relocate when their job can be done remotely, my question is: Why would we stand in the way? Why wouldn't we encourage vibrant growth in communities outside of Whitehorse? This might mean making arrangements for this to happen, but we now know that this is possible. The public service has already tested this out this spring, and it worked. People could efficiently and effectively work from home, wherever that home may be located.

Decentralization might mean making some changes to responsibilities within a team so that it's more adapted to having multiple locations, but again, I look to the adaptability of the public service and I know that this is possible. The public service knows that this is possible because they have just gone through it. It might mean being flexible on scheduling to allow for travel to Whitehorse when it's necessary, but don't we already allow for this when sending regional positions out to communities? Don't we already schedule for travel in other circumstances?

I think everyone acknowledges that this will need to be on a case-by-case basis and that it may not always be possible, but we should strive to support folks to live in the communities of their choice. What rural Yukon communities and existing and future employees are looking for is the commitment to do what is possible.

When I talk about relocating positions — I want to be very clear — we're not talking about relocating anyone against their will, but when a position becomes vacant, government needs to evaluate if it would be better based in a community. This could involve speaking to communities that are directly affected by these positions. Some are obviously better based in communities: community advisors who work within Community Services, regional economic development officers who work in Economic Development, and, of course, regional superintendents who work within Education. Mr. Speaker, the list goes on.

It is actually hard to understand how these positions were centralized in Whitehorse in the first place since the very nature of the work involves working with people in different parts of our territory.

Many other jobs could be done just as well in the communities as in Whitehorse, so it would be great to see job postings indicate clearly that the position could be based in Whitehorse or it could be based in any Yukon community. This would send a signal to rural residents that they don't have to choose between living in their communities and accessing government jobs.

The last aspect of this motion is housing and lot development. These issues should not surprise anyone. I know that in every meeting that I have with a First Nation or a municipal government, the lack of lots and housing is always raised. I also know that suggestions are consistently brought

forward. So, Mr. Speaker, I think we should listen to the experts on the ground in their communities and work together to address the lack of housing outside of Whitehorse.

I really believe that we can make decentralization a reality in Yukon. I know that we have Yukon government employees in communities already, but I believe that we can increase that number to the benefit of all. If we set a goal of increasing that number by an additional one percent of the current 5,000-plus Yukon government employees, we are talking about getting an extra 50 government jobs into rural communities. Communities can tell you, Mr. Speaker, that this will make an enormous difference.

I look forward to hearing the perspectives of others, but I mostly look forward to breathing life into the Yukon government's already existing decentralization policy.

Hon. Mr. Mostyn: It is my pleasure this afternoon to rise to speak to this motion presented by the Leader of the Third Party. I am happy to speak to this motion this afternoon because it reflects a core value of our government. Indeed, it touches on matters in my mandate letter from the Premier.

As we have said on countless occasions, all communities matter. The well-being of our communities outside of Whitehorse is essential to Yukon's prosperity and well-being, and we consistently demonstrate our commitment to them through our capital budget as well as our busy legislative agenda.

Our caucus has excellent community representation through our Premier, the Member for Vuntut Gwitchin, the Member for Mount Lorne-Southern Lakes, and the MLA for Mayo-Tatchun. They all champion the needs and the desires of their communities on a daily basis.

When it comes to increasing the number of Yukon government staff based in communities, the MLA for Mayo-Tatchun has been especially tenacious in convincing and making us understand that Whitehorse is not the Yukon and that rural Yukon communities like Mayo are excellent communities for people to live in and they deserve a chance for expansion and for a bigger stake in the territory's economy. I thank him for keeping us focused on this goal of decentralization from Whitehorse.

Mr. Speaker, we support decentralization — empowering communities and First Nations and building local economies through all means necessary, including bolstering the presence of the civil service in rural Yukon. There's a lot packed into this motion, so I'll start by providing a little context.

I'm going to start with the decentralization policy in GAM 1.9. The Government of Yukon's decentralization policy is rather outdated. It was issued on May 12, 1994. Actually, that represents a revision of that policy. The actual policy dates to a few years before that. It precedes the conservative Yukon Party.

It is a revision of an earlier policy that attempted to fix many of the problems from the first effort, which was poorly thought out and poorly planned. That earlier policy, launched by the government of the day — back in the early 1990s or late 1980s — sent people out to communities. It resulted in job loss and uncertainty. People with permanent jobs were sent to

communities. They lost their permanent status and it resulted in job loss for Yukoners.

Some of those shortcomings of the earlier NDP decentralization policy were fixed in 1994, but there remain problems with the policy — not the least of which is its age. The purpose of the policy remains relevant; however, the world has changed rapidly since the early 1990s. Most of us did not have e-mail addresses in 1994, let alone a smart phone or a Zoom account. This policy is pre-devolution, Mr. Speaker, and was issued before the self-government agreements were in effect.

The intent of the policy is clear. To sum it up: The policy sets out to create more Yukon government in communities outside of Whitehorse in order to contribute to the development of stable economies in rural Yukon communities, to improve the accessibility and delivery of government programs and services to rural Yukoners, and to support the desire of Yukoners to live and work in their communities. Mr. Speaker, I am going to repeat that — to support the desire of Yukoners to live and work in their own communities. It is important because all communities matter.

Now, these objectives, of course, remain relevant today and are priorities for this government. Our enduring priorities continually guide our efforts in this regard. As you are aware, our enduring priorities include a commitment that our strategic investments build healthy, sustainable communities.

We have also committed that our diverse, growing economy provides good jobs for Yukoners in an environmentally responsible way. We will continue to implement initiatives across government as we meet these commitments and continually strive to ensure that Yukon communities thrive. As of yesterday, nearly 16 percent of Yukon government employees are situated in communities outside of Whitehorse. According to a March 2020 population figure from the Yukon Bureau of Statistics, roughly 21 percent of working-age Yukoners are based in rural communities. So there is definitely a gap there. We know that the Yukon government workforce is not an exact representation of the territory's rural demographic.

While consideration of the proportion of Yukon government employees based in communities is an important part of this equation, what we also need to consider is the number of public servants working for Yukon First Nation and municipal governments. This has changed dramatically since 1994. An outcome of future work to support vibrant communities must include support for other public service organizations, including their need to recruit and retain a strong local workforce. It bears a little bit of focus here, because our municipalities and our community governments have grown in their strength and their ability to take on tasks — as have our First Nation governments. They are more sophisticated and they are actually starting to employ and work in their communities in ways that were merely a hope to early governments in the 1990s. So we have come a long way since then and we have to recognize that decentralization has happened throughout the territory and it is something that this government supports wholeheartedly.

What that 16-percent figure shows is that we are close to meeting the policy's target, and we are seeing the distribution in which the proportion of Yukon government jobs located in rural communities reflects the proportion of the total Yukon population living in rural Yukon.

The decentralization policy in its current form does not take into account all of the technological change that has occurred over the last 25 years. I touched on that earlier. Really what we are talking about, Mr. Speaker, is another policy in there — telework. We are talking about a program to support government workers in rural Yukon that was based on rotary-dial telephones and the mobile network that was used — like a CB radio — to contact people who were living in rural Yukon. That is no longer our reality.

As I said, it also does not factor in the First Nation and municipal governments that have evolved and that are well-established and providing more and more services throughout the communities.

We had a debate about the ATIPP act. The members opposite wanted us to force them to adopt the ATIPP rules. We said no. They are responsible governments, and they can actually take on that responsibility themselves. That is part of decentralization. It is part of allowing duly elected governments to make decisions on their own behalf and not adopt a “father knows best” approach to those municipalities.

The pandemic has certainly shone a light more broadly on what the future of the workplace could look like. In our conversations with other jurisdictions across the country and looking at the experience of organizations around the globe, we know that this is an issue that everyone is grappling with. Everyone is thinking about what our workplaces will look like post-pandemic and, in particular, how remote work will factor into our operations. There will be many lessons learned once this pandemic subsides, and I would like to take a minute now to talk a little bit about the evolution of remote work in the Yukon government.

Since 2009, remote work arrangements have been governed by Yukon government's telework policy and guidelines that outline the criteria and rules for working remotely. Over late 2019 and early 2020, the Public Service Commission reviewed its human resource policies and identified the telework policy as a priority for review and update. The intent was to look at remote work more broadly across government — the Government of Yukon public service — and explore ways to be more expansive in the use of flexible work arrangements.

While there are many challenges in working from home, as we have learned throughout this pandemic, there can also be many benefits. Before work to revise the telework policy could get underway, the COVID-19 pandemic began and soon touched Yukon. Because the existing telework policy had too many requirements and a complex approval process to support such a large-scale shift to work from home, on March 18, 2020, the Yukon government issued a human resources directive intended to authorize and support as many employees to work from home as possible, taking into account operational requirements.

We quickly shifted many Yukon government public servants into work-from-home arrangements. This was an important first step in supporting physical distancing and preventing the spread of COVID-19 in the Yukon — critical to public safety.

Before the pandemic, there were relatively few employees with remote work arrangements. In a matter of days, many employees moved from their regular work site into homes. By late March 2020, about 50 percent of our Yukon government public service was working from home. Since that time, many employees have gradually returned to the workplace. Although the transition was sudden, employees working from home have done an exceptional job of adapting to this new environment.

There are stories there, Mr. Speaker: Public servants working in this really disruptive work environment and still getting incredible supports out to Yukon businesses and Yukon people in record time, despite the turmoil and tumult of this — pushing people from their offices into their home. That's an absolutely incredible story that deserves to be celebrated — how these civil servants across government supported this community through a once-in-a-hundred-year crisis.

To support our employees working from home, the Public Service Commission has taken a number of steps, including adopting new technologies and training supervisors on leading remote teams. These measures are intended to help us to stay connected, work safely, and continue to perform effectively.

While it does come with some challenges, we have learned that there are many benefits associated with working from home. In fact, the survey of Yukon government employees this past June saw many employees express support for continued work-from-home opportunities, either full or part time. In the months ahead, we will incorporate our ongoing learning into a revised telework policy and a long-term approach to the Yukon government workplace. It will not be called “telework”, Mr. Speaker.

We are not undertaking this work in isolation. Across the country, jurisdictions are working collaboratively to determine what the post-pandemic workplace of the future will look like.

While working remotely may not suit every position or every individual employee, we continually strive to find new ways to support employee well-being while continuing to provide exceptional services to Yukoners.

In *Our Clean Future — A Yukon strategy for climate change, energy and green economy*, we have committed to implement new policies to enable Government of Yukon employees in suitable positions to work from home for the longer term by 2020. As we undertake this work, we will certainly explore the possibility of facilitating more Government of Yukon employees to work remotely from communities across the territory.

In doing this work, we will work collaboratively with our First Nation and municipal partners. I cannot stress how important those partnerships and working with our communities and First Nation partners are.

We will continue to work collaboratively with our union partners as we develop a long-term approach to remote work for the Government of Yukon that supports ongoing service

delivery to Yukoners, employee well-being, and ultimately contributes to the vibrancy and resiliency of all Yukon communities.

Staff housing is also part of this motion. As it suggests, housing availability is essential to support employees in Yukon communities. We are proud to have taken significant steps in modernizing our program for Yukon government staff in rural Yukon communities. Our new approach aims to decrease rental housing cost disparities in our communities to incentivize private sector investment in rural housing and to prioritize housing for employees considered critical for community well-being. We continue to implement the policy and collaborate with our partners in communities and with both unions to support the development of affordable housing options and private market opportunities in Yukon communities.

Mr. Speaker, I cannot state strongly enough how important these measures for supporting our Yukon communities are — the decentralization — to this government and to my colleagues on this side of the House. I think I have made my point, which is that, really, policy 1.9, the decentralization policy of the Yukon government, needs to be modernized to make more than token movements, despite our best efforts in other areas that I have mentioned. We have to make sure that it reflects the world today, not the world of 26 years ago or before.

I believe that we are on the same page as the Third Party on the intent of this motion and even most of the wording. I am, however, going to propose a small, friendly amendment that I think the Third Party will support and, who knows, maybe even the conservative Yukon Party will.

Amendment proposed

Hon. Mr. Mostyn: I move:

THAT Motion No. 226 be amended by:

- (1) deleting the phrase “implementing its own” and inserting in its place the phrase “modernizing the 1994”;
- (2) inserting the word “and” after the phrase “through remote work arrangements;”;
- (3) deleting the phrase “(3) relocating community-focused positions including but not limited to regional economic development officers and community advisors when these positions become vacant; and”; and
- (4) renumbering the listed items accordingly.

Speaker: We have a proposed amendment on the floor.

The amendment is being distributed to MLAs for their review. I will review it and discuss the same with Mr. Clerk as to its orderliness.

Some Hon. Member: (Inaudible)

Speaker: There’s a request for five minutes. Is that sufficient?

Some Hon. Member: (Inaudible)

Speaker: Ten minutes is requested. Do you agree?

All Hon. Members: Agreed.

Speaker: The House will recess for 10 minutes.

Recess

Speaker: I will now call the House back to order.

I have had an opportunity to review the proposed amendment with Mr. Clerk and can advise that it is procedurally in order.

It has been moved by the Member for Whitehorse West:

THAT Motion No. 226 be amended by:

- (1) deleting the phrase “implementing its own” and inserting in its place the phrase “modernizing the 1994”;
- (2) inserting the word “and” after the phrase “through remote work arrangements;”;
- (3) deleting the phrase “(3) relocating community-focused positions including but not limited to regional economic development officers and community advisors when these positions become vacant; and”; and
- (4) renumbering the listed items accordingly.

Hon. Mr. Mostyn: The changes that we are proposing are intended to strengthen the motion and make sure that, in the end, it better reflects the times in which we live. Continuing to use the decentralization policy as it was revised in 1994 — it really does need to be updated to reflect today’s life and times, so we propose that this GAM policy be reviewed and updated to reflect the modern era in which we live.

Of course, we want to support current employees who wish to relocate to a community through remote work arrangements. We think that’s important, and we think that, by improving and updating the decentralization policy, we will actually cover relocating community-focused positions and all government positions that could be pushed to a community in a methodical and thoughtful manner to continue with the efforts of this government that we have been pursuing, as have other governments, for a very long time.

We acknowledge that the current decentralization policy has to be modernized, and we support the goals contained therein, but once they are updated, we will continue and it will improve the whole process for all of us.

I have already gone through many of the issues and some of the background that we have faced and tried to foster through our decentralization policy and the work therein since being elected in 2016.

So I mean, really, Mr. Speaker, the pandemic, as awful as it has been — the territory has made enormous sacrifices in fighting and stopping the spread of this virus in the territory, and we have done that relatively successfully, and we have done it because of the sacrifices that Yukoners have made. They have been extensive, and the hardship has been incredible.

That said, some of the good that has come out of that pandemic has been an adaptability in a society that will stand us in good stead going forward, such as our ability to work remotely. I have been on this kick for a long time — the need to modernize and improve the way this government works for the modern times — the data-driven economy that we live in, with data-driven decisions, getting more government services online. The redundant fibre line that we’re going ahead with will actually provide the backbone through which a decentralized government process — with First Nations,

municipalities, or the Yukon government — can actually operate online with a lot more certainty.

The other day, we talked a little bit in this House about the fibre-to-the-home project that the CRTC has recently approved. Our government supported that project in writing and with money to help Northwestel in its bid to get that project. We did it because it was very similar — I've called it Connect Yukon 2.0 for a long time — that is, it will take this territory to the next level when it comes to Internet connectivity. Bringing fibre to every single home in the territory will allow us to provide not only better access to the Internet to all of our citizens, but also will give us the tools to actually have —

Some Hon. Member: (Inaudible)

Point of order

Speaker: The Leader of the Third Party, on a point of order.

Ms. White: Although I appreciate the Minister of Highways and Public Works and his thoughts, I believe that, right now, in not speaking to the amendment, he is contravening Standing Order 19(b), either (i) or (ii).

Speaker: Any comments on that? Minister responsible for the Public Service Commission.

Hon. Mr. Mostyn: Yes, I do. I have been talking about modernization of the decentralization policy to reflect the world in which we live, and actually improving Internet connectivity is part of that improved world in which we live and which would be reflected in our decentralization policy.

Speaker's ruling

Speaker: I have been listening closely to your submissions on the amendment, and I believe you are still likely within the confines of the subject matter of the amendment — modernizing the 1994 policy 1.9, entitled “Decentralization Policy”.

I will keep listening, but you have a bit of latitude to continue your comments in that direction with respect to the amendment.

Hon. Mr. Mostyn: As I was saying, we have supported that for many, many reasons. Number one, Mr. Speaker, was to bring better bandwidth to everyday Yukoners and businesses, but it also supports our goal of a decentralized government that allows us to provide better bandwidth, more reliable bandwidth, and greater access that knits our communities together. Mr. Speaker, when this policy was developed back in 1994, you could not imagine the territory at the time — as I have said many times, *The Globe and Mail* arrived a day or two late, and that was the only access to information that we had. It flew up on the aircraft, and sometimes it was bumped because we had too much cargo.

That is the decentralization policy that we are currently working under, so we need to bring it up to speed. We need to improve that policy so it actually reflects the world in which we live today. Part of that is this fibre-to-the-home project. That is another way that we are supporting the decentralization policy. I have mentioned the redundant fibre line up to Inuvik.

We are already working to strengthen rural Yukon communities, including the mental wellness hubs in rural Yukon. Modernizing this will help us support those 22 mental health workers in our four hubs across rural Yukon, which has added more capacity and more good-paying jobs in those communities — and, not only that, but providing services that Yukoners demand, especially during this pandemic.

Really, Mr. Speaker, with this amendment, we are trying very hard to improve it because we believe in it. Supporting our rural Yukon communities is a hallmark of this government's priorities. We have fought very hard to expand those services and to improve our rural Yukon communities. I hope that the members opposite will support this amendment proposed this afternoon.

Ms. White: I am going to quote from Hansard from yesterday. It says: “I think it should be clear that this was not brought to our attention prior to just a few moments ago, so it is not, in my estimation, considered friendly.” That was, of course, from the Minister of Justice.

Had I had the opportunity to have a conversation with the Minister of Highways and Public Works prior to this, I would have said, “Great. Amend it to modernize.” I'm glad I was able to highlight this policy here so that government could say that they were going to modernize it. I don't disagree; things have changed a lot since 1994. My question would be the timeline.

But I am going to be insistent that I believe (3) is important, because within the wording of (3), it talks about specific positions that have the language of “regional” — so the regional economic development officers and community advisors. It talks specifically about jobs that talk about regionalization. I wish we had the opportunity to speak about this before. We heard yesterday that government would like that. I think I would appreciate the same.

Although I support the first part about modernizing policy 1.9 in the *General Administration Manual*, which of course government has the ability to do — this government that won in 2016 — so four years ago, just about. I'm glad it's going to happen now, but I won't be supporting the amendment just because of section (3), because I believe that it's really important that we specifically talk about regional economic development officers and community advisors.

With that, I look forward to more thoughts on the amendment.

Ms. Hanson: I was listening to the minister's comments as he rose in response to the motion put forward by my colleague, the Leader of the New Democratic Party. It was interesting to hear him make the argument that somehow because the policy — the way he said it was that the intent of the policy is dated because it predates the DTA and self-government agreements. Well, I would probably think he also means First Nation final agreements.

But you know, Mr. Speaker, if you actually look to the history of this, it anticipated the conclusion of a successful devolution agreement ultimately with Canada and the conclusion of final and self-government agreements.

It was developed as a result of a government going out and participating in a territory-wide — every single community — Yukon 2000. It was a consultation about what the Yukon would look like in 2000 when we had successfully completed land claims and self-government agreements and we had negotiated with Ottawa for the transfer of federal programs and responsibilities. Keep in mind that in the 1990s those kinds of things were being done; in the 1980s, they were starting. Yukon 2000 in the mid-1980s was actually — and has been studied around the world — an exemplar of that kind of consultative process.

The notion of decentralization and what the government of the day heard was that we need real government jobs that pay decent wages, but not just in Whitehorse. When I got involved in politics, one of the things that echoed what I heard in my previous life working for the federal government was that so many of the jobs were centralized in a capital.

Just before I get into what I heard as a politician, let me explain a little bit of my experience and why I echo the sentiment expressed by the Leader of the Yukon New Democratic Party about the importance of retaining those examples with respect to functions of regional economic development — community services. My experience in a phase of my career when I became involved with negotiations on behalf of the federal government for self-government — it was on the tail of a failed attempt by governments — territorial and federal — to negotiate agreements with Yukon First Nations. One of the issues was, notwithstanding some of the substantive matters of that agreement, the fact that the people who are representing the governments didn't live here. They had no vested interest. First Nations and the Yukon government — speaking as a fed — were a little dubious and a little skeptical. So, the federal government said, "Fine, we will base our teams in the Yukon."

I understand how challenging it is to be a regional staff person leading a set of discussions when your headquarters are somewhere else, but as the minister so aptly outlined, 1989 and 2000 are very different from 2020. The technology that we have today — we are not exchanging faxes. We can actually Zoom in, as he understands from having worked in that environment over the last seven months, as we all have.

So, Mr. Speaker, one of the issues is that when we treat people — and it takes the maturity of management, which I'm hoping that the minister is hoping to reflect in his modernization policy — a maturity of management to trust employees to work at a distance. I can tell you that it is a challenge when you are hearing things that are being said in your work context in your region — whether that is a region that is 3,500 miles away from Ottawa or it's a region that is 500 miles away from Whitehorse. The reality on the ground is different, and you see and you live it differently than you do in that capital, and that helps inform and make more effective government policy and more effective government decisions. I can guarantee that the innovations that First Nations and the Yukon government forced the government into, in terms of the final and self-government agreements, would not have occurred if we had continued the approach that the Yukon government

continues to use, which is to drive in or fly in to the communities. It is not sustainable, and it is not respectful.

So, Mr. Speaker, when I became a politician, it was no surprise to me — from every single community that I went to — those examples, in addition to the regional economic development positions — and we call them that. We call them "community" advisors. We expect them to spend a couple of hours in a community and to understand fully what is going on. I can tell you that, having that experience as a regional social worker, that is impossible. You have to live it in order to understand it, and your bosses have to trust and be willing to hear you. That comes from the very top in terms of the Public Service Commission and the minister responsible for that.

In addition to the regional economic development advisors or the community services, I have been told over and over again that, when there were regional voices for tourism, it made a difference. When there were regional superintendents of education, that made a difference.

I'm not sure what the reluctance is — and I hear reluctance from the minister. I don't understand his resistance to including that language in paragraph 3 of this motion, as put forward by the Leader of the New Democratic Party. They are illustrative only — illustrative; they are not declarative. They are not saying that they are the only ones. They are given as illustrations. There are others that I would count on in modernizing this policy — to open up other options — but these are given as illustrations.

They are given as illustrations because they are respectful of the kinds of feedback that have been given not just to the Leader of the New Democratic Party and me, as an MLA, but to many of the people in this room. If they are honest about it, they have heard this.

The Minister responsible for Economic Development has heard me raise this. This current Minister of Economic Development has heard me raise this many, many times in budget debate about regional economic development officers. How many are in the communities? I did it with the previous ministers of Economic Development because I believe this. I think it's important.

Mr. Speaker, I'm pleased to see that the government is intending to modernize the decentralization policy. I have spoken to many senior officials in the public service who have been pleasantly surprised at the fact that they can make some of the extraordinary measures that had to be put in place over the last six to seven months in terms of working through the pandemic. As we said yesterday, we're not through this yet. I would hope that we would need to put an emphasis on hastening the work on modernizing the decentralization policy — but not limiting it, as I'm hearing from the minister in his language of resistance. I guess we'll see how long it takes for this minister to give direction to see that kind of work begin and what the product will be.

We'll see whether or not it results in, yet again, additional concerns being expressed by the Association of Yukon Communities about the importance and the need to put real government jobs — I just want to come back to one other point. It does not obviate from the growth of First Nation or municipal

governments. That's good, and that's quite separate from the motion that we're talking about here today. I would hope, in the context of the modernization policy that this minister is speaking about, that we actually might see some modernization of some of the arrangements with respect to interchanges between levels of government so that we can facilitate the growth of our public service writ large in this territory, because this is a huge opportunity. With the four levels of government in this territory, we have a significant opportunity to grow and to deepen the expertise in our public service, but we need to develop the tools to make that really happen.

Given the fact that we're now only talking about a pilot project to begin to look at employment equity with respect to chapter 22 obligations of the First Nation final agreements, I'm not going to hold my breath on that right now — but I would hope that the minister will commit on the floor today to the modernization of the decentralization policy within a time frame. That would be useful to have on the record.

Again, I don't hold my breath on these, but I have hope — because I always have hope that ministers — and I know the officials are there. The officials get this, but they need to know that their ministers are going to support them.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker, and I look forward to the next steps in this debate. I of course echo the Leader of the Yukon New Democratic Party — we appreciate the support with respect to modernizing the policy on decentralization of the Yukon public service, but we think it's important that we not keep it so banal as to not highlight some examples to guide that discussion.

Hon. Mr. Streicker: I would like to rise today to talk about how important I think this motion is and the idea that we're trying to achieve here. I will acknowledge that I was one of the members of the Association of Yukon Communities when we put forward that resolution in 2014. In almost all of my community visits — I can't say almost all of them; in many of my visits to communities — we get into this conversation about how critical jobs are within those communities. Even a single job in some communities can turn a lot of critical issues.

It is a conversation that we get into often. It's hard for me to see the upside of the pandemic. It has been very challenging for all of the Yukon, but we have had these conversations about trying to learn from and through it, and one of the ways in which that is the case is about how people have been working more remotely.

Just on the specifics of the amendment — just a couple of small points — first of all, I hear the member opposite, the Member for Whitehorse Centre, suggesting that this is reluctance when it comes to naming. I appreciate that is the perspective that she has; however, first of all, with regional economic development folks — I know that the Minister of Economic Development could stand up and talk about positions that he has put in the communities — and fostered and encouraged them. I have had conversations within my own department about various jobs.

What I want to say is that the resolution we brought forward that day back in 2014 was more about jobs like EMS

— at least in my recollection — than it was about the community advisors. The community advisors are a great group of folks. They work super hard and have been so instrumental during this pandemic because they have been the main liaison with so many of these communities.

The truth of it is that we have five of those positions. It depends on how you count the number of communities in the territory. You can call it 18 or you can call it 20 — whatever the number is. Every one of those advisors covers off a range of locations. Can we arrange it so that they go into a region and work that way? Absolutely. We are supportive of that, but that is not the first place I'm looking with respect to jobs. In terms of a specific — it's not one of the ones where we have been striving.

That said, what I really want to do is stand up and say that the principle I hear all of us agreeing with is the importance of getting jobs into our communities. As much as we love Whitehorse — and with all due respect to the MLAs from Whitehorse — let me acknowledge the Mayor of Whitehorse, who often stands up and talks about the importance of our communities. I think we should all be working on this together.

Mr. Hassard: I feel that I need to get a couple of things on the record here regarding this amendment put forward by the Minister of Highways and Public Works.

I think that the part that probably concerns me the most is when he talks about modernizing the policy from 1994. I think that is probably concerning to a lot of folks in the Yukon. If we look back at the track record of this government over the last four years, one of the things that this minister in particular did in terms of modernizing things was closing down Central Stores. That's kind of an interesting way of modernizing things and I think that there are a lot of government employees throughout the Yukon today who don't think that the word "modernize" would be a very good example or a very good adjective to demonstrate what that actually did.

Let's look at other things on this government's track record over the last four years. The Financial Advisory Panel — we had a government that couldn't make any decisions so they put an advisory panel in place, yet they've done nothing with the recommendations from that panel.

There was a health care review. Out of that health care review, there was talk of medical travel. So, they had to do a review on that, and the review on the medical travel indicated that there should be another medical review — or health care review. The government put in place a tourism panel. Now the tourism panel has to come up with a recovery plan. Just a few days ago, the government came out with a climate change strategy.

These are all important things, Mr. Speaker, but let's look at the track record of the government getting it done. The climate change strategy comes out a year late, and lo and behold, what does it say? Well, we're going to get this done in 10 years. Another example from this minister — let's go back to the early days of this government —

Some Hon. Member: (Inaudible)

Point of order

Speaker: The Member for Porter Creek Centre, on a point of order.

Mr. Gallina: I'm just struggling to make the connection between the members opposite's comments and the amendment that is on the floor. I'm referring to Standing Order 19(b)(ii).

Speaker: Leader of the Official Opposition, on the point of order.

Mr. Hassard: I think that it's quite clear that I've been talking about the government modernizing something and the fact that their ability to actually modernize anything leaves a lot to be desired. I'm just trying to show where I don't believe that this could happen.

Speaker's ruling

Speaker: Yes, I've been listening to the Leader of the Official Opposition. I understand the analogies you're drawing and I think you are allowed some latitude on that.

Of course, the proposed amendment is specifically modernizing the 1994 policy 1.9, entitled "Decentralization Policy", which, of course, is a discrete and specific policy, but as I said, I am listening, and I have heard that you are, by analogy, providing your comments as to why you have some scepticism about this modernization attempt, so you have a bit more latitude.

Mr. Hassard: I shouldn't be long anyway, but as I was saying, let's go to something that happened early on in this minister's mandate, and we can talk about the airports act. There was a boondoggle, if ever there was one. Then, at the end of it, it came out that we were going to get regulations on the airports act. We still haven't seen those regulations, so it is just another example — this government, modernizing this policy from 1994. It's quite clear that we'll all be a lot older and a lot greyer before we would ever see it.

We have yet to see the regulations on the ATIPP act from this exact minister. The electoral reform — there were big promises on the modernization of electoral reform, but what has become of that?

The latest one, I guess, was fixed election dates. That was a campaign promise by this government. So, here we come, in the final year of the mandate, and guess what? Yes, we're going to have that in 2025 — so, no accountability for this government, just accountability for governments in the future.

We have seen the government not be able to fulfill their commitments on the Dempster fibre, and the minister just spoke of it. The Gateway project — again, delays, delays, delays.

I guess, at the end of the day, paralysis by analysis is an analogy that has been used to define this government. I guess I just have a lot of trouble voting in favour of an amendment where I'm going to have to rely on this government to modernize anything.

Speaker: Are you prepared for the question?
Are you agreed?

Some Hon. Members: Agreed.

Some Hon. Members: Disagreed.

Speaker: In my opinion, the yeas have it.
Amendment to Motion No. 226 agreed to

Speaker: Is there any further debate on the main motion as amended?

Hon. Ms. Frost: I would like to pick up on perhaps some of the themes that we are speaking about today. When we look at decentralization, I think we need to look at the growth of Yukon. We need to look at our relationships. With respect to the motion as proposed, it speaks about modernizing and looking at arrangements — arrangements in remote settings, arrangements in our communities with respect to the *Umbrella Final Agreement* and with respect to the land claims agreements and the obligations that we have devolved. The Member for Whitehorse Centre speaks about devolution and clearly defines the purpose of why we settled and ratified claims agreements. The specifics of chapter 22 when it refers to essentially ensuring that services are provided within the communities — local services that meet the needs of communities, respectful of the government, respectful of the community that we represent.

When the Leader of the Official Opposition speaks about accountability — perhaps talks about modernization in such a way that we have no regard for legislative drafting to essentially reflect our modern approaches to relationships, to collaboration, to reconciliation — I know for a fact that, as we look at legislation in the Yukon, we look at relationship building, we have made, in the last six months, almost 100 trips to Yukon communities, speaking with the First Nations, speaking with municipalities — working very closely around arrangements, collaboration, and arrangements of essential services and looking at perhaps decentralizing in a way that reflects the needs of the communities. We did that very effectively.

The member opposite seems to think that we are not doing a very good job. I absolutely disagree with that. I disagree with that as an MLA for Vuntut Gwitchin.

Suggesting that the Financial Advisory Panel — that we did nothing with that. The recommendation was to look at some decentralization approaches around bringing supports to rural Yukon communities in such a way that it better reflects — adequately reflects — the needs of the communities.

We went ahead and put forward the *Putting People First* initiative. Out of that, there were specific requirements to look at health care and health care models. We've expanded the scope of practice to allow implementation of nurse practitioners in our communities and mental wellness hubs in four communities. If that's not decentralization and bringing supports to the people where they reside in rural Yukon communities, then perhaps the member opposite is not very informed or connected to his communities — to the community of Ross River, to the Teslin-Nisutlin area. In terms of full commitments to legislative approaches as we look at modernizing, certainly we want to engage with our communities. We certainly want to look at the models that we put forward and we look at devolution of positions through

local service delivery models. We have done that very effectively.

In fact, we're having those discussions right now with some of our communities around local service delivery. Wildland fire is one good option that we proceeded with. You look at water/sewer delivery in our communities. We're looking at expanding those services. We have a social worker now in every community. Was that there historically? No. But we also recognize that there's a need to look at modernizing and adapting, of course, our approaches to meeting the demand and the pressures in our community for housing and we're doing that very effectively with our communities — the landowners of the communities, the municipalities, and the First Nations. We're currently having those discussions in the Member for Mayo-Tatchun's riding to look at options. We are looking at implementing a representative public service plan across the Yukon — we just recently modernized the legislation to reflect First Nation obligations.

That has not been reflected historically, I can assure you, Mr. Speaker. I don't believe that the members opposite, in 14 years, ending up in litigation on legislative drafting, met the needs of Yukoners in a way that was respectful. I see this as a way forward in terms of looking at our checks and balances — what we can do and what we are capable of doing as a government. That will only happen with true collaboration and cooperation rather than coming in and having debates about specifics — “well, I agree with that, but I disagree with that word” — well, we have a commitment to look at ensuring that services are delivered to rural Yukon communities.

Mr. Istchenko: I do rise today in this House in support of Motion No. 226. I would like to thank the Leader of the Third Party for bringing this motion forward. It includes many points that would benefit our community.

I would think it would be very difficult for any member, actually, not to support this motion here today. A decentralization policy — whether it's a friendly amendment where people promise that we would let you know when we were going to do something, saying that it's implementing or modernizing it from 1994 — but the policy would not only support our communities, but it would also help take some of the strain off of Whitehorse in many areas.

We have seen what effects an inflated real estate market can have on a community. High mortgages lead to high rental prices. We have seen that here. Families struggle to make ends meet and there is a constant demand for affordable housing, especially in Whitehorse. By moving positions and driving the economy to our Yukon communities, we may in fact be able to create more opportunities for areas outside of Whitehorse.

As the MLA for Kluane, I represent a number of these small communities. As a resident of Haines Junction, I can sure tell you how many times I have heard from individuals in Whitehorse about how much they would love to move to our town, how much they would love to slow down their busy lives, relax, and of course enjoy our beautiful outdoors. But there are no jobs, so without the prospect of gainful employment, there is just no way.

By supporting current employees who wish to relocate to Yukon communities through remote work arrangements, we could see some of our smaller communities flourish. I am not talking about growing government, Mr. Speaker; I am just talking about — as the Leader of the Third Party said — moving some of these positions that already exist and are able to function remotely in the communities where employees would love to live.

This is where communities would benefit. They would benefit from drawing individuals and families to our communities, and we would be able to see our communities grow and succeed. Schools could grow and provide bigger and better opportunities for our students. Imagine, with school growth, the recreational opportunities for children would also grow — sports teams could thrive.

A few years ago, I was driving with my kid and her friend, and there was a proposed subdivision being built in Haines Junction. The friend says, “We don't want that.” I said, “What do you mean, you don't want it?” I was taking him to hockey practice. “What do you mean, you don't want it?” “Well, we don't want anybody else.” I said, “There are six kids on your team. How can you compete against the Whitehorse kids? If we get a few more families moving in here and a few more kids show up, hey — you'll have a better hockey team.” “Well, I never thought of that. Yeah, we want people to move here.” Good, there you go.

There would be more opportunities for those people who move here to volunteer for some of the organizations — like our local Lions Club or minor hockey. Something that I think is incredible to see — every time we get a new RCMP officer in our community, they always volunteer as a coach at minor hockey, for some reason. A friend of mine who just moved there knows nothing about hockey and doesn't want to do anything, but he said, “I want to volunteer.” He says, “I want to join the Lions Club.” I said, “Well, I'll nominate you for the Lions Club.” He's a proud member and working hard in the community.

So I am in full support of the government working with First Nations and municipal governments in order to support lots and housing development. I'm very proud of the Champagne and Aishihik First Nations right now for developing 50 lots in the community. With lot development, we can get our — there's a memorandum of understanding to look at the area between Haines Junction and Whitehorse to see if we can't do local area planning there — maybe get a few more lots out that way. That's tax revenue that can go toward the municipality and the First Nations for infrastructure upgrades and for general maintenance and stuff like that.

Perhaps decentralization is the driver it needed to kick lot development into gear. Communities like Watson Lake — I'm sure the member will agree — have been requesting lot development and may have the opportunity to have their needs heard by government. I'm a believer that, when you reside in a small community, you develop a good sense of pride in that community. I have been in my community for, oh, I could say, 50-some years, except for the time I spent in Europe in the military and in other parts of Canada — but by moving some

public service positions into a community, we will see just how much pride we can inject into our rural Yukon.

Yukon government already has a number of positions located in our community, and it's crucial to ensure that those positions remain filled and the positions are kept where they are.

We have some vacant positions in my riding. One of the positions that we have in my riding right now is a mechanics position. Back in the day, we had two mechanics who used to work in Haines Junction, Blanchard, Destruction Bay, and Beaver Creek. The mechanic we have right now does not live in the community and it would be great if he would come to the community.

I know that it might be touched on later — and it was brought up earlier — that the marine and aviation branch came out to Haines Junction and that created jobs. I have spoken to the benefits to the community. I know with marine and aviation, a few jobs have moved back to Whitehorse and I remember having to have that conversation with constituents. Sometimes not every job can be left in the community. When marine and aviation moved out to Haines Junction, our three busiest airports — Whitehorse, Watson Lake, and Dawson — were the responsibility of the federal government and now are the responsibility of the Minister of Highways and Public Works and aviation. Now we are an international airport, so you have to understand where maybe a director's position like that might have to move to Whitehorse where we have Condor landing and other planes. You can see that.

I hope the government intends to fill some of these positions soon in our community and that it looks at that — if there is no interest locally, to generate some interest to draw in new people and new families to Kluane. If someone doesn't want to move out there and that job position is there, maybe we can post it.

I look forward to hearing remarks from other people on this motion.

The only other thing that I wanted to add a little bit — and I think it was touched on earlier today — the pandemic has showed how working from home — so if a position moves from Whitehorse to Haines Junction, to Mayo, to Watson Lake — through technology, through Internet service — through things like that — it's something we have to look at to make sure that it's at the top of it's game, but you know what, you can work in the community and work with your other branch that might be located in Whitehorse. That takes away from travel, that takes away from per diems back and forth, and that actually gives them more time in the community to focus more on the job they have to do.

We saw a hit when Parks Canada re-jigged itself; we saw some job losses in Parks Canada. But when both First Nations — Champagne and Aishihik First Nations and Kluane First Nation — settled land claims, there was an increase in jobs in our community.

I know that I heard it at an all-candidates forum — “You need to keep the jobs here.” I know that the First Nation politicians have heard the same thing — “Let's keep them in

our communities.” We need our communities to grow. If our communities don't grow, first of all, we are not going to see opportunities. We are not going to see opportunities if our communities don't grow — for private sector opportunities and jobs to move forward.

Of course, I will be supporting this motion today. I thank the members opposite for my time, and I will leave it to the next person.

Ms. McLeod: I want to thank the Leader of the Third Party for bringing this motion forward today.

Being a resident of and a MLA for a small Yukon community, I notice how much even one public service job in a small community contributes to the economy of the whole town. When people have the ability to move willingly into a rural community, support trickles down to reach different parts of that community. Small businesses receive that much more support, and children attend local schools and attend local daycares. Municipalities increase their tax base. This is how communities grow and flourish, and I think that some members of this government know this. The government has 88 new FTEs coming into the workforce this year alone, and I am interested to see whether any full-time and permanent employee positions will be relocated to rural Yukon, and I'm guessing none of them.

When positions are moved to a community or a position becomes vacated, there is also the opportunity to tap into the local workforce to fill that position, and often there are individuals who possess the skillsets but not the opportunity to put them to use. I thought we were beyond thinking that everyone who comes to Yukon wants to be located right here in Whitehorse. In fact, I know many people like the communities outside of Whitehorse, and the communities like the new people with their ideas and their energy. We have a number of vibrant communities — so much to see and do, outdoors to explore, lovely people to meet.

If this COVID epidemic has taught us anything at all, it is that work can be done remotely. Surely the government can agree with that, as so many civil servants did work from home or other sites, and some still do. They were at home in their communities and, indeed, in other provinces.

Every person in this room has had to work remotely to some extent, so it seems an opportune time for the government to give this a chance so that all Yukoners can benefit. It seems a shame for an employee to have to terminate their employment because they want to stay in a community, especially, as I have said, given that we have evidence that this can work and, even further, it's possible to allow employees to relocate from Whitehorse to a community. This contributes to the general health of all our communities. Healthy and vibrant communities contribute to a healthier and more vibrant Yukon.

With the government's amendment today, I am a little concerned about those employees who are now caught in the loop. When is the government going to start supporting those employees who wish to remain in communities? Will it be now or will it be after the grand modernization that could be years into the future? Now, there are employees right now who need

to know these answers. I hope someone from the government side will let those employees know what their future employment is going to look like or whether or not they have any employment.

Hon. Mr. Pillai: Mr. Speaker, maybe I'll begin by touching on a few points that were made by different members of the opposition — both the Third Party and the Official Opposition — and then touch a little bit on the language and information that was provided by the Minister responsible for the Public Service Commission.

First, I think it's important to state — just after hearing the comments from the Member for Watson Lake — that I don't believe in any case here — nobody is talking about positions being removed. It's about looking for the stability in the positions that are there in the communities. I think the overall concept is about trying to positively impact all Yukon communities and doing that through the process of having positions move to these communities, but I think it's also a larger conversation, because inevitably — just as the Member for Kluane has touched upon — it is so much more than a few or a number of government positions going to that community; it's getting those individuals, increasing the population, having people to volunteer in the many important things that happen to increase the strength of the fabric of those communities.

I think that, with this motion as amended — there were comments that the Minister responsible for the Public Service Commission was trying to constrict the scope of what was here. I have to clarify this on his behalf. That is not the case at all what was being stated. It was actually trying to broaden the scope of this motion with the amendment. I will delineate what the aspects of that are to broaden it.

I think that it is also important to touch on the fact that the Member for Whitehorse Centre did delve a bit into chapter 22 as it relates to not only the *Umbrella Final Agreement*, but also as it relates thereafter to self-government agreements and spoke on the representative public service. I think that this is a key point, but I would also like to share maybe some other aspects of chapter 22 that are just as important to get to the same goal, which is to ensure that we have vibrant communities and that there are more individuals moving to those communities and living in those communities.

One of the comments that struck me was that the ministers don't get it. That was a comment that was made from across the way. First of all, that is not accurate; we do get it. We have sat down — at least in my case — with staff in Economic Development early on. We have sat with the deputy minister, the assistant deputy minister and others, and said that, when we have the opportunity to have positions — specifically in Regional Economic Development, please make sure that we are taking into consideration that these positions will be more effective if they are actually in those communities.

I would like to have seen over the last three and a half years more of those opportunities, but I am happy that, in the case of the area in south Yukon — Teslin and Watson Lake — we have had the opportunity to move somebody from Regional Economic Development to that community to live there. I think

that the Member for Watson Lake would probably say that it has been, in many cases, a benefit to not just the work but to the community as well.

I agree wholeheartedly with the Leader of the Third Party that this is something that we really should be continuing to support. The individuals living in those communities are going to have a much better understanding of the particulars that have to be taken into consideration — the relationships, the nuances, the challenges, and the opportunities.

I also believe that we have to take into consideration other aspects of employing a public service. It was stated that there is a real opportunity to ensure that we have all levels of government working in a cohesive manner — to paraphrase — and that we can train individuals of all different levels of government to understand the work of their colleagues and then to increase that, but nothing has been done about that.

Well, no, that's not correct either. As you saw, this spring — we didn't get to celebrate as a territory the way we would have wanted to — but we have a university. In that university, the first degree granted was in First Nation governance, and that was open to all individuals. That was an extremely important step forward. It was about building capacity not just for individuals who may work in First Nation governments, but for individuals who work in the Yukon government or others. It's the first degree of its kind in the country.

There has been significant work done. I know that the university is going to build on that; I know the Minister of Education is fully supportive of that. We have had our first cohort graduate, and that's just the start of levels of government beginning to work together and for others to understand the work that they do.

It's also important to understand that there's a very fine line to walk when we talk about the opportunities for First Nation individuals who are moving into the public service. As a government, you have seen that our actions have been that we want to implement chapter 22 in the appropriate manner. We know, going back to 2010, that there was supposed to be a review that has really been stalled for a number of years, and now we're in a position where we're seeing some real action and opportunity. But I have heard the Premier state this before — you have to also understand that we want to ensure that exceptional public servants who work in communities — whether they stay in their community and work for their First Nation or not — we don't want to lose, in some cases, and First Nations don't want to lose and we don't lose those individuals working in those positions, because they become great partners in the work we do.

It's important to walk that fine line. Individuals will define that journey on their own. That is their self-determined destiny as they make a decision about what they want to do with their professional career.

But the reason I think that it's also important to talk about the modernization of this is because, when you go into chapter 22, it's not just about providing opportunities and jobs within the Yukon public service, but it also talks about the contractual opportunities and economic development opportunities that are key. Those are really just additional opportunities that we want

to make sure are taken into consideration. When we start to potentially look at opportunities or work that the Yukon government is doing and we are in dialogue with First Nation governments or development corporations and they make decisions to take on particular responsibilities — that then becomes — we're still meeting the same goal, as we've touched on with the jobs. What we're doing is — there are funds that are then flowing to those First Nation governments, they're creating jobs, and that's all within the same portion of the *Umbrella Final Agreement* within chapter 22.

I think what we're really trying to do — and why this actually does all interconnect, Mr. Speaker — it's because this is a comprehensive approach to ensuring that our communities are as strong as they possibly can be. So just by picking one particular policy point — that, as we stated, needs a lot of work — why is this relevant now? It's relevant now because we've all gone through this process of learning. Everybody has — government has; opposition has.

If you asked somebody in January 2020 what their confidence level was in taking the entire public service, for the most part, and having them work remotely, I think you would get a different answer than you do today. Why? Because our public service rose to the occasion. This public service led the way in many policy points in the entire country and did it quickly and effectively. That's why we're the situation that we are now — because of that good work.

As we hear over and over again from the opposition — and I know there will be lots of time to talk about it — that's why we've just gone through a pandemic and we still — moving through it — good point, that we're still moving through it — but, you know why? Because of our public service working with the private sector remotely, we have less people unemployed today than the last full year that the Official Opposition was in government — and we're in the middle of a pandemic. I'm going to thank the public service for that work. We'll make sure we reiterate that to Yukoners over and over again when we hear about unemployment numbers.

So with that, again, it's very important that we've seen the effectiveness of our public service under these particular cases. I think, if we're going to look at the fabric and opportunities of our communities, it will be very comprehensive and the modernization of that should take into consideration all elements of the agreements.

I think we also heard: "Give us a date right now." Well, as we just spoke about, I think this is about working with other levels of government. For us today — as the Member for Whitehorse Centre said, "Give us a date today." So if we give a date today of when this was going to be completed without talking to the other individuals who are going to work with us on it, we would be told, "We weren't consulted." That's a fact.

So let's get this motion passed. Then we can do the good work in the future of bringing in our partners. Part of the reason is — we've been looking at these opportunities without previously — as I stated — looking at the framework, but I think now what has come to light — which has been a learning experience for all of us — has been this remote work. I

appreciate the Leader of the Third Party for bringing this forward because it's quite an important piece.

I also would like to just reflect on some of the work that First Nation governments have done. I know that in my previous work, working for Champagne and Aishihik First Nations, one of the mandates of the current chief when he was elected was to ensure that positions that were coming up in their First Nation — first and foremost, that those positions should be placed in Haines Junction — not just because it would strengthen the fabric of the First Nation but because the nation understood that they were partners in that community and any position that went to that community — if that salary was being spent, that person was volunteering, their children were part of that community — that would all build a stronger community. We've seen leadership even within First Nation governments as well. Of course, implementing those policy points, you come to learn how important they are.

Just to touch on a few other items before closing, as you can imagine with my colleagues — when you have the colleagues I have, who represent the communities they do — we are always focused on ensuring that our communities are taken into consideration as we make our decisions — whether it be on regulations, legislation, or policy items. I appreciate the members who represent rural ridings for continuing to keep us focused on a very balanced approach — even if we have a large portion of the population here in Whitehorse — about the importance and of course as we focus on how all communities matter.

We've made a priority to work in partnership with First Nations and municipal governments across the territory to improve program and service delivery in Yukon communities. Increasing the proportion of all jobs across a variety of sectors based in Yukon communities, including Yukon government jobs, has a number of benefits from a community-based and economic development perspective. This most certainly includes supporting regional economic development opportunities and a diversification of our economy. It is important to note that we have been actively working toward this goal.

In the Department of Economic Development, for example, we have already shown that having regional economic officers living and working in the communities that they serve can be effective. This has already happened in Watson Lake. We will continue to look into opportunities for this kind of approach going forward across the Government of Yukon.

A number of jobs within the Department of Energy, Mines and Resources are also already located in communities, including several mineral resource, forestry, and land-related positions. These roles support the needs of the communities, and I want to thank the members who do work in our communities for their very important perspectives, local knowledge, and relationships as they work with a number of different industries.

One of our Liberal government's core priorities has been working to develop respectful and cooperative government-to-government relationships for the benefit of all Yukoners. This

includes all levels of government. I want to thank the Minister of Community Services, who tracks each and every one of us on when we are going to a community and how many visits there are so that we have our data to show that not only we are getting to those communities, but also who we are meeting with and ensuring that we have the important conversations that we need to have in those communities.

While I do believe that it is important for the Yukon government to have a representative portion of our employees located in rural Yukon, I don't believe it is the end-all and be-all of the opportunities and tools at our disposal. This is a key piece that I am seeing. That is part of the reason that we supported the amendment to this motion.

I would like to highlight as well, again, the significance of the *Umbrella Final Agreement*, and the economic impact of that, of course, is significant and untapped potential to get us to the goal that we have identified today.

To speak specifically to chapter 22 — economic development measures — I think that is important. This chapter outlines how we can collectively work together to ensure that Yukon First Nations are provided economic opportunities, which undoubtedly leads to money staying in the communities where citizens reside. Our government has been seeking opportunities to ensure that we are achieving these goals.

One such example is our Panache deal, which saw seven Yukon First Nations, Yukon government, and Panache Ventures come together to invest in the future of Yukon's innovation in the knowledge economy by increasing access to equity financing and capacity development to support Yukon tech companies.

This advancement strengthens entrepreneurial opportunities for Yukon First Nation development corporations by opening up a new avenue in their investment strategy, returning benefits to Yukon communities.

When we talk about land, we absolutely support calls to work with First Nations and municipal governments to increase land and housing availability in Yukon communities. As the Leader of the Third Party identified, this is a very important piece of the puzzle — not just the jobs but those opportunities for a place to call home and to personally invest in those communities. We have already been doing this work, and we will continue to do this work.

Over the past few years, we have seen increased demand for land in our territory. We have been working with our partners across the territory to meet that demand. In the 2020-21 budget, we included \$27 million to develop residential lots in Yukon communities. This includes money for the Champagne and Aishihik First Nation Marshall Creek subdivision development in Haines Junction.

Mr. Speaker, I just want to clarify — I have heard from across the way from the opposition that this conversation pertaining to land doesn't have anything to do with the motion. The fourth item on that was working with First Nation governments and municipal governments to ensure lot and housing availability to support decentralization efforts. My interpretation of that is that the information I am providing on

lots directly leads to that. Maybe the member just wants to take a look at the motion again that came from her party.

Again, the 2020-21 budget — of course, \$27 million there. The Marshall Creek announcement was also something that was very significant. It was great to hear the Member for Kluane talk in such a respectful manner but also in a passionate manner about those 50 new lots that are coming into existence in Haines Junction.

As the territory grows, so does the demand for housing. I am happy to say that, as we went through this motion, we are now in a position where there are those lots. Those lots are in Teslin; those lots are in Mayo; those lots are in Watson Lake. We have seen good work done. We know that there are opportunities for individuals to invest in those communities. You have seen action already, whether through financial relationships such as contracts or actually moving particular positions to these communities. I think it is very clear that this side of the House believes in the importance of this particular work. Also, if you're going to undertake it, do it in a comprehensive manner not just on one policy point. Understand all of the relationships and obligations that we have, based on the agreements that were signed so many years ago.

Ms. Hanson: I will just be brief. I had just a couple of thoughts in response or in the context of what the Minister of Economic Development had pointed out. I would say that the minister, although he was very praiseworthy about how effective these relationships can be, may want to check with his officials, because, in fact, the position that he has just lauded as being so effective in Watson Lake has been denied the opportunity to stay there — told that they must relocate to Whitehorse.

So, you need to have teeth and the commitment of senior management and the minister to actually see, when those good relationships are happening, that they're carried out. That's difficult. It's difficult to see the consistency between the words that I heard the minister speak and the actions of the government. It's one thing to say that we're fully committed to these relationships in the communities and that we really want to have regionally placed staff; it's quite another to make it work.

That's unfortunate.

I also think there's a conflation or confusion here with respect to the notion of what was being proposed here. I understand — and I think all people who have been involved with management of any kind — government or private sector — understand that you don't want to be poaching people. I mean, sometimes you do, but in the context of the intergovernmental relationships that we have in the Yukon, that's not a healthy thing to be doing.

What I was trying to get at was the opportunities that we need to seize — and that I was hoping that the minister would be articulating with respect to this decentralization policy — or will build into it, offering the idea of more effective utilization of interchanges. They're used internationally. They're used

intergovernmentally in every part, and we know that there are one or two at any given time in this territory.

I have had the privilege of serving on one of the international interchanges between Canada and Australia. At any given time, the governments of Australia and Canada have 11 different people doing that. It's a way of getting the benefit of other governments' perspectives in an in-depth and intense way, but you go back to your own job, to your own government, enriched, and that's how we can grow our relationships and depth of understanding in the public service of Yukon, First Nation governments, the municipal governments, and I would think the federal government would benefit from some of these, too.

I only offer those. I stand with the Member for Takhini-Kopper King, the Leader of the Yukon New Democratic Party. I feel obliged to vote against the motion as amended because of the fact that the government is not willing to offer even these illustrative positions and the minister's comments run contrary to the facts with respect to the support for that kind of a position in the community.

It has been a very interesting debate. I do look forward to seeing in some near future a modernized decentralization policy that reflects the realities of the 21st century in the Yukon and builds on the opportunities that are really there.

Speaker: If the member now speaks, she will close debate.

Does any other member wish to be heard on Motion No. 226 as amended?

Ms. White: I am forever an optimist, so I'm going to focus on the fact that we agree that decentralization is important, getting positions within communities is important, supporting rural economies is important, and rural schools and rural housing are all important.

I'm hopeful that I won't ask in multiple months or in the next Sitting about where that policy of modernization is, because I hope it happens and I hope it happens sooner rather than later, because we've all acknowledged just how important this is and how important it is for rural communities.

The wording is different than how I put it in, but I believe that we're all behind the intent, which is that we need Yukon government jobs in Yukon communities outside of Whitehorse. I'm going to consider that a win. I thank people for their thoughts. I'm happy to say that I have just changed the mind of the Member for Whitehorse Centre, and so happily, the Yukon NDP members will both be supporting this motion during the vote, which I am grateful for because that was going to be an awkward conversation for me afterwards.

What I'm trying to say is that we come at this from different angles and different perspectives, and it's true that lots of things have changed since 1994. I can't even imagine — when my colleague talked about having to communicate with Ottawa in faxes — what that would have been like.

Sometimes when I get told right now by people that I can send them a fax, I'm just like, "I don't know how to send you a fax." So times have changed since 1994; I don't disagree. But

really, let's focus on the intent that everyone in this House has said: that decentralization is important and Yukon government jobs in communities are important.

With that, I look forward to the vote.

Motion No. 226, as amended, agreed to

Motion No. 230

Clerk: Motion No. 230, standing in the name of Mr. Hassard.

Speaker: It is moved by the Leader of the Official Opposition:

THAT a Special Committee on Mental Health and Education Supports During the COVID-19 Pandemic be established;

THAT the membership of the committee be comprised of one member from the Government caucus selected by the Premier, one member from the Official Opposition caucus selected by the Leader of the Official Opposition, and one member from the Third Party caucus selected by the Leader of the Third Party;

THAT the Leaders of all three parties inform the Clerk of the Legislative Assembly of the names of the selected members from their respective caucuses no later than seven calendar days after the adoption of this motion by the Assembly;

THAT the Chair of the committee have a deliberative vote on all matters before the committee;

THAT the committee:

(1) review the mental health and student supports that are and have been available to Yukoners during the COVID-19 pandemic;

(2) give specific consideration to the unintended consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic economic restrictions, travel restrictions, and isolation measures; and

(3) make recommendations for improvements and changes to the mental health services available to Yukoners throughout the COVID-19 pandemic;

THAT the committee be empowered to conduct public hearings for the purpose of receiving the views and opinions of Yukoners;

THAT the committee have the power to call for persons, papers, and records and to sit during intersessional periods;

THAT the committee report to the Legislative Assembly on its findings and its recommendations no later than 60 calendar days after the adoption of this motion by the Assembly;

THAT, if the House is not sitting at such time as the committee is prepared to present its report, the Chair of the committee shall transmit the committee's report to the Speaker, who shall transmit the report to all Members of the Legislative Assembly and then, not more than one day later, release the report to the public; and

THAT the Clerk of the Legislative Assembly shall be responsible for providing the necessary support services to the committee.

Mr. Hassard: It's a pleasure to rise today to speak on Motion No. 230. Since you did such a great job of reading it all

into the record — and it is rather long; I won't re-do that — save the good folks at Hansard having to re-write it all one more time.

Mr. Speaker, I just want to start by saying that I believe that this is an important motion. I think that, if passed, this will improve the lives of Yukoners. I certainly hope that we're able to get support here this afternoon so we can come together as leaders in the territory for the betterment of Yukoners. I don't think that this is a partisan or political issue; I think it's a people-based issue.

I really hope that today's debate and today's comments stay focused on the people who have suffered and are continuing to suffer throughout this pandemic rather than on personal or partisan attacks.

When COVID-19 first hit us, the government-imposed restrictions and direction came for Yukoners to isolate, to avoid people, and to stay at home. I want to start by saying that's not intended necessarily as a criticism of those restrictions. It's intended as a recognition that we as leaders need to recognize and come up with plans to deal with the side effects, or the unintended consequences, of these actions.

I think that everyone here recognizes that the public health direction was intended to protect public health while those public health officials worked to address the virus, and I think that everyone here recognized the importance of that work and certainly would agree with the intent.

Mr. Speaker, just like when you take medication, for example, sometimes there are side effects. That doesn't necessarily mean you don't take the medication, but you need to be prepared to address those side effects. In the case of the social and economic restrictions, the side effect, unfortunately, was significant declines in mental health for many Yukoners. In fact — as I mentioned in this Legislature a few times over the past four days — a recent Statistics Canada survey found that 52.4 percent of Yukoners felt that their mental health was worse now since physical distancing rules were implemented. That is a majority of Yukoners reporting that their mental health is worse due to the restrictions.

Again, Mr. Speaker, this is not a criticism of the restrictions, but such significant declines in the mental health of Yukoners is certainly scary. I think that it is an important piece of evidence, and any commitment to evidence-based decision-making must, of course, take into account this evidence. So we can't dismiss it. We certainly need to recognize it, get to the root of it, and try as best as we can to solve it. It needs to be part of the discussion and the decision-making process, but I think it also needs to be de-politicized, because people are actually suffering.

Sadly, as people were isolated and we saw a decrease in supports or services, we saw an increase in drug and alcohol abuse in our communities. In particular, we saw the amount of deaths this year related to opioids double as compared to the previous year. This is a tragedy and a crisis. For us not to do something would be wrong. It is for precisely this reason that last week, and again this week, we asked the government if they were monitoring the relationship between the COVID-19 restrictions and the increase of drug and alcohol abuse in the

Yukon. If they weren't, we certainly asked if they would please start. I think it is important for all of us to tackle this issue because if we continue to let mental health decline, we are certainly going to end up in a very bad situation.

This is a problem, because if you don't have healthy coping mechanisms or strong supports, then people may tend to move toward unhealthy or dangerous alternatives. I honestly don't believe that anyone in this House wants to see stories come out about increased drug and alcohol abuse or increased domestic violence or increased financial burdens for mental health supports due to the pandemic.

Again, this is why I asked last week and again this week what the government is doing to address these issues. How much has the government increased the budget to address this? How many new counsellors have been hired? These are important questions. We are not just asking these questions for something to do. They are important for us to understand the problem and to review the solutions and to make a determination of whether or not what we are doing is adequate. That is why we have asked about wait-lists at Sarah Steele or how many people are being turned away from Sarah Steele, because the questions and the answers will help inform us as we provide constructive feedback and advice to the government.

Again, like I said, they are not political questions. They are policy questions, and I certainly hope that the government wouldn't be defensive about answering them. I guess, for example, if more people are having to rely on Sarah Steele due to the pandemic restrictions, or people have had to be turned away, then what do we have to do to address the issues? If people aren't, then we can look at other issues, but we simply aren't doing our job as legislators if we aren't asking these important questions, because the questions really do help inform Yukoners and help to make better decisions in programming for Yukoners.

Our students have been particularly negatively impacted by the pandemic and restrictions on groups and with isolations, the cancellation of classes, the difficulties and uncertainty created for plans to go to post-secondary school, and plans for careers. All of this is certainly upsetting and very difficult for our young Yukoners.

The constant hammering of negative media, whether that be news media or social media, certainly doesn't help the cause, either. It's difficult, even for adults such as us. At the height of things in the spring, the constant reporting of daily cases and the deaths — it takes a toll on a person and can get depressing at times, and you don't necessarily want to read or hear about it. So, imagine how a teenager would respond to that.

Many of us have received comments and concerns from our constituents worrying about the mental health of their children as a result of this. It's no surprise that we have also seen an increase in the number of students requiring or seeking mental health supports. In many cases, we have heard from parents and families who have had to pay out of pocket to ensure that their children receive the support that they need, and that's why, this last week, we asked the government what its plans are to help alleviate the cost for those parents.

Again, I don't for one second think that it was the government's intention when these restrictions came into place to negatively impact or financially burden families, but we can't ignore these unintended and negative consequences of the actions, which is why we continue to ask this.

We are hearing from families, students and parents and even teachers who are concerned and worried about the students. As I said before, these questions come to us from Yukoners. This isn't something that we're dreaming up. I think they are important questions and need to be asked, and they deserve to receive well-thought-out answers.

This truly is a real opportunity for us to come together here in this House and come up with some solutions, and that's why I proposed this motion to create a special committee with a representative from each party. As I said, this committee could look at the current supports that are in place, review them, gauge their effectiveness, and then provide recommendations on how to improve the effectiveness.

This issue is urgent. I don't think it is something we can delay. We also, therefore, have an ambitious timeline. We have recommended that this work be done within 60 days of the motion passing. This allows us an appropriate amount of time to look at the issue while also understanding and recognizing the lived reality of many Yukoners who need our help today — not six, 12, or 18 months down the road.

I think that having the Legislature focus on this and put energy and time into this — a real, tangible issue that will make a difference for Yukoners who are suffering today — certainly is a good use of our time. As I said, it's about improving the lives of Yukoners. It will do so in a timely fashion without extended delays over long periods — you know, unfortunately, this has become more and more common over the last several years with how we do things. I certainly think that having us focus on making improvements to mental health supports for Yukoners and Yukon students in an expedited fashion is a much better use of our time than spending a year to review the *Civil Emergency Measures Act* only to provide a report on the eve of an election, I guess you could say.

If you ask Yukoners right now what we could do to improve their lives, they would say that we should find solutions to address the here and now. I think they would say that we should find solutions to the issues that people are struggling with right this minute, which are, as I have pointed out, growing issues from the mental health decline in the territory. I think that Yukoners would be happy to see all three parties put their differences aside to look at this issue. At the end of the day — it has almost become a cliché, but we are all in this together.

I hope that I have explained my position adequately. I think that this is a great opportunity for us to work together collaboratively. I know that — given the importance of collaboration and the government's insistence that, in the spirit of collaboration, amendments to motions should not be tabled without consultation with the other parties, as we've seen already today. Because we haven't seen this, I guess I know that there won't be any amendments to this motion today.

I look forward to what others have to say and I hope that we can come to a favourable vote in regard to this motion.

Hon. Ms. Frost: It's a pleasure to rise today. It is interesting — it is certainly an interesting debate on the motion and comments from the member opposite with respect to mental health.

Mental health services were not a priority for the Yukon government during their 14 years in office; it sure wasn't demonstrated. In 2016, we were one of two jurisdictions in Canada without a mental health strategy. On the eve of the last election, the previous government released its strategy with no money attached to it. There were two mental health nurses in all rural Yukon communities.

In 2016, a new government was elected, and I was given the task of revamping — and in some cases beginning to build — mental health services in Yukon with a very clear mandate to look at rural Yukon communities, ensuring that we brought the services to the communities that had been long forgotten.

Mental health and well-being have been a focus for this government from its inception. We are committed to ensuring that Yukoners have access to the programs and services that they need. We know that there are increased demands since the pandemic began and those demands will continue for some time. Prior to and during the pandemic, this Liberal government has been expanding mental health services and improving access in the communities to provide Yukoners with high-quality, accessible, and consistent access to care.

First, I want to take a moment to thank the many public servants who work tirelessly to ensure that Yukoners have access to essential services, especially over the last eight months. I know that the wellness of Yukoners is of the highest priority for Health and Social Services, particularly as we deal with the added stress of COVID-19.

Guided by the *Putting People First* report, enhancing mental wellness and substance use services will continue to be a priority as we navigate our new normal. The programs delivered by the Department of Health and Social Services will always remain client-focused.

As an indigenous woman from a remote isolated community affected by the devastating legacy of colonialism and residential schools, I understand what it means to be impacted by being removed from your community at a very young age. I understand the critical need for high-quality mental health supports.

Four years ago, when I came into my role as the Minister of Health and Social Services, there were two rural mental health support workers. This government has been working very hard to ensure that those struggling in our communities do not face additional hurdles in accessing services. I am pleased to say that we now have 22 mental health support workers providing services out of our four mental wellness and substance use hubs located in Dawson City, Watson Lake, Carmacks, and Haines Junction. In addition to that, we have social workers in our communities. We have psychologists and supports in our communities. We are working closely in collaboration with the Department of Education, our education

support workers, and our First Nation partners in all of our communities.

Resources and supports are available for youth and their families across the territory through the extended family care agreements. Counsellors are available through the hubs and our NGO partners, public health nurse supports, as well as enhanced services through our Family and Children's Services branch. In Whitehorse, counselling services continue to be provided by the Mental Wellness and Substance Use Services branch, along with the Canadian Mental Health Association, Yukon division, and All Genders Yukon society.

I am proud of the commitment of this government and our partners to provide support to families and seniors across the Yukon. We are constantly reviewing, adapting, and learning as our knowledge of COVID-19 grows.

When the chief medical officer of health declared a public health emergency in response to COVID-19, service providers quickly adapted to continue to provide critical services while working within the guidelines. Through the Mental Wellness and Substance Use Services branch, mental health supports are available to children, youth, and their families. Mental wellness support units quickly moved to provide all services by phone or through a virtual platform, with the exception of critical programs, including withdrawal management, which remained open at half-capacity — referred care clinics and opioid treatment services, which continue to provide critical services to Yukoners with complex mental and physical health care concerns. The psychiatric outreach program and early psychoses intervention provides critical services to clients with severe, persistent mental illness.

It is worth noting that these harm-reduction strategies were in place prior to the pandemic. With COVID-19, people with substance abuse issues, in some cases, were not able to maintain physical distancing or attending in self-isolation due to their addictions. We had to adapt — we had to adapt programming to support the needs of all of our communities. This is a key reason why we are exploring the possibility of a managed alcohol program.

When schools were closed due to COVID-19, the Child, Youth and Family Treatment Services team quickly remodeled and maintained contact with clients through phone supports and outreach counsellors being made available to meet in person, if needed. The child, youth, and family treatment team continues to offer scheduled or drop-in counselling services on a weekly basis, while also providing psycho-educational presentations, school consultations, and meetings with staff to build support plans.

I know that my colleague, the Minister of Education, will also be speaking later on this motion — specifically on the work that we have done within our schools and in collaboration with Health and Social Services.

In addition to increased supports for children and youth in schools, we have increased residents' psychiatric support in Yukon to improve access to care. We introduced a holistic and multidisciplinary model of care, which provides services in Whitehorse at a private clinic, treatment services at Mental

Wellness and Substance Use Services and at the Referred Care Clinic.

Finally, Canada's Premiers agreed to hold a national symposium on mental health and addictions, which was scheduled for May 2020, modelling the Yukon care model. Unfortunately, this event was postponed due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Our Premier has been working very closely with the Premier of Saskatchewan, Scott Moe, who is a co-host for this event, along with ministers of health to determine how to proceed with this important work. Our government looks forward to bringing the provinces and territories together in some capacity along with experts across the country to learn from one another and to further spur innovation and collaboration on this most important issue. It is particularly timely given that we are in the midst of a pandemic, so we have learned a lot about services and the innovation of modelling and changing like we have experienced here in the Yukon.

It is our hope that, through the sharing of promising practices and innovation, we will continue to promote wellness that helps Yukoners and all Canadians thrive. Ensuring that Yukoners have access to high-quality mental health services is a key priority for this government.

Mr. Speaker, the federal government committed a total of \$19 million toward the Safe Restart Agreement across the country. Under the Safe Restart Agreement, Yukon received \$13.5 million across six areas: health care capacity and mental health; testing, contact tracing, and data management; PPE; childcare; vulnerable populations; and municipalities. We are happy to see this support from Canada. It is an indication that we certainly have to put our efforts where they are needed, which we will continue to do.

Mr. Speaker, the transformation occurring within Health and Social Services has led the Yukon to the forefront of innovative health and wellness approaches. Our Premier is committed to a national working group on mental health and wellness, using the Yukon model as a framework.

As the suggestions in the member opposite's motion have already been considered or are currently underway, I believe that supporting this motion undermines — this is a very important and valued work that Health and Social Services is doing right now. There is a team of professionals working on this.

The member opposite, as he presented the motion, stated that we need to form partnerships, we need to look at COVID, we need to look at emphasis on drugs and alcohol and the impacts of that around COVID. Well, I can say that *Putting People First* is a priority of this government. It certainly aligns well with the work that we are doing in the health care reform model, looking at the recommendations from the Financial Advisory Panel to go ahead and proceed with the Putting People First health review, essentially looking at many of the recommendations and looking at what can be achieved.

I'm happy to say that a lot of the recommendations have been accomplished in a very short time. It didn't take us 14 years. We move quickly with Yukoners. We move quickly to adapt and change and look at the obstacles.

We looked at collaborative care. We looked at rural Yukon supports, mental wellness supports, nurse practitioners, and the *Child and Family Services Act*. We aligned our supports, not based on the apprehension of children. We aligned it based on services and supports to children in our communities. We don't have 400 children in care, Mr. Speaker. We have put, through our extended family care agreements, children back into their communities, into the homes of their grandparents and their extended families to allow them to be well supported, to grow into successful young people rooted in their culture and rooted in their place in their community and their society. That means ensuring that they have mental wellness supports, that they have counsellors, and that they have family supports around them, and we did that through our family support program. We have done that through the merging of the seniors programming — the elders programming — with that of youth programming, and that was highlighted in the aging-in-place submissions and the direct feedback from our seniors.

We have invested in a manager of indigenous services and relations in Continuing Care. We have looked at guidance and leadership of senior management as we look at an indigenous perspective during decision-making processes. That's critically important as we look at the proposal and at the services that we're providing to ensure appropriate stability in all of our communities.

As we also look at stabilizing communities, we want to make sure that we bring health care and health supports into our communities, meaning that we no longer take our elders out of our communities when they are near the end of their long life on this earth. We share in the celebration through our communities. That's a holistic approach to community wellness.

Caregivers in our communities and capacity development around that care is what this government has done. We have done that in collaboration with our partners through our indigenous communities, we have done that through our health commissioners, and we have done that through our leadership. We have commitment from our communities to look strategically at grief management within our communities and at the financial supports.

A year ago now, we put in place resources to look at wellness and wellness planning within our communities. We had in excess of \$600,000 assigned to support indigenous communities, to look at community wellness models, and to look at pre- and post-care supports within the communities. That means enhancing the doöli process, enhancing the models of aboriginal indigenous perspectives when it comes to healing and wellness within our communities. We are certainly not going to see that resolved in a motion with a political committee assigned to look at mental wellness as it relates to COVID-19. I think that's inappropriate. I think we put the responsibilities where they belong, and we have clear instructions to do that from our communities.

They're asking that we support them, and we'll continue to do that in good faith and very proudly say that the ownership does not reside in this government; the ownership of services and mental wellness and well-being resides with the people.

They need to be involved in the process. In first-hand experience, I think we have learned that — first-hand experience with COVID and the COVID pressures that we are seeing in our communities. You can only imagine having someone arrive in my little isolated community all the way from Québec, wanting to escape COVID because they are paranoid and afraid — and they show up in my community. I received the call at 10:00 at night to say, "Hey, we are extremely stressed. We don't know what to do. Can you help us?" That connection needs to happen in every one of our communities when circumstances are presented in such a way — in-time supports during stressful times, during times of grief, during times of healing are necessary. The services need to be on the ground.

We have a critical incident support team that is called upon to go into many of our communities. Sure, the member opposite speaks about — the earlier mention of the correlation between the opioid overdoses with that of COVID. From January to July, we had 13 overdoses. Half of those happened prior to COVID, and one would make the correlation to say that the crisis is here in our community. It is in BC and it has been here for a while.

That is why this government, in collaboration with our chief medical officer of health, put in place an opioid strategy to look at options — to look at options here in our community — so that we can look at a safe consumption site — to look at options that are presented to us as we see the crisis upon us. Sure, we obviously see a lot more stress in our people and we see a lot more use of alcohol, but the programs are there, and as communities we need to work together to clearly align the supports that are required.

I want to kind of bring us to a place where — I think, as we talk about mental wellness and substance use and the expanded services provided to Yukoners — of course it's high quality, it's accessible, it's consistent, and it's here. We have to make adaptations and quickly change — on the fly — the services that are needed to align with the recommendations of the chief medical officer of health to always keep Yukoners safe. At the same time, we had to get the services out to the communities.

With respect to expanding the scope of services — including counselling services and supports for children, youth, and families, substance use counselling, relationship counselling, trauma counselling, group counselling, community supports, outreach supports — those were all provided to the communities. We were able to stay connected to the communities. In some circumstances, we had folks on the ground in the communities who were isolating within their community bubble. The supports were there.

Circumstances in our urban setting were a little different, so we had to adapt. We had to look at increased harm reduction within our education system. We had to work very closely with our partners and First Nation governments. We had to work with the Department of Education and ensure that all of our students were safe, that they had the timely services and supports they needed.

I would suggest that some of the recommendations that speak to the actions of opioid use and what we're doing here have some correlation. I want to just say that, through these unprecedented times, we have looked at our supports — increased naloxone kits in our communities, working with our partners, working with Blood Ties, working with the referred care clinic. We have worked with the Whitehorse Emergency Shelter. We have worked with our partners to get the supports out to our vulnerable population.

Of course, it's tragic when we lose someone: It certainly is. I know for a fact, in my community, when one person passes on, it affects everyone, and we have had circumstances where individuals had unfortunate passings. We speak openly about it. We speak about the supports that are required — the wrap-around supports for the family and the community, the critical incident team and the interventions, and how quickly we can bring program and supports to the community. That has been demonstrated to be successful.

As we look at exploring our safe testing sites — those are some of the conversations that we're having right now with our chief medical officer of health so that we can ensure that those individuals are not stigmatized or blamed or labelled and that, if they so choose — if their lifestyle is such that they are going to use illicit drugs, then we want to make sure it's safe.

We've worked through Blood Ties Four Directions and we work with the chief medical officer of health so that we can expand the scope of the testing to look at doing that through our Whitehorse Emergency Shelter or perhaps through the Referred Care Clinic or, in some circumstances perhaps, we bring it into some of our other communities. Those are some of the very difficult conversations that we're having. Mitigating, of course, the affect and looking at the initiatives as we proceed along our journey and realizing that — what I've learned, anyhow, in my term in working with our communities — the services that were not there before — we have moved mountains to get the supports to them.

We just went through a review with Little Salmon Carmacks First Nation just last week around the Blackjack inquest — the implementation and the obligations there and how quickly we're bringing the nurse practitioner into the community, moving there very quickly with the supports in their community really to address critical pressures that we were seeing there and that they saw. They provided some input to the hub staff in terms of services and supports they needed.

I want to just conclude on that note to say that we are moving in the right direction. We have all the supports on the ground. I think that we've learned a lot. We've certainly learned a lot from COVID. But prior to COVID — I'm pleased to say that a lot of the supports were in the communities and on the ground already. We had to adapt certainly, like everything else, to meet the needs through changing times. I'm very pleased and I want to just give a hai'choo — that means "biggest thank you" — to all of the members of our communities who have stepped up and who have provided and lent support and to our staff for doing such an exceptional job in getting mental wellness supports, social supports, and health supports into our communities in a very timely fashion.

I know that we certainly have a system in the Yukon that is not very fair or equitable. We have a service through the non-insured health benefit model and then we have service through Yukon's health services. The inconsistency in unprecedented times has to be addressed. These are some of the things that have been identified and addressed through *Putting People First*. As you look at the health care models, we have to adapt, adjust, and move with the times. Clearly, that is the instruction. That is the input that we have received in our communities.

I just want to say how honoured I am to stand here and say that all of these supports are available. I certainly don't think that we need the help of the Official Opposition in looking at oversight, because I think that we are doing quite well on our own.

Ms. McLeod: I am sure Yukoners will be quite comforted by hearing from the Minister of Health and Social Services that she doesn't need to hear from the people who the Official Opposition represent. I am sure that they will be surprised to hear that they don't form part of the Yukon public. Clearly, the government is not prepared to engage in any sort of a dialogue. After all, the minister just confirmed again that they don't require any oversight over their programs and actions.

I appreciate the fact that the Member for Pelly-Nisutlin brought this motion forward. I think that it is an important one. I think it is a conversation that would benefit all Yukoners. I am sure that the members of the minister's community who are able to phone her at 10:00 p.m. at night are quite happy about that. I am pretty sure that if I handed out her cellphone number to my constituents, they would be pretty happy about that too. Maybe they could phone her at 10:00 p.m.

Throughout the course of this pandemic, health guidelines have been issues which, through interpretation and implementation, have manifested into policies created by this government — policies on social distancing, policies on indoor and outdoor gatherings, bubbles, and border restrictions.

Schools have had to come up with their own operational plans to interpret the guidelines in a way that works for them in order to get kids back to school. Some schools have created their own bubbles, or cohorts, within the school. Some schools have limited playground time in the mornings and after school. Some schools have banned the use of water fountains. Many decisions made around schools were operational, with direction from the minister. Grades 10 to 12 went to part-time in-person learning. Students are expected to learn what they can in that time that they are given and pick up the slack on their own. Others have been moved from their school and from their safe place.

Though these are meant to protect public health, they do have negative impacts on the mental health of Yukoners, and I think it's important for us to recognize this. We have seen this borne out in the data from Statistics Canada. The majority of Yukoners are reporting that their mental health has gotten worse during this pandemic. Unfortunately, it does not appear that the current supports are sufficient.

People are making do, but some have turned to less than healthy coping mechanisms, and we also know that families are having to turn to private options for mental health supports. These students need support.

It's not sustainable in the long term for families to pay out-of-pocket for these supports, so we need a plan. A committee of this nature could help provide the support required for these students. We have heard the Minister of Health and Social Services speak several times during this Sitting about how she believes that the supports that were in place prior to the pandemic were sufficient to meet the needs of Yukoners. I don't think this is the case. There would not be such an increase in alcohol and drug abuse or in people reporting deteriorating mental health if current supports were sufficient.

So far, the government has not been able to articulate whether or not supports have been enhanced since the pandemic and the state of emergency the government has declared. Instead, we have heard repeatedly that the supports were good enough before and they're still good enough. People were by and large quite happy with receiving mental health services from Many Rivers Counselling. I know that was the case in Watson Lake, and I'm sure it was the same elsewhere that services were provided by them in the Yukon.

I know that people attended Many Rivers. They sought services from reliable, discreet professionals. They grew to know and trust their support workers. Then, one day, they had no support worker. Unfortunately, we saw the government unable to work with Many Rivers to address their problems and allow them to continue to provide Yukoners with the valuable services. The government decided that government would be a better service provider. This is certainly not the way individuals who utilize these services felt.

We still do not have clear answers on how the mental health hubs would be successful and if they are actually meeting the needs of Yukoners — and I don't think they are meeting those needs. The people whom I have spoken to do not think that they are meeting the needs. I was assured that statistics would be gathered and that the appropriate reports on these hubs would be made available for review. I have not seen any such report or statistic, but it has been suggested that this could be something that the committee could look at.

I care about the mental health of people, and when the government puts into place a new program, I believe that the government has a duty and obligation to provide the evidence that the program is working and that it is beneficial to Yukoners. By organizing a special committee on mental health and educational supports during the COVID-19 pandemic, we as legislators would be able to investigate whether current supports are adequate. We have seen unintended consequences of COVID-19 measures throughout the territory, and these consequences resonate through the communities. We need to delve into the reasons behind these consequences and figure out ways to stop them from happening.

We know that opioid deaths are at an all-time high in the territory. This is no secret. The Minister of Health and Social Services has suggested that, of the 13 deaths between January and July, there is an opioid strategy in place. Given that the

numbers are at an all-time high, I have to question whether or not that strategy is having the desired effect.

We need help to get mental health care back on track in the Yukon, especially during this pandemic. We need to reach out to Yukoners to incorporate their views into our findings and work together on this. I don't think that this is a partisan issue, although — I am just going to leave it at that.

We, as MLAs in this House, each represent an area of the Yukon. We represent the people within that area, and those people in ridings that are not government-held deserve to be heard on an equal basis. The mental health of Yukoners has been challenged and tested in these times and we need to get in front of this situation before it causes more damage.

I fully support this motion and would encourage all members here to lend their support today, although the government has indicated that they will not support it. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Kent: I am going to be brief in my comments here today on this particular motion. I do want to thank the Member for Pelly-Nisutlin for bringing it forward, and thank you, Mr. Speaker, for reading it into the record off the top. I know that it is a lengthy motion, but I'm going to narrow my comments today with respect to this large motion to the education supports and the fact that this motion asks that the committee itself, number one, review the mental health and student supports that are and have been available to Yukoners during the COVID-19 pandemic. Mr. Speaker, as members will know, I asked this question of the Minister of Education earlier on in this Fall Sitting; I think it was last week. I asked the question about what additional resources she had put into Student Support Services since the start of pandemic to provide increased mental health support to our students.

A number of students have been adversely affected. The ones who I have heard from directly are those who are attending high school here in Whitehorse and are struggling with the new reality and the new schedule of being in class or with their teachers for part of the day and then having to do the balance of their learning remotely, either in a study hall or at home, as the case may be. Not only is that causing stress for students, but it is also causing stress for their families. It is a real challenge that many are facing. Some have sought additional counselling and additional mental health supports outside of their home through individuals who are in private practice. Some of them are having trouble affording that additional service, so it's not something that is sustainable. I was hoping that, should this committee be established, it could look into those aspects.

The minister, when I asked her that question, mentioned that the Student Support Services program is under review. Obviously, we are still in a pandemic and the school situation has changed so that it has caused additional mental health stresses on students who are attending those schools.

Some of the comments that I have received on social media or through e-mail from constituents and others who care about this particular issue relate to counsellors and the training provided to counsellors in the schools. I'm not sure if the Minister of Education was planning on speaking today — and

if she doesn't speak to this motion, I will follow up with her in Education debate as we move through the 2020 Fall Sitting — but I do want to get a sense for what the current situation is for counselling and student support services and the additional professionals who provide mental health supports for students — what that is currently and if there have been any enhancements to it as a result of COVID-19.

That's just a quick snapshot of the interest that I have as the Education critic and as the MLA for Copperbelt South and hearing from not only my constituents but from Yukoners across the territory on this important issue. It's my understanding that it doesn't sound like the government side will support the establishment of this committee, which is too bad. We have only heard from one government member so far, so perhaps others will weigh in with their thoughts on this.

That said, Mr. Speaker, that is the focus that I started this session with during Question Period, and it will continue to be a focus of mine as we move through this pandemic and hopefully get to the other side of it sooner rather than later so that some normalcy can be returned to the school calendar and how the learning is done. Not only is it this fall that we're grappling with, but we're also dealing with the closure of in-person learning at the end of last school year and the difficulties that it created for a number of families. Some of their children weren't successful in moving on in certain courses, and I know that created quite a lot of stress for many of the families that I talked with.

That said, I'm hopeful to hear from other government members on their decision not to support this motion here today for the establishment of this committee, but I will cede the floor to others at this time as we move through the balance of the day.

Mr. Hutton: I rise today to speak to Motion No. 230.

Mr. Speaker, quite frankly, I find this motion insulting not just to this government but to Yukoners as well, especially those living in rural communities. The rural communities in Mayo-Tatchun, in terms of mental health supports, were absolutely abandoned by this previous government. The Official Opposition, on the eve of the last election, delivered a mental health strategy with absolutely no dollar figures attached. This is akin to a plane being built with no wings — difficult indeed to get passengers on board, much less to get it to fly.

During their previous 14-year mandate, they maintained two mental health workers for all 14 Yukon rural communities. For 14 years, it stayed the same. Now, apparently because of COVID-19, there has been some kind of epiphany across the floor and mental health, all of a sudden, is an issue. It's amazing.

I have family and friends, Mr. Speaker, who have been suffering for years from mental health issues and no supports available out there. The situation has become dramatically worse in every one of my communities. The alcohol and substance abuse, depression, suicide — all these mental health issues linked to alcohol and totally ignored by the previous government.

I don't see any evidence to suggest that members from the Official Opposition take mental health seriously. Mental health problems didn't just begin to emerge because of the COVID-19 pandemic; they were amplified by it.

We've been suffering from a mental health crisis in Canada and in the Yukon for decades. In 2015-16, there were 77,000 admissions to hospital from conditions that were 100 percent caused by the harmful consumption of alcohol; 25 to 30 percent of suicides that occur are linked to alcohol. Alcohol has had a far more devastating impact on all of our communities than COVID-19 will. I'm not underplaying the significance of the number of people who have died from COVID-19, but if you compare it to the number of people who die every day from alcohol and substance abuse, the numbers would shock you.

It is also interesting that the federal Conservative candidate in the last election made a comment in the *Whitehorse Star*, May 1, 2020, where he stated — and I quote: “Humanity has not faced a challenge like this pandemic in generations, so politicians are taking direction from medical experts — ordinary professionals in extraordinary circumstances doing the best they can, but public confidence wavers when their advice changes daily. And while doctors may be experts in health, they are not experts in financial or cultural health...” I would like to point out that this individual remained on the Yukon Party payroll throughout the summer, and the first reaction — both locally and federally — to the governing party's response to the COVID-19 pandemic was to discredit chief medical officers of health across our country.

Mr. Speaker, the members opposite would have you believe that strong and resilient mental health comes from a strong and resilient economy. In fact, it is the opposite. When you invest in Yukoners, when you treat them like assets rather than liabilities, when you provide the care and services that they deserve, and when you rise to the challenge of meeting those requirements for health services, your economy thrives.

The members opposite question this government's decisions based on the recommendations of the chief medical officer of health to manage the COVID-19 pandemic. Their representatives don't seem to understand the basics of science-based decision-making. When you are presented with new evidence that redefines your narrative and scope, you change your narrative and scope. It is no wonder why this government has been so heavily focused on the health and wellness of Yukoners over the past three years, because nothing significant happened for the previous 14 to address these gaps — because there was, and there remains, a lack of understanding around science-based decision-making within the Official Opposition.

The Hon. Minister of Health and Social Services has been working diligently since this government took office to provide increased services for mental health and wellness across the Yukon Territory. We have increased mental health representation by over tenfold — a thousand percent, if you want to hear it another way. We went from two mental health workers to support all the rural communities to 22. That is fantastic. That is great news for all our rural communities.

Mental wellness and substance use services are continuing to expand and are providing rural Yukoners with high-quality,

accessible, and consistent care — something the previous government couldn't and wouldn't deliver on. We have expanded the scope of services provided by the hub staff to include counselling for adults, children, youth, and families, relationship counselling, trauma counselling, group and community support, and outreach support. None of these supports were there for the previous 14 years.

We have increased resident psychiatric support in the Yukon to improve access to care for patients and introduced a model of care that provides services in Whitehorse at a private clinic. In November of last year, this government saw three psychiatrists open private practices in our territory.

I would like to draw attention to the mental health of our First Nation communities. COVID-19 wasn't the beginning of mental health issues for First Nations in the territory. Believe it or not, when white people came along and introduced alcohol to our Yukon First Nations as another tool of colonization, that was really the beginning of the mental health crisis for First Nations in all the communities in this territory; it didn't start last March.

My communities — and all Yukon First Nation communities — have been decimated over the last century due to the imposition of residential schools, yet the members opposite would have you believe that COVID-19 is solely responsible for the decline in mental health across this Yukon. The legacy of residential schools and intergenerational trauma have seen a downward spiral of mental health in every Yukon First Nation for decades; it didn't start last January.

This government is working hand in hand with First Nation communities and those negatively impacted by the long-standing negligence of the Official Opposition to shape Yukon into a territory that we can all be proud of. I'm very pleased to be part of a government that negotiates respectfully with First Nations, as opposed to looking to litigation for solutions — one that's healthy, nurturing, and caring for all.

Programs — such as Honouring Connections and steps toward reconciliation — work to return children to the care of their parents and extended families so they can reconnect with their culture and their people, rather than being forced into assimilation. As a parent and a grandparent, I can tell you that this is a wonderful thing — to get these children out of these residential institutional settings here in Whitehorse and back to their families, back to their parents and their grandparents, and then provide those parents and grandparents with the supports they need to help us raise the future leaders in our communities, which are struggling right now with alcohol and drug abuse — the legacy of residential schools and the lack of caring from the previous government. For 14 years, there was no mental health support for our rural communities.

Twelve Yukon First Nations have endorsed the Honouring Connections initiative because they recognize the significance of this in their communities and the positive mental health aspects that programs such as this bring to their people. Mental health support is not one size fits all. A government party that doesn't believe in science-based decision-making should not be responsible for shaping the future of our medical industry or the mental health of Yukoners.

Mr. Speaker, you may have assumed that I will not be voting in favour of this motion. That assumption would be correct. As we move forward, we will continue to get advice from health professionals regarding supports that help meet the needs of all Yukoners. I see very little advantage to seeking advice from a committee of three politicians to provide those same health supports to Yukoners.

Hon. Ms. McPhee: “Be Heard” — an expression that members of the opposition often mock in this Legislative Assembly but one we truly believe in with relation to our relationships with Yukoners. Putting people first, all communities matter — how can we work to make Yukoners' lives better? These have been, they continue to be — and I daresay on into the future, they will be — the focus of this government with our one-government approach.

Mr. Speaker, this motion contemplates reviewing mental health and student supports, and notes — I think a bit curiously — what are and have been available to Yukoners during the COVID-19 pandemic.

As my colleague has mentioned very eloquently, this has been a concern, and those approaches that I have just noted are how this government works on behalf of Yukoners to make Yukoners' lives better.

It's important to remind us all that we are still in the midst of this crisis — this emergency. It's not likely to subside anytime soon, despite our best wishes, despite our interest, despite what I've heard here in the territory but really around the world — people saying, “I just want to go back to normal.” If wishes were horses, Mr. Speaker — it is simply not going to happen.

The Leader of the Official Opposition, in bringing this motion forward — I appreciate the opportunity to speak to it — listed numerous impacts of COVID-19 and the world pandemic. It won't surprise anyone, perhaps, that I strongly agree with the Member for Mayo-Tatchun and his very heartfelt submission here to this Legislative Assembly today that these are not aspects of people's lives that are new. They are situations that have been increased, or situations that have been exacerbated, but in the submission from the Leader of the Official Opposition, he has failed to remind us that these are issues and concerns that have been long-standing. I think that unfortunately calls into question some credibility of the entire motion.

I think it's critically important to note that — I cannot speak for my colleagues — I do not recall having received a single letter over the summer or an e-mail or phone call from any member of the opposition asking me about any of these provisions. What are you doing for students? What is happening for students' mental health? What is the focus for students, schools, the other people who are in schools — the teachers, the education assistants, the administrators — all feeling stress over the current situation in this world? Not a single one.

They haven't asked about any of these provisions — certainly not to me. They haven't asked what's in place; they haven't asked what changes have been made. I will reference

the Opposition House Leader who, last Thursday, asked me in particular about mental health supports. Frankly, I question whether that's an actual serious interest. I had one minute and 30 seconds in which to —

Some Hon. Member: (Inaudible)

Point of order

Speaker: The Member for Lake Laberge, on a point of order.

Mr. Cathers: The Government House Leader, I believe, has contravened two points of order, actually — under 19(g), imputing false or unavowed motives to another member in questioning the sincerity of my colleague in bringing forward those concerns about mental health — and also has certainly fallen into the gutter with 19(i), with use of abusive or insulting language regarding a very serious issue that my colleague asked the minister a question about. For her to dismiss those questions on behalf of Yukoners is insulting not just to my colleague but in fact to the Yukoners who raised those issues. I would ask you to have her retract her remarks and apologize for both of her remarks and the flippancy with which she delivered them.

Speaker: The Minister of Education, on the point of order.

Hon. Ms. McPhee: I don't believe I've contravened any of those sections of the Standing Orders. My question, if I had been permitted to continue it, was whether or not the question — not on behalf of Yukoners — was serious in that I have never been asked it before and that I had one minute and 30 seconds to respond.

Speaker's ruling

Speaker: Questioning the sincerity — I'll review Hansard, but my initial reaction is that questioning the sincerity of another member's submissions or speech is not very nice, but it may ultimately just be a matter of debate — of heated but hopefully some sort of principled discussion — between members in this parliamentary forum.

I'll review Hansard. I'll come back if required, but that's what I heard at first blush.

Hon. Ms. McPhee: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Perhaps I'll just state the facts. I've never been asked about these things. I've never been asked what's in place for students. I've never been asked what changes have been made by the members of the opposition. I have not been asked, outside of this Legislative Assembly, any of those questions.

In my submission, that is problematic. It's problematic for this motion. I'm going to use my time today to describe the current situation and the responses within the Department of Education and the focus that has been there on providing service and support to our Yukon students.

I don't disagree with the Leader of the Official Opposition that there have been consequences to dealing with the world pandemic and all of its complexities. None of those consequences could have been foreseen — again, despite the wording of this motion — because we have never had to face such a situation.

Consequences are something that my colleagues and I and our very talented public service and administrators across this territory have been wrestling with on a daily basis in relation to schools, in relation to hospitals, in relation to medical services, in relation to tourism, in relation to economics, in relation to the business community — and I can go on — every day since COVID-19 came to the Yukon doorstep.

This is a challenging time for everyone, including for Yukon students, families, and school communities. The first consideration for education during the pandemic has been the health and safety of students and the staff and ensuring that student learning continues over the course of the pandemic. It is with patience, kindness, and mutual support that Yukon communities are working to keep us all safe and resilient.

Thanks to those conscious efforts, we have been able to adapt and resume classes in schools for students following the advice and the guidelines from the Yukon chief medical officer of health. The priorities for Education during the ongoing pandemic include ensuring the health and safety of students and staff. One way to do this is with sanitization and cleaning supplies for schools and buses — the provision of those and the practice — the PPE — like masks and hand sanitizers — increased custodial services, and health and safety training for teachers and teachers on call.

We have been ensuring that learning continues for all students by adapting field trips, adapting learning spaces with additional desks and whiteboards, and relocating the F.H. Collins grade 8 students and the experiential programs to other sites.

I would like to take a moment to thank the teachers, the educational assistants, the educators, and the administrators in our schools who have really risen to the occasion. I know that we all know stories of individuals, classes, and students who have come up with great energy and innovative ideas on how they might do a field trip, how they might learn something outside, or how they might change the way that they have done learning in the past in an exciting way. Many of those students are excited about that, and this has presented this world pandemic in a way that we have had to re-think how we are going to manage — not only now but in the future — and perhaps change things for the better. There are truly amazing ideas there and there is evidence of it everywhere. It is so critical that our communities — and us, as leaders in this Legislative Assembly — hold up those ideas, those educators, and those students because to do otherwise, I think, falls into the negative situation that was described by the Leader of the Official Opposition and how destructive that can be for us all — and certainly for students who are looking to adults in their lives to provide reassurance and compassion.

Supports for students, Mr. Speaker, with diverse learning needs and those in need of additional supports such as study halls for students in grades 10 to 12 and supports for students and teachers and support staff for flexible learning — including access to technology, tools, and training — have been part of the response. Another example is additional IT and cyber security resources for school technology and blended learning. The department has worked to relocate existing funding and

resources based on these priorities to support learners of all ages in the territory.

With respect to the mental health supports for students — getting students back into schools with their teachers and their friends and back into routines is one of the best ways that we can support children and youth during the pandemic. This supports their learning success and their overall well-being. This is not only supported by our own medical experts but by those across Canada and those across the world and by the research that is being done as fast as it can be throughout the world to figure out what the best possible response can be.

Keeping students out of school, as we know, can have negative impacts on their mental health — not to mention the students, the teachers, and the other learners and staff who work in the school. I know of stories where teachers who have their own health issues or health issues in their families are still taking up the head of their classroom every day, putting themselves and their families at risk because it is so important for them to be there and to lead their students. I know of teachers who have had to retire after a 30-year career last spring without seeing any of the students who were in their class or without having any participation in their graduation in a way that would usually be the case. There are hundreds of thousands of stories. Those are just two small examples of how teachers have also been affected.

Yukon's modernization and modernized school curriculum includes developing competencies for well-being and resilience. Those are built into the curriculum — not something that needs to be a response to a world pandemic — although, goodness knows, who knew this was coming? Great forethought, great development, great future of education — because it does need to respond. As my colleague has said, these are not new problems. These are things in Canada that have been recognized to be necessary responses to providing a better and more holistic education for students.

Through Yukon school curriculum, Mr. Speaker, students learn about socio-emotional skills, decision-making about their health and safety, and strategies to strengthen their resilience and well-being. We would do well to follow them. One example is that physical and health education promotes positive well-being through four competencies: physical literacy; healthy and active living and healthy relationships; social and community health; and mental well-being. We are working to support those students who are still developing their independent learning skills and to help build resilience in all learners.

Mr. Speaker, during the pandemic, resource programs for students with disabilities, transition programs and other programs for students needing additional support, including those with mental health needs or related independent education plans — or individual education plans, as they are sometimes called — are continuing at school all day, every day.

We are working with partners to ensure that mental health supports and resources are available for young people at school and in the community, including to support their needs during the ongoing pandemic. School administrators —

Speaker: Order, please.

The time being 5:30 p.m., this House now stands adjourned until 1:00 p.m. tomorrow.

Debate on Motion No. 230 accordingly adjourned

The House adjourned at 5:30 p.m.

The following document was filed October 7, 2020:

34-3-31

Loss of XplorNet satellite services, letter re (dated October 6, 2020) from Hon. Richard Mostyn, Minister of Highways and Public Works, to Allison Lenehan, CEO XplorNet (Mostyn)