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THE HONOURABLE BILL BARISOFF, SPEAKER

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LIEUTENANT-GOVERNOR
His Honour the Honourable Steven L. Point, OBC

FOURTH SESSION, 38TH PARLIAMENT

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MONDAY, NOVEMBER 24, 2008

The House met at 10:03 a.m.

[Mr. Speaker in the chair.]

Prayers.

Introductions by Members

M. Karagianis: Today in the House, joining us just shortly, is a group of students from Rockheights Middle School. They are the division 9 grade 6 students from Rockheights, and they are accompanied by Mr. Miller, Ms. Kosma and Mrs. McClure. I know that they'll be here shortly, but would the House please make them welcome.

Orders of the Day

Hon. B. Penner: I call private members' statements.

Private Members' Statements

WHERE WE LIVE

S. Herbert: I enter this House in a time when our economy is deeply troubled. I enter this House when our climate and environment are under threat. I enter this House when poverty in our community and the child poverty rate continues to be at the all-time high across Canada, and I enter this place when many in our communities do not believe in this House's power to do good anymore. And I've got to say that I don't blame them sometimes.

This House has failed our province and has failed our children in many respects. A lot of good has been done here too. But of late, I'm not sure what we've been up to.

[1005]

Many of our members speak of the future and of looking out for their grandchildren's future. For me, I speak of looking out for my generation and my future generation's future and the future we will face.

As the government has relentlessly reminded us, we live in a great province. And we do. I love this place. [Applause.]

Thank you, members.

But the challenges we face today are some of the greatest we have ever faced, and so far I don't believe we've been seeing a lot of greatness. People across B.C. are looking to us for a new kind of leadership from all of us. They're looking for us all to rise to the occasion, and I believe they are looking for change.

My community of Vancouver-Burrard is a place where neighbours look out for one another. Many don't have a lot, but they have a community. When you're paying

1,300 bucks for a 500-square-foot apartment, you get to know your neighbours, your parks and your community centres like the West End and Roundhouse community centres.

It's a place where people have come to know they will find acceptance and welcoming. It's a place that appeals to the best in all of us, where neighbours help us, help each other, when times are tough. It's a place where if you're part of the gay, lesbian, bi or transgendered community, you are welcomed, and where if you're a new immigrant, you're welcomed. Many who have lived there all their lives play a big part in making it the community it is.

My community has many similarities to your communities, and my constituents face many of the same challenges yours do. I choose today to speak on where we live, the places we lay our heads at night, the places we turn to when times are tough and when we celebrate, the places where we share our greatest moments. I speak of our homes.

For many British Columbians, our homes are the only place of security these days as we see savings vanish, as the economic picture grows bleak. But just when people need their homes the most, many in my community and yours are facing the loss of their homes or are afraid that they will be next.

I speak of the residents of the Seafield in the West End, who are expecting eviction notices any day now so that the landlord can slice up the historic building into small pieces and rent it out for massive amounts of money — rents that none of the current residents can afford, and they're already paying very high rents.

I think of longtime West End resident Roland McFall, who is 83, and his sister Mary, who is 91, who live there. They don't know where they will turn to when they're forced out. They've been great tenants, have offered to work with the landlord to make any necessary renovations occur, but it's not enough. More money and massively increasing the rent seem to be all that matter.

I think of the Renters at Risk organization, which is formed because of issues like this. They've been standing up for renters in my community who have their world turned upside down when facing eviction and massive rent increases. When this organization has turned to the government, they've been ignored. They've been told to take it to the courts. Unfortunately, that seems to be a too-common refrain these days.

I think of Laurie, who is 85 and who didn't want her last name used for fear of reprisal. She recently faced the prospect of a rent increase of 30 percent — 30 percent. Why? She'd always paid her rent, paid her taxes, paid the yearly rent increases, followed the rules. Why is this happening?

[K. Whittred in the chair.]

The Residential Tenancy Act is not balanced. It was put out of whack when the government made massive changes in 2002 and again in 2006. It's happening because when this act was drafted, concerns of renters were ignored. These changes have thrown our system out of balance and allowed many to be thrown out of their homes.

I've spoken to people whose home is now Stanley Park — the forests of Stanley Park. They were living on disability in a rental building and were forced out due to the changes brought in. They couldn't afford to move and couldn't afford anywhere else. So now they're sleeping outside in the cold, terrified.

In the last seven and a half years, this government has watched as the number of homeless people in Vancouver and in the streets and parks of my community has gone up almost 400 percent. This is shocking and disturbing. This happened in good times. I'm very concerned about what will happen in tough times.

My community is tired of stepping over homeless people, and the homeless people in my community are tired of being stepped over. They need supportive housing now so that they can get off the streets and into programs that help them with mental illness, help them with substance abuse and drug addiction problems, help them get back to living productive lives.

I know this House is often one of chest-beating and desk-thumping, a place where the theatre of partisan politics is played out. I appeal to the members opposite, on behalf of my constituents, to take action now for renters and those living on the street.

[1010]

This is a House where our province's business is supposed to get done, a House we British Columbians and fellow British Columbians look to, to support those most vulnerable, to look out for their interests, a House full of members who have secure homes to go to. I appeal to all to remember those whose homes are not secure and those without homes. We have the power to make positive change for and with our communities. Let us use that power now to keep people in their homes and to house those without them.

C. Richmond: First of all, let me congratulate our new member in this House and wish him well. I sincerely hope he enjoys his time here, however long it may be — as I have, however long it was.

Interjection.

C. Richmond: I doubt that very much, hon. member. I can't help wondering, though, if the hon. member took a close look at the record of his party during their term in office, which was the '90s when times were good. But I assume he should have taken a close look at the party that he now represents. If he had not, I think he would not be so quick to his feet in this House to speak

about the NDP record regarding housing or their record regarding job creation and the economy, which no doubt contributed somewhat to the extent of the homelessness we see today.

They did, however, put thousands of people on welfare — 375,000 of them, to be exact. One in ten British Columbians were on welfare during their watch, when economic times in the country were really pretty good. Their record is abysmal.

How many jobs did they create in the ten years they were government? People were leaving B.C. by the thousands to find work elsewhere. B.C. at that time went from No. 1 in the country to No. 10, just for his edification. We became a have-not province for the first time in our history, and our debt increased by \$20 billion.

In response to his remarks about housing, let me point out a few of the things that this government has done since 2001. In the seven years since we became government, this government has committed to creating more than 15,900 new units of housing. So far 12,603 have been completed, and 3,314 are in development or under construction.

This significant achievement is a result of the wide range of new and expanded housing programs created under our housing strategy, Housing Matters B.C., released in 2006. It provides the framework for developing more affordable housing for people in greatest need.

This includes a commitment to more than 4,000 new and upgraded supportive housing units and shelter beds under the provincial homelessness initiative through the ongoing work of the Premier's Task Force on Homelessness, Mental Illness and Addictions. More than 4,200 supportive housing units exist now in B.C. compared to the 1,300 units that existed in 2001.

We have created a homeless outreach program, an aboriginal homeless outreach program, in 48 communities so that homeless people can be connected to housing and supportive services. More than 2,500 people have been housed as a result of the outreach work. This is a \$4.2 million annual budget plus \$1.3 million in annual funding for 810 homeless rent supplements in the private market over four years.

One of the more important programs that we have put in place is the emergency shelter program. It has undergone a major expansion with more than 1,500 permanent year-round beds and 59 shelters, compared to 850 beds in 2001; 84 percent of the permanent shelter beds are now available 24-7, and 95 percent now provide three meals a day. Over the next couple of months even more shelter beds will be available 24-7 — a \$50 million annual budget.

[1015]

But I think one of the more immediate programs that has been a real boon to people is the rental assistance program, which provides more than 6,000 low-income

working families with direct monthly cash to help pay the rent, with an average payment of about \$350 a family each month.

This program, Madam Speaker, has an effect immediately. It doesn't have to wait for housing to be built or zoning to be approved and the waiting periods and the lineups to get in. It's people who have a home right now but have difficulty paying the rent. It's immediate, and it has helped over 6,000 low-income families with direct cash supplements — a very important and innovative program.

S. Herbert: Well, I was prepared to hear from the member across the floor — or, this time, on the government side of the floor — about what a great job his government is doing, and I knew he would speak about the '90s and a government that was elected when I graduated from elementary school and when many of these members weren't even part of that government.

Interjections.

Deputy Speaker: Members.

S. Herbert: I'm new here, and maybe I'm naive, but is it too much to ask the government to focus on the issues that are facing us today? Can we focus on the people who elected us as real concerns — people like Roland McFall, an 83-year-old facing eviction any day now because of this government's inaction? Can we focus on the homeless people on the streets — over 10,000 across the province, most of them who weren't there when this government was elected but are there now because of the lack of action?

I'm just tired of the government saying what a great job it's doing, how fabulous it is — the greatest place on earth. Well, for too many of our residents, this is not a great place to live. It's getting harder; it's getting more difficult to live here. They're having to choose between buying food and paying their rent, and they're facing the streets. This is wrong. We need action now, not rhetoric.

We'll soon be into an election again where fear tactics and more discussion of the '90s from the government rather than the problems of today are the order of the day — more chest beating. The game will go on, but all the while, more and more people in my community and yours will end up evicted or have their rents skyrocket to levels where they have to choose between food and paying their bills.

I have heard the concerns of renters, manufactured home park residents, those in leasehold properties and those in leaky condos. I have heard the concerns of small landlords who need help dealing with problem tenants. There is much work to be done. We can do this together. No more need to end up on the streets. No more need to face massive rent increases over

and above the regular increase forcing them to choose between food and paying the rent.

No more need to face "renovictions," a new word created in the West End because of the renovation evictions. No more need to feel the government is working to push them onto the streets, not helping to keep a roof over their heads. We can make that change.

I don't believe the government can or should do everything, but at bare minimum we should be able to expect it to work to ensure its laws don't create more injustice. We can make that change. The balance between landlords and renters needs to be righted. A change is going to come. Let's make it happen now.

SOUTHWEST MISSION DEVELOPMENT

R. Hawes: More than 30 years ago, the district of Mission and its duly elected council designated the southwest area of the district of Mission to be an urban reserve area. It was going to be, and it was pronounced then to be, the future urban growth area for the community.

In fact, 20 years ago I was on the municipal council when we enshrined that urban reserve status in the official community plan for the municipality. For many years residents of Mission have looked at this area as being the area that was going to be the future urban area of the district of Mission.

[1020]

A substantial amount of the land in that area is owned by two large corporations, one being Genstar and the other a company called Madison Group. They together own some 1,600 acres or so. They decided some seven years ago that it was time. It was time to make the investment in the infrastructure and begin the work towards bringing urban status, bringing residential growth to that part of the community.

As they began doing their work and they went out to the community, the municipal council asked them to consult with the people of the area and the people of Mission, which they did. They went into a fairly extensive consultation process, ultimately going to an official community plan change application that would change the designation from urban reserve to residential zoning in the official community plan.

There were public hearings held. Those public hearings were broadly... There was opposition, substantial opposition, much of it from outside of the community at the official community plan discussion, but the council ultimately passed that change.

Then the proponents, Genstar, moved ahead to go into the actual rezoning, which requires some planning discussion. The community, through the elected city council, asked them to embark on environmental studies. In fact, they have now completed over \$2 million, closer to \$3 million, worth of environmental studies that were conducted by some of the best environmental firms in

this province. Not satisfied, though, that the proponent hired the environmental oversight and the qualified environmental professionals that did this work, the municipality hired a number of qualified environmental professionals of their own to peer-review all of the work that was done by the Genstar-hired consultants.

This is probably one of the most, if not the most, environmentally studied development proposals in the history of British Columbia for a residential development. Yet as it moved ahead, some opposition, in my belief, was relatively limited in the number of people. That opposition began to spring forward and put misinformation out into the community — what I call misinformation. A lot of misinformation about the environmental studies that were done and a lot of misinformation about the cost of this development to the community.

The district of Mission appointed a review panel of citizens — a neighbourhood plan advisory committee made up of 19 citizens of Mission. They advertised for people to take part in that committee, to be a participant, and every single person who applied was appointed.

Nineteen citizens spent hundreds, literally hundreds, of hours reviewing the plan over a couple of years. These citizens came forward on a completely volunteer basis. Many of them had no real interest or land holdings in that area. They are just concerned citizens that wanted to make sure that this large development was done properly.

Actually, I'm extremely proud of the fact that we did have citizens in the community I live in that were prepared to put in that kind of time. Yet what has happened is... I think many of us are familiar with what I guess we would call the instant letterhead groups — the save our farmlands, save our communities, save this, save the creeks.

All of these groups come forward, and they begin coming to a public hearing process in the district of Mission. They begin speaking there night after night to the point.... Unfortunately, the way that the public hearings were set up, anyone was allowed to come and speak for 12 minutes at this public hearing, and then they could speak again and again and again. Some people spoke four and five times. As they came up to speak, it was all the same thing over and over. Someone would come with a PowerPoint; they might show that three times.

[1025]

They would finish speaking, put their name back on a list, to the point that the citizens who actually support this process decided to stay home, and they didn't come anymore. What was the point? Now, at that point....

There are a number of e-mails out there, from some of the instant letterhead groups, that circulated around Vancouver inviting people to come to Mission and speak at the public hearing. This then went into the provincial media.

Frankly — I live in Mission; I've lived there for a long time, and I've served that community for a long time —

I was quite embarrassed by the number of people that were spreading the misinformation and by the way that it was being portrayed in the media.

This has been one of the most publicly participative projects that I've ever seen in all the time I've served in government and at the local level. I served three terms as a mayor, and I have never seen — never seen — a project move ahead with as much community consultation as this one. It was very carefully planned and, I believe, very, very much supported by the vast majority of people who live in the district of Mission.

One of the opponent groups....

Interjection.

R. Hawes: I'll come back to this in a moment. I'd be interested to hear the response from the opposition.

M. Sather: It's really amazing to me and surprising that the government allows the member for Maple Ridge–Mission to speak on this subject. His involvement is so rife with conflict, or at least the appearance of conflict, that it's incredible that he would get up once again and talk about this project.

Let's go over some of the history, and you can judge for yourself. When this government was first elected in 2001, they didn't like the fact that developers had to face a 30-metre setback from streams. By the way, the Silverdale development is covered with streams. So guess what. They come up with a new bit of legislation called riparian areas regulation that allows developers to get closer to the streams. And who would be the chair of that committee? None other than the member for Maple Ridge–Mission.

Then the provincial government did some environmental work at the Silvermere Island area, which is also a Genstar project. The senior biologist in charge, Dr. Rosenau, was fired by this government when he said that it wasn't particularly a good project environmentally. One wonders what involvement the member had in that particular outcome.

Then the member went to council. I've mentioned this in the House before. This time I'm going to read it, because last time he said he didn't say what they said he said. Here are the minutes of the meeting.

"Member for Maple Ridge–Mission stated that 64 municipalities adopted RAR and that the Department of Fisheries and Oceans and the Ministry of Environment are supportive of RAR. Mr. Blank also indicated that in the event that a municipality setback requirement differs from a setback recommended by a qualified professional, compensation could potentially become an issue and that the government is looking at legislation to deal with this issue."

After bullying the council, then the member runs around Mission wearing a Genstar t-shirt. "Oh, what the heck. Let's be unbiased in our presentations to the community."

Most recently this same member was party to an

advertisement in the local paper, just two days before the election, telling people who to vote for. This is a Genstar-friendly ad. The member has his name appended to it. He doesn't put "MLA" after his name. I don't know why. He might have thought that that looked a little too blatant, like he was trying to influence the result of the election.

Deputy Speaker: Member. I just want to remind members that while some partisanship has been allowed in this morning's debate, be very cautious that we don't stray into personal attacks.

Continue, Member.

M. Sather: I don't know what the intention of the member was. I'm sure he's going to explain it later on. He thinks this is the best thing since sliced bread. However, maybe he just neglected to put "MLA" after his name.

This agreement in Mission is a new kind of agreement that was brought in by this government in 2007 called a phased development agreement, which allows for — in fact requires, unless the two parties, the municipal government and the developer, agree — essentially binding the terms of this agreement for up to six consecutive municipal governments.

[1030]

This is not surprising from this government. They're always trying to bind local governments. They're always trying to make things more difficult for the public. I know the member has to put up with these horrible groups like "Protect our Farmland." That's terrible. Can you imagine a group like that actually wanting to get up and talk about the actions of this government?

The member is also a huge advocate of gravel extraction from the Fraser River, notwithstanding the significant effects that would have on our fishery. That's been clearly outlined, but it doesn't bother the member apparently at all. I don't know. It's probably just a coincidence that Genstar will require a lot of gravel for that development.

Deputy Speaker: Member, please, can we keep the remarks on a little bit higher level. Personal attacks are not part of the discussion.

M. Sather: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I didn't mean it to be portrayed in any way as a personal attack. I think it's a matter of circumstance. The member, I'm sure, will get up and explain clearly how all these things came to be and how, in fact, his record on these matters is impeccable. But the government itself has a lot to answer for. It's not just the member for Maple Ridge–Mission.

The firing of Dr. Rosenau was appalling. It was in the media recently, and that's why I thought it was particularly peculiar that the member would be allowed to get up and bring this up again. But he has.

R. Hawes: Just to clear the record. My understanding on Dr. Rosenau is that he was not fired. He moved.

The other thing is that the development that the member refers to actually was never, ever on the books of the district of Mission. There was no referral ever made for that to the ministry. So I'm not quite sure what that report was intended to do or who really cared, because it was on a development that wasn't going to take place, never was on the books that the city got — no readings from the city and no referral to government. So frankly, that's just a bunch of bunk.

The other point that he made was about the riparian area regulation. I'm just very quickly going to cover why the change was made and why it makes sense. Under what this members seems to think should happen in British Columbia — streamside protection — you have to stay 30 metres away from a creek. You could build an oil refinery 31 metres from a creek, but you couldn't build a picket fence 29 metres from the same creek. Does that make sense to anyone?

The RAR actually encompasses biological principles and makes people take a good look at the creek and what you're doing near the creek. It has been endorsed by the biologists at both the Ministry of Environment and the Ministry of Fisheries and Oceans federally. This member....

M. Sather: Under duress.

R. Hawes: Under duress. Yes, yes. Anything that's sensible must be under duress. You've had your chance to speak, and actually I wasn't interfering, Member.

I am a supporter of the process the district of Mission has embarked upon, because it's the right process. Actually, land use decisions are the purview of municipalities, and I personally choose to leave that to them. If I choose to endorse, though, as a citizen, my right.... To endorse whatever is going on in my city and affects my tax dollars is my right. This member chose to speak at the public hearing although he has nothing to do with it and has no information at all about this.

This is an e-mail from the New Democratic Party, the executive of the Fraser Valley, endorsing all of the candidates people should vote for in the recent election, including six candidates in the district of Mission that are from the Citizens Against Urban Sprawl Society — another one of the instant letterheads.

These people have come forward opposing the whole process for quite some period of time, spreading misinformation throughout our community. The NDP pushed those six candidates. They finished last — last — on the ballot in my city. The people that got elected in my city are the ones who are for progressive development.

So in my view, in Mission we have had a referendum on this process. The people have spoken, and they spoke loud. They said: "We want progressive development. We're electing those people to represent us."

They are now in our local government. They are going to proceed and move ahead. The ones who are opposing, the ones who are part of the instant letterhead group, the ones who were endorsed by the NDP, were defeated. It's time for them and the NDP to go away and leave our city to get on with responsible development.

[1035]

ADVOCATING FOR SMALL BUSINESS

J. McGinn: It's my great privilege today to rise in this House to give my first statement as the new MLA for Vancouver-Fairview. Today I want to speak about an issue that has had a huge negative impact in my community, something that has chased many small business owners away from Fairview and kept countless others awake at night. That is the chaos created by the construction of the Canada line.

Construction of the Canada line project began in October 2005. Full excavation of the street began in November 2006 and was supposed to be completed by mid-2008. Parts of Cambie Street are still a disaster and pose many challenges to residents and businesses alike. The Canada line is scheduled to be opened to the public in November 2009.

There was a great deal of opposition and concern about the Canada line going along Cambie Street because merchants were worried about the impact to their family businesses. TransLink had assured the Cambie Street merchants that the disruption would only last three to four months at any one location. This was based on a bore-tunnel method.

Instead they did a cost-savings about-face and proceeded with a cut-and-cover method, which meant full excavation in front of storefronts and which lasted for a minimum of 11 months at any location and, in many areas, considerably more.

The question is: at whose cost were these savings borne? The impact to the small business community has been substantial. Over 50 small businesses have either been bankrupt or forced to relocate. Many of these businesses have been institutions in my community. Longstanding businesses like the Don Don Noodle Cafe or the legendary Tomato restaurant are now gone.

The human impact is extraordinary. I've heard stories of immigrant families coming to Vancouver to make a better life for themselves and for their families. They were living their dream to have a small family business, only to have that business bankrupt because of the careless and callous decisions made by TransLink and other parties.

Business owners have told me that part of the reason they've been so harmed by the Canada line construction is because they never expected it to be built by cut-and-cover. These families not only experienced huge financial losses in the hundreds of thousands of dollars, but also deep personal shame for losing their business.

The business community has not been taking this lying down. In fact, I would like to pay tribute to a leading advocate for the Cambie Street merchants, another longstanding Cambie Street business that will be gone by the end of the year. Susan Heyes, owner of Hazel and Co. located at Cambie and 16th, has just announced that after ten years of operations she's packing up and moving to Main Street.

Ms. Heyes has been a tireless advocate for the Cambie merchants. She's been the brave voice for many who were too afraid to speak out. I'm quite certain that the loss of this business and her strong voice will be missed in the Cambie village and beyond.

Ms. Heyes has had a three-year fight for compensation over the Canada line construction and has taken that fight all the way to the B.C. Supreme Court. Her hearing date of November 21, to determine whether Transportation ministers should appear in court, has been unexpectedly postponed. However, her trial is expected to proceed in March 2009.

Ms. Heyes reports suffering \$900,000 in lost sales, forcing this single mother to remortgage her home twice to stay afloat.

Additionally, the Cambie Street business improvement association filed its lawsuit on November 10. They are seeking damages in excess of \$20 million. The BIA is claiming that the defendants, Canada Line Rapid Transit and InTransit B.C., the companies tasked with building the Canada line, and SNC Lavalin, the project's major construction contractor, knowingly and deliberately harmed area businesses because they wanted to save construction costs by using the cut-and-cover method.

Since the defendants benefited by switching construction methods at the plaintiffs' expense, the plaintiffs wish to be compensated.

[1040]

So far both TransLink and the provincial government have denied any responsibility to compensate businesses for their losses. This is in spite of a commitment made by the Premier on June 10, 2004, that "the province will assume construction risks and responsibilities through RAVCO, which will be transferred to the province."

The negligence is insurmountable. The losses to the business community have been of mammoth proportions. According to a survey by the Canadian Federation of Independent Business in October 2007, the average business impacted by the Canada line construction saw a sales loss of approximately \$112,000 in the first year of construction. Considering that survey was completed well over a year ago, we can only assume these losses are substantially higher.

Business owners have reported that they've had to go in debt to stay afloat. Many have worked longer hours or had to lay off staff. Many have had no other option but to close their doors. Statistics alone cannot begin to

capture the damage that has been done to people of my community.

From the Canadian Federation of Independent Business report, the impact of the construction-related noise, dust, lane closures and traffic rerouting along the corridor has been more severe and lasted longer than most people anticipated. Many avoid the area completely. As a result, small business owners along the construction corridor are reporting significant sales losses. Efforts to remain in business go far beyond the ordinary and include taking out second mortgages, using retirement savings, laying off long-term staff and relocating. The related emotional stress defies quantification.

The CFIB further reports: what went wrong? Why were the concerns of business owners about the impact of the construction on their livelihoods not taken more seriously during the initial review of the project, particularly after the construction method was changed from tunnelling to a more disruptive cut-and-cover? All partners in this project have failed to make small business viability along the line during construction an issue of major concern.

Madam Speaker, small businesses play a vital role in the British Columbia economy. In fact, they're responsible for the majority of jobs created in this province. If the government were truly concerned about the health of our economy, they should sit down and begin negotiations with the affected businesses rather than waste countless taxpayers' dollars fighting their claim.

R. Thorpe: First of all, let me say on behalf of myself and our colleagues, we welcome the new member for Vancouver-Fairview to the House. I think what we should look forward to from new members is actually bringing forward real solutions.

I'm very, very proud of the small business community of British Columbia and the achievements of the small business community of British Columbia. You know, they are growing at the rate of 11 percent — three times the national average — right here in British Columbia. We should be proud of their achievements, creating just under 100,000 new jobs since 2001 in the small business sector.

You know, I hear from time to time the members on the other side say: "We're for big government. We're for making sure that government controls everybody's life." Our side of the House believes in the entrepreneur spirit of small business, and we believe that money is more powerful in their pockets. That's why we're very proud to have a tax regime in British Columbia. Those earning \$111,000 or less have the lowest income tax rate in Canada. I might add that that puts \$144 million into those taxpayers' pockets when this 5 percent tax reduction that's before this House is passed this week — 144 million new dollars in their pockets.

It's interesting to me that they say they want to support small business, but yet when we wanted to increase the

threshold for small business taxes from \$200,000 to \$300,000 to \$400,000, what happened, Madam Speaker? Every time the NDP voted against that. Then they stand in this House and say they care.

What happened when we said that the small business tax rate of 4½ percent wasn't competitive enough, and we wanted to take it to 3½ percent? They voted against it. When we announced we were going to reduce it by 2½ percent by 2011, they voted against that.

[1045]

Now before this House is that reduction to 2½ percent. It's being brought forward to this House now in a bill before this House, and we will see that that will result in \$146 million more in the pockets of small business. Now we will see if they're going to support that or stand to their old ways of voting against tax reductions 103 times.

Those reductions in small business over the years have put \$401 million into the pockets of small businesses. You know, small businesses have told us, with respect to doing PST returns, that that should be increased. Our government heard; our government acted. We have before the House an increase in the fee to double that, so that puts \$1,200 a year in each small business's pocket that files PST. That is moving forward. In addition, over the years we've made a number of changes to the PST, and that has resulted in savings to small business and British Columbians of \$43 million a year.

You know, one of the things that small businesses told us over the years is about breaking down red tape and barriers. The NDP are masters at increasing regulation. If they had been in power today, we would have had over 403,000 regulations in the province of British Columbia. Today, through the efforts of British Columbians from the north to the south to the east to the west, we have reduced red tape by 42.8 percent, down to 164,000.

It's about working with small business. It's about developing a single small business licence for mobile businesses. The NDP shunned that. We put that in place in the Okanagan on a pilot project, and everyone said that it would fail. Amazingly, it's been a success — 1,900 new small business mobile licences in the Okanagan. That is now going to move forward on a provincial basis.

We are working with small business. We are working through the Small Business Roundtable, and over 32 consultations have taken place across the province of British Columbia, talking to over 500 small businesses. With respect to skills and training, we have worked with small businesses, and we will continue to work with small businesses.

But I would be remiss if I didn't tell British Columbians to be careful — to be very, very careful — about the opposition and the NDP. They want to add \$400 million to the cost of business. The chamber of commerce has told us that, and you're against that. We're for the economy; we're for jobs. You're against small business in British Columbia; you're against jobs being created in British Columbia.

We must work together for the benefit of small businesses from the north to the south, east and west, and the government is committed to doing that.

J. McGinn: I'd just like to thank the former minister for his remarks. He clearly does demonstrate what I've been hearing from the Cambie Street merchants and from the small business community, and that is that this government is out of touch, arrogant and doesn't care about their concerns.

You know, when I take a stroll up Cambie Street, which I often do, it's obvious that things do look better, at least on the surface. The street has new benches, new garbage cans and banners. There are even some new businesses on Cambie Street that have opened up, which is a welcome addition. Many people suggest that the Canada line has been short-term pain for long-term gain.

However, tell that to the people who have lost their livelihoods, their legacies for their children, whose credit ratings are in the toilet. No matter how many flower baskets and banners we construct, things are not pretty for the merchants who have been devastated by the Canada line construction.

It has been argued that if these businesses are compensated for their losses, it would be setting a precedent. What about the dangerous precedent of sheer negligence that has already been set?

Cambie Street merchants have told me about their frustrations and their fear. They're worried about whether they will in fact experience any direct benefit from the Canada line. The Cambie village shops are eight blocks from the nearest station, where anyone riding the trains will be funnelled from one underground shopping mall to another. The street-level shops are invisible to riders on the subway, in sharp contrast to surface light rail passengers who see all the shops and increase local business immediately.

[1050]

The Cambie Street bus service has already been reduced, and parking restrictions will be enforced for blocks either side of Cambie, with meters installed along the corridor. Most tenants have demolition clauses in their leases, if in fact they have a lease. The whole area has been rezoned, with much redevelopment pending.

Rents are already going up, and there's concern that this will result in the demise of small independent businesses in place, with chain stores filling up their spaces. This will adversely impact the unique character of the Cambie village.

I would like to see fairness, even an acknowledgment of the pain and suffering the small business community has experienced.

CONNECTIONS

H. Bloy: I rise today to discuss the many exciting transportation infrastructure improvements planned or

underway for Burnaby and the Lower Mainland. Since 2001 the Metro Vancouver population has grown by more than 6.5 percent. The economy has also grown greatly during this time. These two factors together have led to increasing challenges in the movement of people and goods and services and have given urgency to taking action on climate change now.

The initiatives I will discuss today show our government's leadership in meeting these challenges, and all share in one theme: connection. We have the Evergreen line providing faster and more efficient mass transit, the Gateway program improving the movement of people and goods, and the improvement of our cycling network. All these initiatives will greatly improve Burnaby residents' connections to their community, the Lower Mainland and the Asia-Pacific region.

The Evergreen line, which will connect Lougheed Town Centre going through Port Moody to Coquitlam town centre and ending at Douglas College in Coquitlam.... As MLA for Coquitlam, I work closely with the minister advocating on behalf of the stop at Douglas College and all the stops throughout the line.

On April 18 the provincial government announced that the Evergreen line will follow the northwest route, but this decision was important because we had had many consultation groups, and the mayors and councils of the local cities New Westminster, Burnaby, Coquitlam, Port Moody and Port Coquitlam all supported that route unanimously. We listened to them, and that was the final decision that came out.

When the Evergreen line starts running in 2014, it will provide vital mass transit for our fast-growing suburbs and will support the provincial transit plan and the climate action goals. The Evergreen line project will do much to help reduce greenhouse gas emissions, reduce urban sprawl and create more jobs.

Creation of a convenient, easy-to-use mass transit does much to enable residents to reduce their own carbon footprint by leaving their cars at home. By 2021, seven years after the Evergreen line will start running, we will have an annual ridership of 22 million people. Can you imagine how many cars that will take off the road? Imagine the reduction in air pollution and how much it will benefit our residents. Imagine also what a significant contribution Evergreen will make towards our target of reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 4.7 million tonnes by 2020.

The Gateway program — particularly the northwest, the Fraser and the South Fraser perimeter roads — is another important step in building stronger connections for our area. Gateway will integrate with improvements to regional road, transit and cycling projects which are either planned or underway. When completed, a well-integrated and effective transportation network connecting municipalities and facilitating economic growth will be in place.

I'd like to give a bit of background on why the Gateway is so badly needed. The population of Metro Vancouver has increased by 750,000 since 1986, and it's expected to increase by another 900,000 people by 2031. Congestion has increased as a natural result of this rapid growth, mainly because of the population and employment growth that has been so spread out. Commuting patterns have changed. People do not just travel to downtown Vancouver from the suburbs. People travel all over the Lower Mainland now to go to work.

[1055]

We need to address the changes and the resulting congestion so that we connect families back together sooner. Already congestion costs the Lower Mainland about \$1.5 billion per year. Of that, \$500 million is trucking costs — three times as much as ten years ago. With future population growth and a projected 50 percent increase in truck traffic by 2021, travel times and congestions will worsen if we do not act now.

A key objective to the Gateway project, therefore, is to reduce this congestion. Further objectives are to improve access to key economic gateways such as ports, industrial areas and border crossings; to reduce travel times and improve connections between the Lower Mainland and municipalities; to keep regional traffic off local roads; to increase the mobility of goods and people; to reduce vehicle emissions; and to provide better connections to transit, cycling and pedestrians.

You know, there's been a lot of money that's gone into Burnaby lately — over \$200,000 — to improve their cycling network. With the development of Highway 1 and the expansion, there will be cycling paths along the freeway with room so that they can get through all the interchanges and be able to go safely to work.

On the transit front, Gateway will see the return of transit service to the Port Mann Bridge for the first time in 20 years. Can you imagine? We're going to have buses that will be able to take people back and forth from work and shopping and go over the Port Mann Bridge. We will also have HOV lanes with several priority on-ramps extending from Vancouver to Langley to alleviate gridlock along major roads.

The road and bridge improvements from the Gateway project would do a lot more to improve traffic flow in the region overall. You know, we have the Pitt River Bridge that will be finished next summer, which is just going to be amazing to move traffic from Maple Ridge in through Burnaby into downtown Vancouver and back. And we have the new Golden Ears bridge, which is being completed.

It is important that we continue to do as much as possible to make it easier for residents to choose cycling as an option for transportation in order to reduce their impact on the environment.

These transportation infrastructure improvements are clearly a great benefit not only for the reasons I've

discussed so far, but also for what construction of the Evergreen line, the north and south perimeter roads would do to stimulate the economy. Currently, the Gateway program is employing 300 people. In the future, Gateway will provide 17,000 person-years of construction and employment. Over the next few years, from 2009 to 2013, we are going to see tremendous benefit to our economy with these projects as we keep British Columbia working. Our goal is to keep B.C. moving.

C. Puchmayr: Thank you to the member for his comments. The Gateway. We hear a lot of announcements about traffic and transportation initiatives, but many of them are announcements that we hear over and over and over.

The Millennium line was one that was built by the previous government. That was announced. Consultation, very intensive consultation.... There was a lot of mitigation for communities, and it was built. It was built on time, it was built on budget, and it certainly did benefit the member in his Burquitlam riding. It certainly has benefited the growth in the northeast sector, which is where the livable region strategic plan has decided that there should be significant growth to protect the farmlands and the green space in the Fraser Valley.

The Evergreen line now has been announced. I was on city council when the announcements of the Evergreen line first began. I think there have been so many sod turnings on the Evergreen line that you could actually use those sod turnings as a cut-and-cover and build it today.

[Mr. Speaker in the chair.]

We continue to hear about this very needed piece of transportation infrastructure, and it continually gets put on the back burner. We need to build it. We need to build it today, and we need to get that infrastructure in the northeast sector moving north to south, east to west so that we can move the commuters.

We always hear about the '90s. Well, I'll talk to you about some transportation initiatives that happened in the '90s.

[1100]

The beginning of the South Fraser road to the Fraser Surrey Docks was completed. The first section of it was completed. The Millennium line, of course, was completed. It certainly benefited many communities in the northeast sector, including New Westminster that I represent. There were the Barnett Highway HOV lanes which, again, certainly benefited the member's riding who just spoke. There were the HOV lanes on the freeway expansion. It certainly got a lot of people out of their cars and created an incentive for car-pooling.

The Front Street connector, which was part of the North Fraser perimeter road in my community, was completed. The West Coast Express — even with all the opposition to the West Coast Express, you look at the

absolute thousands of cars and thousands of tons of particulates that that has taken out of our atmosphere and the cars that it has taken off the roads to free up the road space for more goods movement.

The Hamilton Street overpass connecting the Alex Fraser Bridge to Richmond was completed back while we were in government in the 90's, and one of the really good projects was the Island Highway. The Island Highway was again built on time, on budget. It was not a 3P project. It got youth employed. It created a lot of apprenticeships. First nations youth were employed as well. High-quality apprenticeships came from that and journeymen came from that, journeypeople came from that.

These were initiatives. All of these were not 3P projects. These were projects that the people of British Columbia built for the people of British Columbia using local labour in British Columbia. So I think that when we look at transportation in the future, when we look at transportation for today, we need to ensure that it's people in British Columbia that are building transportation for British Columbia and that we are not at the mercy of paying a 3P contractor for virtually doing nothing, for bringing money to the table.

So we need to ensure that those projects remain in the control of the people of British Columbia, that they're built of the highest quality possible and that they employ British Columbians and not foreign workers.

In closing, I look forward to listening to the comments from the member, and maybe he will even give some praise to some of the initiatives that we've done. He has to remember that the consultation that was done was done throughout the municipalities. It was done with communities that were affected by transportation growth sitting at the same table, looking at it, analyzing, seeing what the best solutions were.

What we have now is a private, handpicked group of people that meet behind closed doors, that don't have to put a service plan forward for the next ten years to the public. Transportation is going to be directed by those, and that is the wrong direction to go.

H. Bloy: I'd like to thank the member for New Westminster for his comments, but I'd like to correct him. First of all he started off wrong. He talked about the Millennium line being on time and on budget. It was over \$1.5 billion over budget. It only went two-thirds of the length, and they forgot to complete the environmental study, but they started construction anyway.

Can you imagine that? The environmentalists over here, supposedly the green party, building a massive project and not completing their environmental study, but constructing, digging up Lougheed Highway all along to get it completed about a year and a half late and \$1.5 billion over budget. That's the economic leadership shown by this person. You know, they rushed and rushed, but they just couldn't do it.

He talks about sod-turning and that we could use it for cut-and-cover. I guess that's a pretty nice line. But you can do all the sod-turning you want. We haven't done it, but they did it, because they didn't consult. When you want to do something right and you want to do something good, you need a government that knows how to run projects, that can do it and that can build. It takes time to plan. It takes time to do things right, and it takes time to consult with all your partners.

Interjections.

H. Bloy: Some of my colleagues on the other side of the House believe that's pretty funny — to do a job right and to do it right for all the citizens of British Columbia. [1105]

Burnaby is going to be a great benefactor. We're going to complete the job that the NDP never did complete. We are going to build the Evergreen line. The Evergreen line will be running by 2014. We will be running 22 million-plus people on the Evergreen line. We will be taking cars off the road. We will be taking action. We will be keeping B.C. moving forward.

To keep B.C. moving forward is to move our goods and services, and that's why we're doing the perimeter roads. But it's also to keep families together so they can spend more time together, so they're not sitting in gridlock all the time. We have to be able to move the citizens of the Lower Mainland, especially as we continue to grow in the Lower Mainland and more businesses want to set up here.

With the growth that we've undertaken and all the transportation and goods that are coming from Asia, we need these roads so we can get it to the people sooner, so we can get it to the industrial areas and the distribution.

I'm proud to be part of a government that takes transportation seriously, that announced — I can't remember the number of years, but over the next number of years — a \$14 billion plan to improve transportation in the Lower Mainland. But we're going to do it right. We're going to do it with consulting.

Hon. B. Penner: I now call Motion 41 on the order paper.

Mr. Speaker: The unanimous consent of the House is required to proceed with Motion 41 without disturbing the priorities of motions preceding it on the order paper.

Leave granted.

Motions on Notice

AMBULANCE SERVICE IN B.C.

C. Wyse: It is indeed a pleasure to be back in the House — a little tardy. It's always a pleasure to see you, Mr. Speaker. I hope things went well for you.

It is indeed my pleasure to introduce the motion today.

[Be it resolved that this House recognize the value of the ambulance service provided by the Province of BC and the importance of continued improvement to this service.]

The B.C. Ambulance Service provides public ambulance service in B.C. under the authority of the Emergency and Health Services Commission of the provincial Ministry of Health. The B.C. Ambulance Service is directly responsible to the Minister of Health.

In 1974 government legislation was enacted to create the Ambulance Service. It was formed in response to the growing concerns about the conditions then present in the ambulance industry of the day. Emergency pre-hospital medical services were supplied by a mixture of commercial operators: some operated from funeral homes, some partially subsidized by municipalities, some based with volunteer fire departments, and some that existed on paid subscriptions from the public.

The competition between ambulance companies was intense. Standards were not uniformly observed, and effective patient care was often an afterthought. Today the ambulance service employs about 1,100 full-time paramedic and dispatch personnel, 2,200 part-time staff and 100 management and provincial support personnel. The provincial call volume is about 5,300 calls annually, ranking the B.C. Ambulance Service as one of the largest ambulance services in North America.

The Ambulance Service leases dedicated air ambulances aircraft from provincial carriers, with 8,800 air evacuations annually. There are 144,000 patient transfers between medical facilities by ground ambulances.

Now, there are two facts that I believe are important to the motion that is in front of us. The Ambulance Service is intended to bridge the major regional disparities in both geography and population densities across the province. Secondly, the Ambulance Service depends on a reliable communications system to direct ambulances through a common communications system. This ability is particularly important during times of extreme weather conditions or in local disasters. So this raises a number of challenges that face us here with our ambulance system.

[1110]

[S. Hawkins in the chair.]

One challenge that does face the ambulance system is the structural changes caused by decisions made by the government. By closing hospitals, the distances that ambulances had to travel throughout the provinces were lengthened. By reducing the number of acute care beds in hospitals as well as not providing the 5,000 long-term care beds that were promised for seniors care, the number of acute care beds that were available in the hospitals decreased, having the ambulance systems turn up in the emergency wards that were backed up because there was no place to discharge the patients into the hospital system.

Therefore, with the ambulance system being responsible for that patient until they are turned over to the hospital, we ended up with backlogs of the ambulance system waiting to discharge their patients while they could not return and do their major function, which is one of initial response as well as then transporting the patient to where more extensive care could be provided.

The second challenge is one of disparity between the urban and the rural geographies. That raises the issue of the training and retention of the licensed paramedic across the province. There are three categories that exist amongst our stations that are set up here: a remote, a rural and an urban designation. In a remote-designated station the paramedic is paid \$2-per-hour pager call-out until his or her service is activated, and then he goes on the full-scale payout.

When one looks at the literally thousands of dollars that a paramedic invests in order to get this training, to remain on a job where you're receiving \$2-per-hour pager call-out simply does not work. Therefore, the paramedic leaves the area and goes to where they can get more full employment within the system, or they simply leave and go to the public system, industry or what have you, where they receive a much more stable and larger remuneration.

I would like to use my riding of Cariboo South as an example to show you the difficulty that arises. There are three remote-designated stations in Clinton, Alexis Creek and Anahim Lake, and there are three rural-designated stations in Ashcroft, 100 Mile House and Williams Lake. Those paramedics stationed at the rural receive \$10-per-hour call-out, and upon receiving a call they then go on to the full scale.

The remote stations are often out of service or they are reduced service because the paramedics do not stay in those areas, and there are not enough to man them 7-24. As an example, in August of 2007 the Alexis Creek station was completely out of service for the entire month. That, in essence, left the entire corridor between Williams Lake and Bella Coola out of service and reduced service for extended periods of time.

It is equally important for those of you that are not familiar with rural settings that those stations that require a call from outside of their areas minimally add an additional one hour of travel time before they begin travelling within their catchment area. There are cases in my riding in which ambulances from the 100 Mile House area have been required to go out into the Chilcotin to respond. That has put an additional two hours of call time to respond, to get to the area where the ambulance is required.

This issue of training and retention is a challenge that exists, and it exists and is felt primarily in the rural parts of the province of British Columbia. There are going to be additional pressures in my riding of Cariboo South as other factors are putting pressure upon the emergency

rooms of both 100 Mile House and Ashcroft to potentially close down, and they have suffered some closures in the immediate past as a result of other issues, increasing the travel time that is likewise necessary for those services to come about.

The third challenge is one of a reliable communication system. Presently, the communications are provided through dispatch centres in Vancouver, Victoria and Kamloops.

[1115]

The Kamloops dispatch station in 2005 was identified by the Ambulance Service as requiring significant upgrades, and the entire system required communication upgrades in order to integrate the communications between the three dispatch centres.

In 2007 the Kamloops station suffered a malfunction and was taken out of service for a period of time. With it being out of service, it now has been relocated to a temporary location. It is time for the province to address the third communication centre. The Kamloops dispatch centre covers the geography of three-quarters of the province of British Columbia. It needs to be brought fully back into service in a proper building, integrated within the entire system. There is no reason, as I can see, why three-quarters of the population of British Columbia have their dispatch severely challenged as a result of information that the province had been aware of for, literally, years.

The fourth challenge that I wish to draw attention to here is that the Lower Mainland ambulance stations are in poor condition. For example, the ambulance station in East Vancouver on West 7th Avenue had been closed while remediation work was being undertaken for mould. There already existed two stations working out of that one location.

Port Moody has a station working in a trailer. New Westminster — their station is in serious disrepair, with no parking. North Vancouver is in a storefront in a care home in Deep Cove. Tsawwassen — a storefront shared with a community policing station. North Vancouver and Surrey — their leases expire in 2010, with no plans in place, to my knowledge.

So as good as the paramedic system is, the ambulance system provides care that matches, when we have an ambulance arrive on scene with a licensed paramedic in place, a service level that is as good as hospitals that are found in many parts of the world.

There are challenges that face the system, and I look forward to hearing from my colleagues from both sides of the House to elaborate upon the importance of the system, as well as to point out the challenges that are facing it and how we can make improvements to it. Thank you for the opportunity to present this to you.

R. Hawes: Thank you to the member for bringing this motion today. I would agree with the member that there are challenges. There are always going to be challenges as

we move ahead and as populations shift all over British Columbia. There are always going to be challenges, but I don't want to concentrate on the service totally.

I want to talk about the individual members, the individual paramedics, that are out there working in British Columbia. I want to speak just for a moment about the leadership that John Strohmaier, the head of the paramedics union has shown, in advancing what I consider to be a really important program that the paramedics of British Columbia are doing on a volunteer basis, and that is to run CPR training in high schools throughout British Columbia.

When I talk to paramedics they tell me that if somebody goes down with a heart attack and they get CPR immediately, the chances of them surviving are increased exponentially. Unfortunately, within our population, not enough people are trained in CPR. So the B.C. paramedics have embarked on a program where they are going into high schools on volunteer time to teach kids CPR, and I think that's a fabulous program. I think it's very important.

I know that some time ago I tried to work with — and I did work with — John Strohmaier to set up a program. We have the Olympics coming, and it just seemed to me that it would be a wise thing for us to be able to say that this is the safest place ever to hold an Olympics in terms of training for people in case you have a heart attack while you're here visiting British Columbia, because we have the most people trained in CPR per capita of anywhere else that's ever hosted an Olympics. I think that's a very laudable goal, and it's one that I know the paramedics are working to try to accomplish.

[1120]

So I just want to spend a couple of minutes of the time that's available to me to laud the individual paramedics that are out there running this kind of a program, to laud the leadership that John Strohmaier is showing in having his paramedics union take on this task. I know they are working with first responders, with the fire departments and police, to bring that program into high schools in British Columbia. I think it's a wonderful thing.

I just wanted to take a moment to compliment them on it. I can tell you that if I have an incident, a heart attack or whatever, I would like a paramedic there to help me. I would first, though, like someone trained in CPR to make sure that I'm still alive by the time the paramedics get there, and the paramedics are helping to ensure that that would happen. Good on them. Keep up the good work.

C. Puchmayr: I know our time is limited here to speak on this very important matter. Paramedics — men and women — who provide this service for British Columbia are such an important part of British Columbia. It's great to have everyone conversant in CPR, but what's very important is that there is a quick response when

paramedics are in need, and that response time is starting to expand. It's starting to get critically long. Some of the reasons that my colleague from Cariboo spelled out earlier are some of the results of government policy that are creating this.

There are going to be some retention issues when you start paying paramedics \$2-an-hour standby time to work as a paramedic when there are actually paramedics in other areas that are coming in to stay in the ambulance station and getting \$10 an hour until such time as there is a call. That is very serious. These are people that we rely on, that our children rely on and that our parents rely on so that there is a quick response and that there is an adequate response, and they are very gifted and very trained.

We've come a long way. In the '70s, when the NDP actually brought in the B.C. Ambulance Service, we went from the snatch-and-grab rush to the hospital — private companies — to a very efficient and life-saving ambulance system that I think we need to retain and preserve. We need to ensure that it's a model for other people in the world to see, and we are seeing it being dismantled piece by piece. We are seeing, certainly, grave concerns with the paramedics. They are speaking to us about concerns.

The quality of worklife for paramedics. Now under the new strains and new stressors that are brought forward, that quality of worklife is creating problems as well. Post-traumatic stress has been taken away as a compensable accident except for extreme cases by WorkSafe British Columbia. That is, again, a policy of this government.

Some paramedics, after many years in service, will suddenly succumb to a post-traumatic stress incident where they're no longer able to go to work, and they need the assistance of the compensation system to acknowledge, to accept, to approve that that is, in fact, something that has to become part of WorkSafe B.C. regulations and has to be part of the workers compensation system. We can't expose people to these stressors and then not look after them when they're affected by them.

In my community I have never seen as many ambulances parked around Royal Columbian Hospital as I do today — way too many ambulances parked there. They need to be available so that when patients need the quick response of our paramedics, they're available. I will yield the floor to other members who wish to speak on this very, very important matter in our province.

J. Nuraney: We can sit and talk and debate about the compensation and wages until our faces get red from discussions of things that are important. But still, one has to look at the overall picture of what the province or the government can afford. Doctors want more. Nurses want more. Paramedics want more. Everybody who is involved in the service needs more money. But one has to be prudent. One has to be cautious. One has to be

rational about how we spend our money and where we spend our money. In spite of having said that, the paramedics have indeed received a 28 percent raise in their wages and benefits in the last few years.

[1125]

Not to take away from the important work that the Ambulance Service and the paramedics do, let us talk about what actual services are now presently offered in British Columbia. The demand for the Ambulance Service has gone up approximately 40 percent in the last eight years. This is because of the aging population that we now have in the province, which has put extra stresses on our health care system, which includes the ambulance services as well.

But we are trying and meeting those demands. There are more ambulance vehicles on the road today. There are more paramedics on staff today, and there are also more people on the payroll than before, servicing this very important emergency service.

More importantly, I think what is also important to understand and talk about is how we have improved the services in the last few years. The paramedics, the Ambulance Service people, have had more training. They are now able to administer the kinds of responses and the kinds of treatments, as first responders, of what they need to do with the patients.

The Ambulance Service, as you know, is called by people who are in dire need, where it's a question of life and death. The people, the paramedics, who first treat these patients, who first make contact with these patients, need to understand the complications. They need to understand where they are or what they are and the kind of training that they need. This training has been enhanced in the last few years. We are much more comfortable now in saying that the paramedics today are able to treat most of the cases that they encounter.

Apart from the paramedics in the Ambulance Service, let's talk about the hospitals and the way the hospitals are now geared to receive these services. Burnaby Hospital recently went through a renovation, where now emergency vehicles can very quickly be off-loaded. There are special areas created so that the patients can be received by specialty nurses, who are there waiting for these patients to arrive.

I am very happy to say that in spite of the challenges that we have in the various sectors of health care, our Ambulance Service is doing well. I want to pay special tribute to the paramedics, who are doing an excellent job.

C. Trevena: I, too, am very pleased to be able to stand today to talk about the importance of the paramedics within our communities. I talked to a paramedic, to say that I was going to be speaking on this issue, and said: "What would your first things be if you could tell the government what your issues were?" He said recruitment and retention, staffing and hiring.

As other members of this House have said, we do rely on paramedics. We do need them, and we do have to also respect them. When we are in a time of need, when we have to call the ambulance, there is no choice. But there is a choice for people who join the service. They can look at other services to go to, other jobs where they will get treated with the dignity and the respect that they need.

In our society, that dignity and respect are equated in pay. We are seeing paramedics working in urban situations who are completely stressed, working exceedingly hard and not getting the recompense that they really need. They say it's sad that it's come to this — that they have to say these things — because they believe in patient care. That's why they've gone into the profession — because they believe in care. They feel that instead of getting the proper care, they are getting what's been described to me as McDonald's wages.

I represent an area that not only has a large urban community but also has very diffuse rural communities, where we rely on the volunteer ambulance people — the people who carry that pager, who are there at a time when they may be with their families on a Saturday night. They will get a paging call, will have to be out and will have to give up their evening, their night, to help the people in their community.

[1130]

They've made that choice, and they've decided that's an important thing to do. But in recompense — and that is, again, how we value people in our society at the moment — they get paid \$2 an hour while they're carrying that pager, until they're called out. That's not a lot of money to have your life effectively on hold all the time that you are on call, particularly when they are also paying thousands of dollars, approximately \$10,000, for their training. This is a huge disincentive — that people have to pay for their training and get in recompense just \$2 an hour while they are there on call, before they're called out.

It's a real problem for retaining people and recruiting people. In rural communities we do rely very much on those people in our communities who are willing to volunteer, who are willing to give the time. Yet the stresses are increasing. We see fewer and fewer people who are willing to participate, willing to take on that responsibility for their neighbours. We're seeing aging populations where there aren't the people available.

I am very pleased that my colleague from Cariboo South brought this motion to us today, so that we could talk about it, and we could recognize the real importance of our Ambulance Service. I think we all acknowledge the importance of our Ambulance Service, but we have to recognize the importance of them every day. These are people who are giving up a lot of time to make sure that we in our communities have the support and the safety we need.

With that, Madam Speaker, I'll allow other people to participate in this very important debate.

D. MacKay: I'm pleased to take my place and debate Motion 41, which was brought forward by the member for Cariboo South. It is an important issue that all of us need to pay attention to.

I couldn't help but listen to the member for Maple Ridge–Mission when he talked about hoping, if he had a heart attack, that somebody that knew how to do CPR was going to be close by to make sure he made it to the hospital or before the paramedic got there. I think that's a very important issue that we probably shouldn't forget about.

I don't know how many members in this chamber have actually had the unfortunate privilege of riding in the back of one of those ambulances because of an accident. I can relate to the importance of the paramedics, having had a moose come through the windshield of my car several years ago. I wound up with a broken neck. I didn't know that until after.

The fact that I was treated properly at the scene by the paramedics — and the fact that I'm standing here today — would attest to the great training that these paramedics have received and continue to receive in our province. They continue to treat the people of this province with a great deal of respect and care, based on the training abilities that they have had provided to them by our province — in all governments. I would touch on.... All governments have provided great training for the paramedics.

When you listen to some of the members from the opposition, you'd think that the place was falling apart. You'd think that the paramedics and the B.C. Ambulance Service were slowly being disintegrated. That's not the case.

I just have to go back to the small community of Houston where, in fact, we are now building, with the help of Northern Health, six new acute care beds in a small community in north-central British Columbia. Part of that redistribution of funds required the B.C. Ambulance Service to relocate. We were going to take over the ambulance bay in the health facility in Houston and provide these six long-term acute care beds.

The Ambulance Service is getting a brand-new facility directly across the street, and that ambulance service will be completed before the renovations start on the acute care beds that are going to be provided, the six beds that will be provided in Houston.

When you sit here and listen to the opposition members say that the B.C. Ambulance Service is slowly being picked apart, that's not the case. The math of the NDP always amazes me. They always say that the health care facilities are being underfunded. They forget about the additional billions of dollars that our government has provided to the health care system, and they always continue to say that the health care has been cut.

You know, if you stop and look at the B.C. Ambulance Service in the last several years, there's been a 65 percent increase in funding to the B.C. Ambulance Service. We've gone from having spent \$181 million in 2001 to just under \$300 million in 2008-2009. That's a dramatic increase in health care funding for the B.C. Ambulance Service.

[1135]

The province understands and appreciates what the paramedics do for all of us in this province. I think it's really unfair to sit here and say that we're not doing anything for the paramedics. We've increased the number of ambulances. We've increased in-hospital paramedics, who are now getting some of the training so that they can keep current with some of the expertise that they've derived from the training they've received.

I understand the motion, and I support the motion the way it's worded. But when I listen to the opposition members, I really have a problem understanding what it is they're saying when they continue to say that the B.C. Ambulance Service is not getting the proper attention.

With that, I will yield the floor.

G. Coons: I rise to support Motion 41. I also want to talk about the ambulance attendants and paramedics, as they are the key to our ambulance service.

The hon. member before me talked about the math. We look at the math of this Liberal government as basically a weapon of "math" destruction. They have no idea what's happening in the Ambulance Service.

Many paramedics I've talked to are dismayed and troubled over the declining state of the Ambulance Service and of morale. Morale is at one of its lowest points. Many in my riding — which includes Prince Rupert, the Queen Charlotte Islands, Stewart, Bella Coola, the Nass Valley — have decided to spend more time with their families instead of continuing to make the personal sacrifices necessary to make the service run.

Some of the key concerns I hear when I talk to the paramedics are the measly pager pay of \$2 that we've heard about and the \$10 standby wage — neither an amount to recruit or retain a workforce.

There's a provincial concern about training for paramedics. They have to put out close to \$5,000 out of their own pocket for their training. At this year's UBCM a resolution was endorsed that requests this government to provide training for paramedics at a minimal cost to the trainee. That's what we would expect from our government.

We must create a positive work experience and environment, where employees are recognized and rewarded for their performance and where everyone shares in the excitement of being a world-class ambulance service.

You know, we haven't seen the Premier rushing out congratulating, shaking hands or hanging gold medals

around the necks of the thousands of volunteer paramedics that work tirelessly on our behalf. No gold medals there; just budget cuts and the arrogant expectation that paramedics have to pay for their own training.

B.C. Ambulance admits they have a recruitment problem. Of course they do. Wages and benefits in the oil patch and in other sectors are significantly better and more tempting than those in the Ambulance Service. But what we get from this government, which knows all the problems, is the same rhetoric — that the \$2-per-hour pager pay and the \$10 per hour is better than it was before.

That's what we expect from a government that has the wrong priorities. They're out of touch with what's really happening in the remote and rural areas of the province.

Just a couple of stories, before I conclude, from paramedics in my riding. This one is from somebody from the Queen Charlotte Islands. He says:

"The lower call volumes in rural and remote B.C. do not allow a person to earn a living as a paramedic, because we are paid per call. Recently I was called out to transfer a patient from Masset hospital to Sandspit Airport. I left home at 7 p.m. and did not return home until past 3 a.m. I am very fortunate that my primary employer let me take the time off. When you count my lost wages, I paid over \$250 for the privilege of working for B.C. Ambulance Service that night. It doesn't make any financial sense to me, but my community needs me."

So there's commitment.

Another paramedic sent me this analogy:

"Forty years ago the Ambulance Service in B.C. was a patchwork of professionals in one city, trained firefighters in another and basic volunteers scooping patients into the back of station wagons, hoping to make it to the distant hospital in time. It can become that patchwork again without too much effort, but at great cost. We must renew the vision for ambulance service."

We in this House must recognize the value of the Ambulance Service and the importance of our paramedics. This government must ensure the funding is there to fully support and improve it.

[1140]

J. Rustad: I just want to start by responding a little bit to the previous speaker from North Coast.

The speaker stands up and talks about budget cuts. I just want to talk about some NDP math. The B.C. Ambulance Service budget has risen by 65 percent, from \$181 million in 2001 to \$298 million. Only the NDP could call that a cut — a 65 percent increase in the budget for them. But of course....

Interjection.

J. Rustad: Exactly. They don't really like hearing the real numbers.

The member for North Coast also raised the issue with regard to wages and benefits. It's interesting to note that the majority of full-time paramedics have received wage and rate adjustments totalling 27 percent since 2001 — 27 percent.

There is no question that the Ambulance Service in this province is critical. It's critical to the health care system, but more importantly, it's critical to anyone who needs the service.

My family had an issue this summer and had to call 911 and had to have an ambulance come in. I can tell you something. When you're waiting a minute, it seems like an hour. But it was within less than five minutes that the ambulance was at the door, and a minute or two after that the other emergency services were at the door and providing the service that was needed. I have to tell you, Madam Speaker, that the professionalism — the work that they have done and that they continue to provide — is second to none. It is absolutely phenomenal.

When we talk about ambulance services and we talk about the paramedics and the services they do provide.... One of the things that we made a commitment to in our throne speech was that we wanted to see paramedics and give them the ability to be able to actually treat minor issues and be able to release — to be able to provide that initial care and not to have to deliver them into the hospital.

We're working towards that, and that will be a huge benefit for the health care system, because it'll help to relieve some of those issues that we have in our emergency rooms and will also help, of course, the patients that are receiving the treatment right then and there.

With regard to emergency rooms, I have to say that the paramedics provide an unbelievable service in there as well. One of the previous speakers talked about seeing ambulances parked at the hospitals. It just so happens that we actually have paramedics now in the hospitals, helping to provide treatment directly in the service. Of course, their ambulance is parked outside when that's happening.

More importantly, I want to talk about one other initiative that we're looking at. The speaker from Cariboo South, who is in the Interior Health area, talks about the time it takes to get patients and travel them back and forth between various facilities.

We've actually got a pilot project, which is going to be starting in the Okanagan in January 2009, to look at providing non-emergency patient transfer services, on a pilot basis for a year, between medical facilities and then releasing in terms of taking patients back home. The intent of this pilot project is to be able to free up some of the time of the paramedics that is needed for other things and to be able to try to have a better delivery of service.

There are a lot of initiatives that we are undertaking with regard to the ambulance services, but I think I want to close with just one more example. In 2005, when I was first elected, one of the earlier events that I had the pleasure of attending was an event at a paramedic facility, at the ambulance station which is close to the hospital in Prince George. That event was there to celebrate the implementation of a 24-hour-a-day, seven-day-a-week standby model in rural stations. The difference that that

has provided for rural B.C. is a 13 percent improvement in response time.

We have done a lot with paramedics, and I am pleased to stand here and support paramedics, because they do provide an incredible service in this province. I look forward to continuing to work with them in the years to come.

N. Simons: I would like to thank the member for Cariboo South for bringing this important issue to the House today and to thank my colleagues for their considered thoughts on this issue. I believe that really, we're all interested in making sure that citizens in this province have access to emergency medical services when required.

[1145]

I'll speak briefly about my particular constituency, which has a variety of Ambulance Service setups, from the urban areas of Sechelt to the very remote areas like Pender Harbour, Madeira Park and Egmont.

The issues they're facing are obviously related to the fact that it's very difficult to recruit and retain people who are dedicated to the profession of paramedics, who will be paid \$2 an hour for the first big chunk of their time once they're assigned to a station. My concerns in the rural parts of this province are that they are being expected to live in an area where response times will be lower, and when the responses occur, they'll be attended by people with less experience than in the larger areas.

Now, of course, we're not talking about whether or not we support the paramedics. Of course we support paramedics. We have to do more than simply say that we support them and we congratulate them for what they do. We also have to recognize that that is a profession that requires the support of the community.

I think that right off the bat, in order to recruit people, we can't say: "Come on over here. You pay us five grand, and you can get this certification upon which, upon graduation, we'll expect you to, every weekend, take a three-hour drive from Vancouver up to Madeira Park, spend 48 hours getting \$2 an hour and make your way back to the city."

This is not the best way to introduce paramedics to their chosen profession. Nor is it the best way to ensure that citizens in the Madeira Park area on the Sunshine Coast have access to quality and response times that are appropriate for their medical needs. Many people in my constituency wonder how it is that this government will simply talk about what they think are the issues when, in fact, the people in the communities are more likely to know more specifically what the issues that they face are.

So I would hope that this discussion, instead of creating defensiveness on the part of the government side, actually creates a stimulus for them to have a look at the system and to see how it can be improved, because right

now there are certainly crises in our communities across this province — and in our rural parts of the province in particular — that are suffering from the lack of action by government when it comes to properly providing for ambulance services here.

H. Bloy: I'd like to thank the member for bringing this forward. I'd like to thank John Strohmaier, the executive director of the B.C. paramedics. I know that he has been a strong advocate for many years on all the causes, and I really thank him for volunteering his members and running the program in high schools to teach CPR. But I want to talk about another way of how we can help the paramedics, and I want to talk about my city, Burnaby — how we can help them.

We have the professional firefighters there, and they are first responders. I've brought the professional firefighters and the professional firefighters union to Victoria to meet with the Minister of Health, because I would like to see the firefighters have all the same rights and responsibilities as paramedics so that when they go out to an ambulance.... Right now there can be a bit of a turf war out there between ambulance and firefighters in E-Comm.

There's one sad story where someone was stabbed outside a local pub, and ten minutes later the people, after calling 911, ran half a block down the street to get the firefighters. They didn't know about it. We have these trained professionals there, these trained professional firefighters that are there to serve every citizen in the riding.

This should not be a turf war. This should be another level of support that we can provide to all the citizens in all the communities. This backup support will be there for a long time. The professional firefighters are well trained and have all the knowledge, and the majority of them have completed the courses on first responder.

I would like to see this move forward to support the paramedics. I support the great job that they do. They have such a diverse area, as British Columbia is so big — trying to reach into the urban areas where the member who brought this forward is, to be able to provide the services for all the citizens. I believe that we have an added advantage in the urban areas by using professional firefighters as first responders with all the rights entitled to it.

[1150]

N. Macdonald: Madam Chair, it's good to see you.

The paramedics of the B.C. Ambulance Service provide one of the most challenging and important services there is to the people of British Columbia. The provincial government has an obligation, therefore, to manage properly. They need to think through changes. They need to make sure that they consult meaningfully. They need to make sure that they plan.

The government required paramedics to stay at the station for \$10 per hour in rural British Columbia. There were a couple of mistakes that they made in introducing that idea. It meant that they needed to stay at stations that were not adequately designed for them to stay overnight.

In particular, in my area in Revelstoke you had for the past three years paramedics forced to stay in motels, then in an industrial garage. It was an incredibly difficult thing for those paramedics to do. They did an excellent job, but the government has an obligation to think these things through and make sure that it doesn't happen.

The other problem with staying at the station for rural areas, paramedics tell me, is that there are fewer incidences and there's less work. But when it is time, very often it is a critically important incident like an accident on the Trans-Canada Highway. Paramedics are forced to take very low wages and then deal with extremely difficult types of accidents. So paramedics are drawn away to places like the tar sands, to construction, to urban areas, where they can be paid properly for the skills that they have, and they leave rural areas with huge retention issues.

The other issue that has been touched on but is critically important is the cost of training put on individuals. This government changed the rules so that it costs approximately \$5,000 for somebody to pay to be trained, and that is money that is very difficult to recoup.

[Mr. Speaker in the chair.]

Therefore, you do not have people attracted to this profession, and you have areas that are left with very few paramedics. In fact, what the government is starting to do is allow paramedics with very limited training, and it's simply the wrong direction and unfair to everyone involved.

What has happened over the past four years — and members will know — is that the NDP, communities, paramedics and their unions have fought for paramedics consistently. We fought in Kimberley for greater safety for paramedics, and we've succeeded. We fought for a full-time position. We succeeded. In Canal Flats we fought for recognition in training. We succeeded. In Invermere for full salaried positions, in Golden for conditions that will bring more to the service, in Revelstoke for a proper purpose-built ambulance station — we succeeded. The NDP, in its rural caucus, has fought for improvements to the Kamloops call-out centre.

Paramedics do a difficult job, and they do it well. Government needs to stop letting them down.

V. Roddick: Recently I was extremely honoured to help deliver awards to a fascinating provincewide competition between paramedic teams acting out various emergency scenarios at the Delta Town and Country hotel. We are hugely indebted to the incredible commitment and professionalism of the B.C. Ambulance Service.

I would like to just follow up on the inability of the NDP to do even simple math. So \$298 million is what we have put in for 2008-09, compared to \$181 million in 2001-02. That's \$117 million more — more money.

Since 2003-04 the number of full- and part-time paramedics employed by the B.C. Ambulance Service has grown by almost 25 percent. Some 3,471 serve B.C. compared to 2,785 then. Today 470 ambulances and 41 support vehicles are on the streets, compared to 457 and 27 units in 2003-04. Delta, for example, has a new transfer ambulance out on the road.

[1155]

In 2005 the BCAS implemented a 24-7 standby model in rural stations, which resulted in a 13 percent improvement in response times, and we pay for that standby time.

BCAS is reporting a 20 percent increase in the cardiac arrest survival rates, attributed to the treatment provided by the BCAS paramedics and CPR instructions given to bystanders over the telephone.

Since April 2001 the majority of full-time paramedics have received wage and rate adjustments totalling almost 27 percent.

I would also like to reiterate what my colleague said — that in-house paramedics have been implemented at the BCAS suggestion on how to improve emergency room care. Dispatch technology is being implemented. Medi-Van has been awarded to help non-emergency patient transportation.

To wrap up, in June of this year I myself needed the services of the B.C. Ambulance Service. It was exemplary. British Columbia is well served by these dedicated women and men.

L. Krog: I will be brief as I do note the hour this morning.

Firstly, like all other members, I wish to recognize the incredible efforts of the men and women who work in the B.C. Ambulance Service. They face situations every day requiring incredible stamina. They face people in crisis,

the sick, the injured, sometimes the dying and sometimes the dead. They are to be honoured for that work.

I can't help but note this morning the many history lessons of the members opposite. I want to remind the members opposite that the B.C. Ambulance Service was a creation of the government of Dave Barrett, along with other great creations that this government doesn't seem to honour or respect.

Let's go back a generation. Let's talk about B.C. Hydro and B.C. Ferries and B.C. Rail — all creations of former governments that this government has chosen to dishonour by not effectively supporting something that is important and valuable to the people of British Columbia.

Prior to Dave Barrett organizing the B.C. Ambulance Service, the ambulance service in this province was a hodgepodge — a mess. What Dave Barrett created in the B.C. Ambulance Service was a service that became a model that was examined around the world and formed that model.

I want to conclude my remarks by recognizing that the time is near for the luncheon break, but this government needs to recognize and put its money where its mouth is and support the B.C. Ambulance Service so that rural British Columbians, who now don't get the service they deserve, get the service they deserve. They deserve to be as confident in their beds as every other urban British Columbian.

L. Krog moved adjournment of debate.

Motion approved.

Hon. B. Penner moved adjournment of the House.

Motion approved.

Mr. Speaker: This House stands adjourned until 1:30 this afternoon.

The House adjourned at 11:59 a.m.

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