

Legislative
Assembly
of Ontario



Assemblée
législative
de l'Ontario

**Official Report
of Debates
(Hansard)**

No. 57B

**Journal
des débats
(Hansard)**

N° 57B

1st Session
43rd Parliament
Monday
27 March 2023

1^{re} session
43^e législature
Lundi
27 mars 2023

Speaker: Honourable Ted Arnott
Clerk: Todd Decker

Président : L'honorable Ted Arnott
Greffier : Todd Decker

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House Publications and Language Services
Room 500, West Wing, Legislative Building
111 Wellesley Street West, Queen's Park
Toronto ON M7A 1A2
Telephone 416-325-7400
Published by the Legislative Assembly of Ontario



Service linguistique et des publications parlementaires
Salle 500, aile ouest, Édifice du Parlement
111, rue Wellesley ouest, Queen's Park
Toronto ON M7A 1A2
Téléphone, 416-325-7400
Publié par l'Assemblée législative de l'Ontario

ISSN 1180-2987

CONTENTS / TABLE DES MATIÈRES

Monday 27 March 2023 / Lundi 27 mars 2023

ORDERS OF THE DAY / ORDRE DU JOUR

**Building a Strong Ontario Act (Budget Measures),
2023, Bill 85, Mr. Bethlenfalvy / Loi de 2023 visant
à bâtir un Ontario fort (mesures budgétaires),
projet de loi 85, M. Bethlenfalvy**

Ms. Catherine Fife	3101
Mr. Anthony Leardi.....	3109
MPP Jamie West.....	3109
Mr. Rick Byers	3109
Mr. Joel Harden	3110
Mr. Sheref Sabawy	3110
Mr. Chris Glover.....	3110
Mr. Graham McGregor.....	3110
Mr. Lorne Coe	3112
Mr. Chris Glover.....	3113
Ms. Lisa MacLeod.....	3113
MPP Jamie West.....	3114
Mr. Anthony Leardi.....	3114
Mr. Joel Harden	3114
Mr. Anthony Leardi.....	3115
MPP Jamie West.....	3115
Mr. Rick Byers	3118
Ms. Sandy Shaw	3119
Mr. Sheref Sabawy	3119
Mr. Joel Harden	3119
Mr. Sheref Sabawy	3120
Ms. Stephanie Bowman.....	3120
Second reading debate deemed adjourned.....	3121

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
OF ONTARIO

Monday 27 March 2023

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE
DE L'ONTARIO

Lundi 27 mars 2023

Report continued from volume A.

1541

ORDERS OF THE DAY

BUILDING A STRONG ONTARIO ACT
(BUDGET MEASURES), 2023
LOI DE 2023 VISANT À BÂTIR
UN ONTARIO FORT
(MESURES BUDGÉTAIRES)

Resuming the debate adjourned on March 27, 2023, on the motion for second reading of the following bill:

Bill 85, An Act to implement Budget measures and to amend various statutes / Projet de loi 85, Loi visant à mettre en oeuvre les mesures budgétaires et à modifier diverses lois.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutla Karpoche): I'm going to give the members a moment to exit the chamber before we resume debate.

Further debate?

Ms. Catherine Fife: It's a pleasure for me to join the debate on budget 2023. Last Thursday was a very interesting day, I have to say. It was our leader's first budget. There was a lot of ramping up about how great this budget was going to be, and it was quite something to see what's actually in the budget bill.

I do want to start off by saying this government has now established a very disturbing pattern of not being completely transparent about where the funding is going and the actual spending versus what actually happens in the budget. And the budget, actually, for this government, I don't know if—

Interjections.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutla Karpoche): Order, please.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

The government, for their budget—they're becoming increasingly untransparent, and I'm going to explain why this is so concerning, Madam Speaker. The budget pattern that actually has been tracked by the Financial Accountability Officer of Ontario bears little resemblance to the government's actual spending, as several FAO reports have pointed out. And I do want to say why this is so important. That is because in Westminster democracies, budgets are supposed to be approved by the Legislature. But with the government's habit of hoarding cash in massive contingency funds and making radical in-year changes to the spending plan, the Legislature increasingly

cannot trust that the budget presented will be what the government actually spends. There is a pattern of behaviour here.

When the Financial Accountability Officer basically says to the government, "You promised to spend this much in health care and education"—

Interjections.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutla Karpoche): I apologize to the member for interrupting. I'm going to ask members to please take your side conversations outside. Thank you.

The member from Waterloo.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Move it along. Okay. Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

The Legislature cannot hold the government to account. And why does this matter, Madam Speaker? It's because there is an accountability function that the official opposition has—

Interjections.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutla Karpoche): The government side will come to order.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Move it along. Come on. Be respectful. I had to listen to what you had to say. You can listen or you can leave.

Interjections.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutla Karpoche): Order. The member from Waterloo has the floor. I'd like to be able to hear the debate without any interruptions. Thank you.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Thank you.

The lack of transparency, I would argue, is bad for democracy. The Financial Accountability Officer actually measures the expenditures of the government based on your own budget. This government hasn't even been able to follow their own budget from 2021-22, Madam Speaker, and this has left shortfalls. This is the equivalent of underspending on certain very important ministries. When there is a lack of transparency, there is a lack of trust. Trust matters in our democracy, I would say, and it's so important. It's important to us, anyway.

In the new budget document, table 3.4 shows a bunch of further revisions to the government's spending plan for the 2022-23 fiscal year. We actually learned that in the last quarter the government failed to spend an additional \$570 million in cash that had been budgeted for health, education, children's and social services. These latest spending reductions are on top of the \$6.4 billion in underspending from the 2022-23 FAO report in the Q3 Expenditure Monitor.

It's really interesting, because the finance minister joined us, his respective critics, on The Agenda on Thursday night. The finance minister said about the FAO, "Well, he's got a crystal ball." It actually, Madam Speaker, is a true expenditure monitor. In every quarter, the Financial Accountability Officer reports what the government did spend or didn't spend. It's the not-spending, not-investing part which is actually causing the people of this province a considerable amount of pain.

People in this province are hurting. They were looking for some relief from this budget. They were looking for an acknowledgement that housing prices are out of control, that people are getting evicted, rents are going up. Housing is sometimes between 60% and 70% of one's income, which doesn't leave a lot of money for the other things like food and the other bills.

I have to say, when I heard the finance minister say, "Well, you know, the FAO has got some kind of a crystal ball," I really felt that that was in some ways derogatory, because the FAO is independent. They are non-partisan. There are some really good people who work there, very smart people, and they track the funding. We've always said, follow the money. If you follow the money, you'll follow the real priorities of this government.

In this instance, Madam Speaker, this was a budget that missed the moment. It missed the moment that this province is experiencing right now. I'm going to talk about housing, health care, education and child care, and then a couple of the other issues that the government sort of snuck into this budget around reduction in services for seniors and eye exams, and also changing the policy around uninsured Ontarians and their ability to access health care, which is, I would argue, one of our core values as a province.

But I'm not the only one who was disappointed in the budget. I'm going to read from the Toronto Star editorial board. They start off by saying Thursday's budget "was a complacent mishmash," and "if it was uninspired and unimaginative, it was also largely unmemorable...."

"The Premier—who often empathizes with the many serious problems facing Ontarians—seems to have been sufficiently comfy with things as they are that he and" the finance minister "proposed to do nothing particularly dramatic about them."

Our leader, the Leader of the Official Opposition, they go on to say, "was not wrong when she said it was a budget that 'fails to meet the moment.'"

"With ... plenty of runway until his next appointment with voters, Ford might have been expected to use this window for bold initiatives.

"But there was no such sense of urgency that the crunch facing Ontarians was more than they should be expected to bear." There was no urgency or recognition that the people of this province are experiencing great duress in this province, Madam Speaker.

The editorial goes on to say, "If this budget were a Christmas present, it would be a three-pack of white socks. Not entirely useless. But an exercise in going through the motions.

"Overall, there was clanging dissonance between the budget's palpable self-satisfaction and the economic anxiety, rising interest rates, soaring prices, health care concerns that have hit Ontario residents hard."

This is why, when I first commented on this budget, I said very clearly, I have never seen a government so gleefully celebrate mediocrity, Madam Speaker.

The editorial goes on to say, "The finance minister continued, instead, to build up his contingency funds for rainy days or unexpected emergencies. While perhaps prudent, it also appears to leave a lot of current needs unaddressed."

1550

This is the missed opportunity, Madam Speaker, to actually speak to the people of this province, to demonstrate that the government has been listening and watching and paying attention. Literally, the lack of investment on the housing front is a concerning indicator that this government thinks that somehow the private sector is going to take care of the housing crisis. Meanwhile, you have Bill 23 on the books, which prevents municipalities from actually coming to the table in true partnership—but more on that a little bit later.

This editorial goes on to say about the budget, "It was surely not unreasonable to have expected a more robust response to the squeeze Ontario residents are feeling in the emergency room or at the grocery store." I have to say, the fact that we've had so many ER closures—more than any other province, more than any other time in the history of the province—when people go to an emergency room, they expect it to be open. They expect it to be staffed. They expect the resources to be there, because they're in a crisis. That's why it's called an emergency room, Madam Speaker. The fact that this budget did not address some of these very emotional concerns that people have in Ontario was quite stunning.

It goes on to say, "Overall, the 186-page budget lacked focus, over-arching purpose or—even with the unexpected tax windfall"—because this is the thing, Madam Speaker: Because inflation is so high, the revenue that's coming in on goods and services in this province has never been higher. This government is benefiting from the hard-working people of Ontario. At the very least, you could have (1) acknowledged that and (2) passed on some of that windfall to actually make their lives easier around cost of living.

Interjection.

Ms. Catherine Fife: This is the lens that we would be looking at this budget for.

So they had an unexpected tax windfall: "any appetite for tackling the pressing social needs of the moment" was not solidified. "If it was to be summed up in a word, there's a currently popular one that works.

"Meh."

There you go. That's the Toronto Star editorial.

I think people were concerned that it was going to be an austerity budget, a true cut-and-slash budget. I have to say, the government really could not have gone down that full road, because the health care system is running bare-

bones. The education system: We just brought a motion to the floor of the Legislature about how school boards have had to absorb COVID-related costs, and now they've dipped into their reserves. They've used their reserves. The government had \$600 million allocated; that money did not flow to school boards, which is why they used their reserves.

This dissonance that was happening between the Minister of Education and some of our very educated members on this side, who have brought the voices of school boards and parents and students to this place—speaking truth to power, I might say—is becoming a common pattern. And it's not based on ideology, not at all; it's based on facts on the ground, what's really happening in our school system.

There is a general concern that this government can say, "This is the biggest budget in the world, in the universe"—they can say that, but at the very end of the day, the value of the budget and the paper that it's written on is where the money actually gets out the door to communities. What we've seen is that this government has been pooling all those contingency funds—and they've done it again this year: \$4 billion they've planned for.

We started this year off with \$4.6 billion in a contingency fund that has slowly dissipated over the course of the year; now it sits at \$1.75 billion. But the concerning thing, Madam Speaker, is that we don't know where that money has gone, and that's a lot of money. We know where it hasn't gone. We know that schools are still struggling. We know that schools are still struggling. We know that child care centres will not be able to open without staff. We know that the health care system has seen a record number of ER closures. We know the wait-list for mental health services has never been higher. And the mental health services sector came to the government and they said, "Listen. We're well past a crisis here. We are well past needing desperate funding right now. We needed it five years ago when you cut the \$333 million from mental health." They said, "An 8% increase? We can stretch those dollars; we can make sure that that money gets to the people that need it." And what does this government do? Five per cent.

It really is incredible to me that this government will focus on a highway to nowhere at a cost of minimum \$10 billion, but knowing that people are hurting so drastically, Madam Speaker—there's the pain and the suffering of folks who are waiting for mental health services, but there's also the lost productivity to the economy. This is the government that says they'll care about the economy. Invest and put the full amount into mental health services. Give people a fighting chance in this province. Did that happen? No, it did not.

The lack of transparency in the funding—I mean, I'll say I was the finance critic also under the Liberals and they had a few interesting accounting tricks that they did. But eventually we could get through them by the Auditor General, and the FAO would point out that there were cost discrepancies. But this government? No province in Canada has an unallocated contingency fund to the degree

that this province has. And it's clearly a workaround, right? They're not bringing these items to the floor of this Legislature. There is no debate on where those billions of dollars are going. There's no evidence or research to prove that those investments are needed. And so these unallocated contingency funds are now a well-established pattern of this government and hugely concerning to those sectors and those jurisdictions that really had come to the table through the whole finance committee budget process—libraries, for instance. The return on investment for libraries cannot be countered and they have not seen an increase in 25 years. They've stretched those dollars as far as you can stretch them.

Then there are a few items I'm just going to mention because it ties in with the lack of transparency piece. One budget line we're spending is going to zero is the COVID-19 measures and such measures were reported separately in the previous three budgets, so we could actually see—especially when those federal dollars were transferred to Ontario during the height of the pandemic—that that money was coming here. But going forward, any future COVID measures the government maintains will be reported through the general budget for the Ministry of Health. So this is once again a true lack of transparency.

Please note that why this COVID funding is so important to see in a stand-alone line is that the COVID pandemic is not over. COVID is airborne, and the Ontario Nurses' Association in their pre-budget brief was asking the government still three years since the beginning of the pandemic for the appropriate PPE. They are still asking for N95 masks in all hospitals. The fact that this line is just going to be—I almost said another word that would be very unparliamentary, but this funding just got eaten up into the massive Ministry of Health budget. It's going into the black hole, essentially, Madam Speaker. And I think we should have learned some important lessons about the pandemic and about being prepared and about prevention, and that's what PPE provides to the very people that you call heroes. But now, as ONA has said, we still need access to this equipment.

The other part is that seniors today—my office has been flooded, because we have a very engaged population in Waterloo. I'm sure my colleagues have very—when people get mad, they call you. And seniors in Ontario today are very, very unhappy with this government. In fact, they're seeing red after the government reduced their OHIP-covered eye services. It's part of a new agreement.

1600

The Minister of Health blamed the Ontario Association of Optometrists this morning. I'm going to go talk to my optometrist, because I have such a good relationship with my optometrist, because this government has failed to get a contract for five years. But now, they're celebrating that they got a contract, but they had to serve up seniors in Ontario. And we know that prevention, particularly with eye care, matters. You have to catch these issues very, very quickly, and regularly monitoring of eye care matters. That's what the optometrists of Ontario say.

This morning, the Minister of Health was mocking our critic, saying, “Are you an expert?” Well, she’s not an expert, but she’s quoting experts. Whereas the Minister of Health is saying, “We had to get a deal. We had to get a deal by serving up seniors and cutting their OHIP services for eye care.”

This is what our leader had said: “Preventative eye care is important to catching issues early and could impact seniors’ ability to live independently.” We care about that. “Only seniors who can afford to pay out of pocket will be able to get more frequent eye exams.” This is a huge problem, Madam Speaker.

And when I asked my question this morning of the finance minister, I said, “Listen, are you going to be amenable to changing this budget bill, because right now, it’s nowhere good enough?” And we will come to the table with solutions, and those solutions actually will be informed by the people of this province. For instance, at budget committee, when we were in Sudbury, when we were in Ottawa, when we were in Kenora, nurse practitioners proposed to this government that—you know that 2.1 million Ontarians do not have a doctor—2.1 million people in this province. They proposed—I think there’s in the pipeline now nine nurse-practitioner-led community health care centres. Each nurse practitioner takes 900 people off of a wait-list in a community, and I’m thinking also of those northern and rural communities that are so desperate for a family care physician. And did the government listen? No. You had a solution right here which actually would have made so many people very happy, especially in primarily Conservative ridings, to be honest with you. When we were up Kenora, they said, “Listen, this would be a very quick solution, and this is the kind of comprehensive holistic care that would make a big difference to that community.”

When people don’t have family physicians—for instance, I was just up at the emergency room in Fergus yesterday. I met an amazing nurse practitioner, who took very good care of the people under her supervision. She told me the story of a fellow who came in with a seriously separated shoulder that needed to be readjusted and there needed to be an X-ray, but this fellow didn’t have a family physician. So she had to refer him to an orthopedic surgeon just so there would be some follow-up. So there’s a cost to not ensuring that people have access to that direct medical care, and it’s more costly, I would say, at the end of the day. So from eye care to nurse practitioners, there are real missed opportunities for this government to acknowledge what’s happening in Ontario.

The other health program on the chopping block was a pandemic-prompted plan that covered the cost of physicians and hospitals that cared for the uninsured. This morning, the health minister kind of contradicted herself, actually, because she said, “This is not true. This program is not being cancelled.” But then she also admitted that it was time-specific and that it was tied to the pandemic. We know, from the Ontario Medical Association, that the notice went out on Friday, and they are seeing red about this—or seeing blue; I don’t know. They actually have

said, and this is direct quote from one of the doctors: “Cancelling this program harms the most marginalized including those uninsured solely due to mental health challenges, addiction and/or no fixed address.” This was from Dr. Warner.

This program comes to an end at the end of March 31. It will hurt the most vulnerable in Ontario, especially the undocumented and homeless—this is a fact. And I have to say, given the state of the increased number of people in Ontario who are homeless—there are encampments in Sudbury, in Waterloo region, in Toronto, in Hamilton. AMO said this last week. They said, “Listen, people are living in tents in the woods in Canada. And they’re not camping for the fun of it. They are out there in a tent because they have no other options.”

So it’s kind of understandable sometimes people would lose their health card. They have no fixed address. You can’t say, “Third tree to the left.” That’s not an address. You can’t get a health card like that. For the love of humanity—I mean, we used to be a caring and compassionate province. We used to recognize when people were hurting, they should at the very least access basic health care.

And there are really good projects that are happening. I mean, down here at the University Health Network hospital, they’re actually planning on building housing because they recognize that housing is health care. They recognize that, and we heard that from doctors in Ottawa, doctors in Windsor and doctors here in Toronto. Housing is health care. People cannot stay healthy or get healthy if they don’t have shelter—and that shelter has to be supportive as well.

So at the end of the day, you have these two really egregious reductions in services: to the most vulnerable and also to seniors. I don’t know how you can square this when you say, “We value our seniors in Ontario.” Anyway, the seniors are mad. They’re calling us. They’re likely going to come here as well. One lady said this to me: “My eyesight is my independence, and I want my eyesight to remain as strong as possible so that I can still drive, so that I can live independently.” Because we also know that seniors are absolutely terrified of ending in any kind of a long-term or assisted-living situation. They saw what happened to their family and friends, and they’re going to do anything to avoid going into long-term care, Madam Speaker.

I also want to say that I was listening this morning to, I believe, the finance minister and the two parliamentary assistants, and they started talking about how much they value nurses. And I can’t stress this enough: When you do that, you are actually only making nurses angry because nurses are demoralized right now in the province of Ontario with Bill 124 still on the books. It’s an unconstitutional piece of legislation. You’re wasting more tax dollars fighting it in court—I think that this is maybe the 15th or 16th court case. And what they have said is that they’ve had it and they’re going to leave.

And this is actually from their pre-budget submission: “Stop the privatization of Ontario’s health care system.”

And they point to agency nursing as a major issue in Ontario, and we actually heard this. One nurse up in Kenora said that it is untenable to be working as a nurse on a floor and then have an agency nurse working right alongside you, having no real connection in particular to the work of that patient because they have just been called in on a temporary basis, and then actually find out that they're making two, three times as much money as you. I mean, you want to say insulting—there are various expletives that I could put before insulting. But honestly, I mean the Ontario Nurses' Association has said this is so disrespectful—ultimately so disrespectful—and they went on to say, “Require employers to exhaust all avenues to meet the needs with current staff and hospitals in long-term care through call-ins and offering overtime.” That's not happening right now, Madam Speaker. They've also said, “Cap the percentage usage of agency nurses overall at a workplace and in each unit,” and “Work towards phasing out agency nursing completely.” This was part of their pre-budget consultation. None of this was taken into account.

And in their press release, they had some interesting comments I'm just going to read from my phone:

1610

“The ... government's provincial budget released today continues the march toward private, for-profit health care at the expense of Ontarians' health and pocketbooks, says the Ontario Nurses' Association (ONA).

“ONA and our 68,000 front-line nurses and health care professionals continue to witness the detrimental impacts of this government's policy decisions on patients and those who care for them,” says ONA interim provincial president Bernie Robinson....

“This budget is the latest attack on public health care from this Conservative government. From the unconstitutional wage-cut law Bill 124, to the deregulation of health care providers in Bill 60, and now this budget, it is clear that” this Premier “is determined to destroy public health care in favour of enriching for-profit providers anxious to get their hands into the pockets of Ontario taxpayers. The budget lacks adequate funding for our public health care system while handing money to private clinics and private home-care providers....

“We hope this government's single-minded agenda to prioritize privatization over the accessibility, affordability, and quality of our health care is clear to all Ontarians.... We are seeing the destruction of a service that all Canadians value and rely on—we hope there are alarm bells ringing for taxpayers, and that they are motivated to join nurses and health care professionals in stopping this dangerous plan.”

Those are strong words from the Ontario Nurses' Association. They came and presented, and they came and presented with solutions as well. One of the solutions—because, I mean, we have 100 publicly funded hospitals in the province of Ontario. This was their recommendation to address the gap in funding:

“Permanently raise the annual funding escalator for Ontario hospitals and acute care facilities by a minimum

of 7%”—this government has a 1% increase—“and commit to an increase in hospital funding of 15% in this year's budget to address inflation and the capacity crisis. In order to meet estimated annual increases in cost pressures, pre-pandemic, with binding targets to eliminate hallway health care, the annual funding escalator must keep up with existing pressures.”

They go on to really ask a very basic simple thing that we should all be very invested in right now, having gone through three years of a really challenging time in the health care system, and this is an ask for the province to fund public health programs and services at 100%. Municipalities ask for 75-25; they wanted to go back to that. They are being very cautious at AMO with this government these days. Who knows what else is coming down the pipeline?

But the Ontario Nurses' Association has also asked for one other serious thing, and that was to repeal Bill 218, “which shields long-term-care owners and operators from liability for their negligence during the COVID-19 pandemic.” It's really unconscionable stuff that we are protecting the very people who abandoned our seniors in long-term care during that very challenging time.

So here you have a government who says, “We really value nurses,” but you actively “disrespect” them with Bill 124. That's their own words. The other word is “humiliating.” They say that Bill 124 is humiliating for them and poses a huge stress on the entire system because—and this is one of the big lessons that we heard as well during the finance committee budget consultation: You can talk about building beds; those beds will never open because there won't be a nurse to open them. In fact, we had a recent example of the government funding eight beds, but actually having to lay off eight nurses because the funding is gone because the funding cost pressures on hospitals are so high. And that's, in turn, connected to the fact that so many people in Ontario don't have a family doctor or a nurse practitioner, and so they're using the emergency room as their gateway into the health care system. As I just told you, sometimes that gateway is very, very expensive because you need someone to follow up with patients.

At the end of the day, on the health care file, this government had the money. I think that's probably the most emotional piece about it. This government had the money to invest strategically in the health care crisis.

One is that you address the human resources health care piece by respecting the very people that work in our hospitals. That would be a really good first step. And then, you actually invest the services.

So instead of opening up a parallel private, for-profit system, sometimes operating within our own health care system, like contracting out our surgical suites to corporations—I believe that's happening in Ottawa. Instead of that happening, you respect the people, you make sure that the nurses and the health care professionals are respected, and that they are paid appropriately and compensated for very difficult jobs, and then you open the surgical units past 3:30 on a Thursday, and you use the resources that we have at our disposal to take care of people. I know it's a

wild concept, that you actually make use of the resources that you have, but the options and the solutions are there, and we're going to continue to push this government to recognize what those solutions and options are.

The other issue that this government missed the mark on entirely—and to the media's credit, the finance minister really was challenged on the housing file. They said, "Where is the housing plan? Where is the housing plan?" Because Bill 23 has already proven to not be effective as a housing motivator.

I have to go back—I mean, AMO, to their credit, had some pretty strong words for this government, for really good reason, I would say. They said that they still appreciate the "commitment to 'keeping municipalities whole' to maintain the ability to fund housing enabling infrastructure but" are "disappointed to continue to see no marked progress on what that commitment will be."

Municipalities are in the lurch right now in Ontario. They're waiting to hear from the minister, from the finance minister, from the Premier: How is this government going to make municipalities whole so that infrastructure can actually happen? To date, they haven't received any clarity on that. I think many people thought the clarity would be in the budget document, that there would be a line that said, "We're going to invest this \$1 billion"—because that's what AMO has said Bill 23 is going to cost them in development charges.

Bill 23, as you know, "proposes numerous changes to the Development Charges Act and Planning Act"—this is from their deputation—"that, if passed, will significantly impact how municipal governments recover the costs associated with growth."

They go on to say:

"The cumulative impact of proposed changes to municipal fees and charges is significant and contrary to the widely accepted concept that growth should pay for growth.

"While AMO would like to support the province's housing objectives, it cannot support changes that largely place the burden of carrying the costs associated with development onto municipalities. AMO believes that the proposed changes may contradict the goal of building more housing in the long-term as it merely shifts the financial burden of growth-related infrastructure onto existing taxpayers."

So given all the cost-of-living pressures—wages have not kept pace, housing prices are up, public sector workers have been capped at 1% and are leaving the province, out-migration is a huge issue. On top of all of that, Madam Speaker, now, because of Bill 23, local property taxes are going to go up. We actually saw that across the board in the province of Ontario, including in my own region of Waterloo. And it speaks to the process. For so many years I've said to the government of the day, when you have a flawed process, you get a flawed piece of legislation.

In this instance we did travel, I think at great expense to the taxpayer. We travelled around this province: 11 different cities. This is a whole show, and then, of course, the government did their own show on the finance committee and decided to host their own consultations. We

don't know what was said in those meetings, Madam Speaker, because we weren't invited to those meetings.

1620

But I will say that AMO came to the last spot. The last one was Barrie. They pointed out that "the cumulative impact of proposed changes to municipal fees and charges is significant and contrary to the widely accepted concept that growth should pay for growth."

I had to say that twice, because this is a significant shift, and this is not how you answer a crisis on housing. You don't remove the tools from the tool box if you're trying to build something good for the people of this province. Municipalities, all 444 of them, have come to this government and successive governments and said, "Listen, we want to work in partnership with you." What does this government do? They take away some infrastructure funding which would help them help you. I know there's a line from a movie that was quite amusing, but this is not amusing, unfortunately.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: "Show me the money."

Ms. Catherine Fife: Yes.

Just to finish that point, though, usually I would argue that process matters. We did do the process, but this government still didn't listen, so I can't even use that analogy anymore, because we had a fulsome process of consultations. Informed people came to those committee meetings. They brought solutions from doctors, from environmentalists, from child care, from educators. Good people came out and shared their time and expertise with this government, and this government decided not to listen.

Municipalities were one of those. This is from their pre-budget delegation, and it was quite something: "Municipalities are attempting to make sense of the government's response to the housing supply crisis brought about by the COVID-19 demand spike. And AMO will continue to shine a light on what it believes is wrong with legislative changes that are built on a false premise. The provincial government's assertion that the housing supply crisis can be solved by limiting municipal access to infrastructure funding, eliminating environmental protections or changes to municipal governance is unsound.

"Unless the costs of Bill 23 are fully offset by the province, it will account to a transfer of a billion dollars a year from the pockets of property taxpayers, including low-income property taxpayers, into the pockets of developers with little prospect of improved affordability." So why would the government—

Ms. Sandy Shaw: A billion dollars.

Ms. Catherine Fife: A \$1-billion download to the taxpayers of this province during, one could say, record-high inflationary rates, huge challenges that are happening right now in Ontario.

But then they go on to say—I mean, they're still trying. God love them, right? They're still trying. They're going to "call on the province for a commitment to work with municipalities on the implementation of these legislative changes," and "to provide clarity about the province's commitment to fully offset the financial losses" associated

with Bill 23. We look forward to that clarity, I would have to say.

Already, in Waterloo, Bill 23 has had a cooling effect on housing. They have parked a planned 800-house subdivision because there's no way for them to fund the needed infrastructure for those 800 homes. They want to do it. They want to be part of the solution, but they don't have some \$400 million for the needed infrastructure.

AMO went on to say—and this is a point that the Liberals used to brag about—that “Ontario’s spending of \$11,800 per person is almost \$2,000 per person less than the average expenditure of the other provinces and territories at \$13,800.”

So Ontario is not investing in the services that people need. It's as clear as day. This is not an ideological argument in any way, shape or form. It used to be something that the Liberals bragged about, but this government has remained stubbornly obstinate on this number, and then, of course, we also see some of that funding that's supposed to be going into services, be it health care, education or social services, is now flowing into this unallocated contingency fund where there's no accountability at all.

AMO really put homelessness on the agenda and I want to thank them for that. They took out a full-page ad essentially pleading with the government to say, “This is a serious, serious issue.” They tried to get the government of the day to listen and this is what they said, “The homelessness crisis` in your community is a made-in-Ontario crisis”—made-in-Ontario crisis—“that results from underinvestment and other disastrous policy choices made by the government of Ontario.” Honestly, these are fighting words, but their back is up against the wall, I have to say.

And then there are several areas of critique, including the province's failure to engage in meaningful reconciliation with Indigenous peoples, which “creates economic and social disparity and limits opportunity.” We fully agree with AMO on this. In fact, of course Indigenous communities are going to be fighting the government on Bill 23 in court—I think that would be the seventeenth court case—and then also around Bill 71 because of lack of consultation on the Ring of Fire road. I think that's already in the works; that could be court case 18, if anybody is keeping track.

The lawyers are getting tons of work from this government, as are the consultants. My goodness, you've got consultants consulting consultants. It's really quite something. In totality, though, on homelessness, which AMO, quite rightly, places at the foot of the provincial government, they go on to say that, “The homelessness crisis signals that Ontario's broader prosperity is at risk if the government is not prepared to act.” Those are pretty strong statements from AMO on homelessness and on housing affordability.

I'm just going to touch on education because the education minister came out and rolled around a lot of numbers that are completely separate from the lived reality of what's happening in our education system. So I want to move to education now. This is a pretty serious disconnect.

Our motion earlier today really just asked the government to invest the \$600 million that you promised to invest, which didn't flow to school boards, around COVID relief. That is why so many school boards are actually looking at deficits, because they had to use their reserves to keep students safe.

This is an article on the budget. It says, “Despite the prospects of layoffs across Ontario's school system”—which are real—the Premier's “2023 budget has no additional funds earmarked for education, leaving the province's education system tens of millions of dollars in the hole.”

Now, the minister would say, “That's not true; there's \$2.3 billion.” So, “Adjusting for changes to last year's interim expenses, Ontario's 2023 budget notes that the education system saw a \$47 million spending cut due to a reduction in ‘non-government revenue.’” And so this is the transparency piece that I was trying to get at earlier, Madam Speaker.

“Education sector expense is projected to be \$47 million lower, primarily due to school boards experiencing lower than forecasted non-government revenue and implementation timing of the Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care Agreement, partially offset by increased school board spending, such as higher fuel costs for student transportation.”

“According to the official numbers presented in the ... 2023 budget, education spending would appear as though it is set to rise from \$32.4 billion to \$34.7 billion.”

However, “While this total spending increase appears to work out to \$2.3 billion, the fine print explains that this new spending ... is not going to primary and secondary education—it was previously earmarked for the joint federal-provincial child care program.”

This is a huge discrepancy. You know, in the \$2.53 billion in new money for education, this is an accounting issue and you have to read the fine print. That's what we know for sure with budget 2023.

Then, “According to Ontario's Financial Accountability Office”—I hope that they don't get rid of this office because we've seen some of these independent officers get the boot.

1630

Miss Monique Taylor: The first one to go was the Child Advocate.

Ms. Catherine Fife: The Child Advocate was one of the first, then the French, then the environmental. This government is not really fond of oversight. I think that's the theme of it.

Anyway, this is the FAO: “The Ministry of Education plans to spend \$1.5 billion in 2022-23 and \$2.3 billion in 2023-24 under the agreement. This includes \$1.1 billion in 2022-23 and \$1.6 billion in 2023-24 to reduce child care fees.” That's what the money is allocated to there. It is not money that is going into elementary and secondary schools in Ontario.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: It's child care.

Ms. Catherine Fife: It's going into child care. We saw this.

This is why I'm so concerned about the COVID funding, as well, is that we saw this government receive billions of dollars in COVID support; much of that money got siphoned off into this contingency fund and did not make it into the health care and education systems.

"The remaining planned spending in 2022-23 and 2023-24 of \$353 million and \$694 million, respectively, is for wage enhancements, professional development, growth in spaces, start-up grants and administrative costs." Now, what I want to say to the government, though, is that the funding of new child care spaces will not happen if you do not increase the wages of our early childhood educators.

This was part of the Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care's submission. They said very clearly that they cannot recruit people into this sector, into this field, for less than \$25 an hour. These are special people who do a two-year college or four-year university program on early learning and care, and what an important job. It's primarily female-dominated, I do want to say, much like the PSWs and the nurses, who seem to always be last on this government's list for an increase, Madam Speaker.

So there is a little creative accounting—let's call it that—with the education dollars, because this money that's in this budget is not going into our schools; it's already allocated for the federal child care agreement. All told, it works out to a zero-dollar increase for 2023-24 and a \$47-million nominal cut. Those are the numbers.

Ms. Sandy Shaw: Those are the facts.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Those are the facts. So, on top of failing to keep up with inflation, "when you add in the federal money it's absolutely a cut and the students of the province will be shortchanged." This is a quote from the president of OSSTF, Karen Littlewood.

Additionally, the Ontario Public School Boards' Association also noted that there's a \$17-billion backlog for school repairs—\$17 billion—and only \$2.8 billion is allocated in this for capital and updating. This is why we brought the motion to the floor of this Legislature today around the COVID relief funds for schools.

The Toronto District School Board, the largest school board in Canada, is warning of a round of program cuts if the province does not provide \$70 million to recoup the COVID costs. In Ottawa-Carleton, it's \$9 million. This is a lot of money in a school board budget. The boards used their reserves during COVID and are now expected to replenish those reserves and meet their budgets. They're not going to be able to do it. School boards in Ontario, I'm predicting, either have to make some drastic cuts to program services for children and for students or they're going to run a deficit. I hope that there are a few school boards out there that challenge this government on where the money is going.

We have seen, though, a drop in funding last year of \$1.3 billion, and this was largely due to a drop in bake sales and fundraising. I have to say, Madam Speaker, not a lot of people know this, but schools are still doing some pretty heavy-duty fundraising. We're fundraising to fill the gaps in so many other issues, including domestic violence services. Women's Crisis Services in Waterloo,

the sexual assault centre, is constantly, constantly fundraising to keep women safe in Ontario. It's a shame; really, it is.

I will say also that if you track the underspending that this government has overseen, this is where we are: There is a \$284-million cut from health. There is a \$47-million cut from education—I just referenced it—a \$75-million cut from post-secondary education, a \$92-million cut from children, community and social services, and then in total, in other programs, \$384 million.

This is not how you meet a crisis. This is not how you look out past this Pink Palace and see people using food banks who have never had to. Food bank use is up; record numbers of evictions; we have people absolutely living in encampments and in tents in Canada in the winter—nothing to be proud of.

This budget had the potential, Madam Speaker, to meet people where they are in the health care system, in the education system, and even around human trafficking. This government talks a lot about the girl next door and human trafficking. It's a status quo amount: \$2.5 million to address human trafficking. I mean, I was talking to my colleague from Sudbury. He said they could probably use \$2.5 million just in Sudbury.

I will note, just in keeping with the theme that this government seems to have very selective hearing when they're listening to the voices of Ontarians, that when we tried to actually make the human trafficking legislation more comprehensive, when the hotel registry was on the books to keep track of who was using rooms and visiting hotels or motels, Airbnb happened to come in and talk to the government. We know that at least a quarter of human trafficking is now happening in Airbnb locations, but this government exempted Airbnb from that requirement.

I use that example to really point out the fact that this government is really set on just listening to certain voices, and usually those voices come with chequebooks, and usually those chequebooks are pretty big. That generally has been what we have witnessed is swaying how public policy and legislation are crafted in Ontario. If you can get into those backrooms and be part of those conversations, you can influence this government.

But the nurse practitioners and the doctors and the teachers and the custodians and the people who work in our jails, the guards, are not in those back rooms. They're not writing any cheques and they're not getting any results. That isn't how our democracy is supposed to work—it is not.

We all say a prayer in this House in the morning, or we observe a moment of silence, and we pledge each day that we're going to come to this place and try to make the lives of Ontarians better. And so when you have a budget and you have the surplus and the contingency fund to actually meet those needs, and then you fail to do so, this compromises our democracy and the trust that people should have in a democracy.

At the end of the day, we're going to try to get this government to understand that there are still vulnerable people in Ontario who need health care, and even though

they are uninsured, they should still be able to access that health care system. We're going to try to get this government to understand that preventive eye care is really important to the seniors of this province and you should not have slipped it into this budget. It should not be there. We should have a greater understanding of the importance of taking care of yourself from a prevention piece, Madam Speaker.

We are going to address the school boards' shortfalls, because I was very alarmed to hear some of the language from some of the members, I think including the parliamentary assistant to education, blaming school boards and basically saying, "We're not going to bail you out," when there is no acknowledgement of what those cost pressures are in the system as it's constructed right now under the current funding formula.

We've seen a lot from this government, but I really did feel—and this came out on *The Agenda* on Thursday—that the government is talking about balancing the budget. What's very clear is that the government is willing to balance the budget on the backs of certain vulnerable people in this province. They are marginalized, they don't have lobby groups, they don't have lobby days, but they still count, they're still human beings. We used to be a very compassionate and caring province, and when you take away health care services for these folks, you are speaking volumes to their value to you as a government and to the province of Ontario.

1640

One final note on the budget: Not one mention of autism—

Miss Monique Taylor: Mind-blowing.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Really, it is mind-blowing, because the legacy project is ending at the end of this month. There's no strategy or transition strategy for funding to ensure that these children liaise back successfully into the school system. Last week, the minister refused to even address it. The minister has resigned. I hope that she's well; I hope that it's not a health issue. But how can you walk to work in the day and not understand that the autism file is a mess and that the longer that list of children who are waiting for these crucial services—that list that continues to grow, 60,000-plus? Their opportunity to be successful, the needed respite for their families, the stress that they experience entering a school system that is not fully prepared or funded to be prepared for them—what a lost opportunity.

I end with that, because it's a value statement. You could have at least mentioned autism and the stress that these children are experiencing in Ontario.

With that, Madam Speaker, I hope to get good questions.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutla Karpoche): Questions?

Mr. Anthony Leardi: I thank the member for her hour discourse. It's not easy to complete an hour discourse. She did touch during her discourse upon the issue of human trafficking, and something closely related to human trafficking is guns and gangs. The government has a Guns,

Gangs and Violence Reduction Strategy into which it's adding an additional \$13.4 million under this budget. Aside from all of the other matters in the budget, I'm wondering if the member from Waterloo can express her view on this \$13.4 million of additional funding being put into the anti-guns and gangs strategy of this government and how it might touch upon human trafficking.

Ms. Catherine Fife: Thank you to the member from Essex for the question. When I'm thinking about human trafficking and the smart investments on human trafficking, it's around the education system, it's around ensuring that they aren't further financially exploited. Really, the smart money is on prevention. It's true that police are obviously involved, and Waterloo region police, for instance, do a pretty amazing job of intervening and trying to prevent this from happening, but the issue of human trafficking needs to be looked at holistically, and that's the approach we would take from that perspective.

At the end of the day, though, the \$2.5 million for human trafficking, I hope we can agree, is not sufficient.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutla Karpoche): Question?

MPP Jamie West: Thank you to the member from Waterloo. It's always great listening to her debate upon the budget. She described this as a budget of mediocrity. When I spoke to people in Sudbury about the budget, what stunned them was the billions of dollars in this contingency slush fund, rainy day fund—just simply flabbergasted that the government wasn't aware that it has been raining for months and months. I'd argue it has been raining since last year. This is a mediocrity budget. Could the member from Waterloo talk about this and, if she could, just restate, "If this budget were a Christmas present...?"

Ms. Catherine Fife: I think when you look at a budget, it tells the story of a government's priorities. This is what I said on Thursday night: I just couldn't imagine, knowing what the problem is, knowing that there's a solution, and also acknowledging that the funding is there to deal with it—this came through, actually, even in the delegation from the mayor of Kingston, where he said, "Listen, we have a solution; it's working but we can't finance it." And so that becomes part of the issue: People become increasingly disappointed. And the quote really is, "If this budget were a Christmas present, it would be a three-pack of white socks. Not entirely useless, but an exercise in going through the motions." That's not good for our democracy, Madam Speaker.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutla Karpoche): The member from Bruce-Grey-Owen Sound.

Mr. Rick Byers: I'll start off by saying there's nothing wrong with a good pair of socks. I've got some nice ones on today.

I wanted to ask the member—and I thank her for her remarks. She mentioned the finance committee and, no question, we were all over the province during the five to six lovely first weeks of the year; January 9 up in Kenora and on and on. There were two general themes that I recall that were repeatedly addressed to us. One was homelessness, and we saw it in downtown Peterborough first-hand

where there was an encampment; and the other was mental health funding, where CMHA organizations all over said, “Please, give us more money.”

In this budget, we’re doing important things in both those areas: \$425 million on the mental health issue and \$200-million-plus for homelessness prevention programs. Will the member please acknowledge, through you, Madam Speaker, that those important elements were indeed addressed in the budget?

Ms. Catherine Fife: I was asked by Steve Paikin on Thursday night, “Find one good thing.” And so the one good thing I did acknowledge is that at least this government is now talking about supportive housing and has \$202 million. It may sound like a lot of money. You stretch those dollars out across this province—I mean, the city of Kingston said \$18 million; just one city, right?

The mental health piece: They came to the table and they said, “If you want to save lives, we need an 8% increase.” The government put 5% in the budget. And that gap is alarming for me, because I believe that the members that came on that finance committee—I think we all heard the same things: Mental health is a crisis; fund it at the 8% that community agencies need.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutla Karpoche): Question?

Mr. Joel Harden: Thanks to the member for Waterloo for her remarks on the budget.

I’m glad you mentioned what we’re dealing with in our city with respect to a private, for-profit, secretive surgical group operating in the Riverside Campus of the Ottawa Hospital. The member has been looking at finances in this budget and previous for some time. Can you explain to me how trucking in surgical equipment from Toronto, paying people who currently work in the public system to work through a private, for-profit corporation on the weekends—why wouldn’t the government simply ask the staff of the hospital to use the OR capacity we have? How does it make any sense to do this?

Ms. Catherine Fife: It doesn’t; it makes no sense. It makes no sense to not use your current facilities and maximize your OR exposure. It makes no sense to have Bill 124 disrespect the health care workers that are needed to actually open the ORs. It makes no sense to create a parallel system which will poach nurses from the public system, which compounds the problem that we’re seeing.

This is a crisis that has been created by this government. They’ve offered privatization and profitization as a solution. It is not; it will cost more, deliver less and compromise our entire health care system.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutla Karpoche): Question?

Mr. Sheref Sabawy: I’m glad that the member in the opposition found lots of things that don’t make any sense: “This doesn’t make sense. This doesn’t make sense. This doesn’t make sense.” But does it make sense that nobody did anything for 12 years, with your support, to upgrade the infrastructure for health and we end up where we end up today, where we are trying to fix it today? Is it going to take time to fix it? Yes. But at least it is not the status quo.

Does it make any sense that no infrastructure money was put in health for 12 years, with your support? Please answer.

1650

Ms. Catherine Fife: I’m so happy to have the opportunity to answer that non-question. Listen, every time the government gets up and says, “With the NDP supporting the majority Liberals,” that’s like saying we support you, we’re propping you up. It makes no sense whatsoever. The Liberals did freeze hospital budgets for six years, but we were in the official opposition; we had no way to pressure them to do the right thing.

But what you’re doing—you’re doubling down on Liberal policies, quite honestly. You can say that you are going to open a bed, but, at the same time that you’re disrespecting nurses, that’s just funding furniture. That’s the problem. You’re funding furniture and not services. You’re following in the same pattern that the Liberal government followed for 15 years.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutla Karpoche): Quick question?

Mr. Chris Glover: I really appreciate the comments today. My office has been supporting someone who’s homeless and having a mental health crisis right now. The government keeps boasting about investing \$202 million in homelessness prevention programs, but they also cut \$391 million last year from programs that provide the same service. For the last week, we’ve been trying to find shelter for this person. When we phone shelter services, there’s no space. He’s literally sleeping on the street, as are thousands of other people across this province. Will this budget address homelessness?

Ms. Catherine Fife: This budget has promised \$202 million. Once again, this is a perfect example of not meeting the moment. The city of Kingston, because they brought in some homelessness programming, prevented 777 emergency room visits. The smart money is on early intervention and prevention, but you’ve got to fund it; you can’t wish it to happen.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutla Karpoche): Further debate?

Mr. Graham McGregor: It’s my privilege to rise in the House today in support of the largest budget in Ontario’s history, introduced by our fantastic Minister of Finance. I will be splitting my time with the wonderful member for Whitby.

Interjections.

Mr. Graham McGregor: The member for Whitby deserves better applause than that. Let’s go. Come on. There he is. Come on. This guy has been around.

Interjections.

Mr. Graham McGregor: This historic, nearly \$205-billion budget will ensure that our province maintains its focus on navigating global economic uncertainty with a responsible targeted approach that will help people and businesses today while laying a strong fiscal foundation for future generations.

Speaker, like the rest of the world, Ontario continues to face economic challenges brought on by the COVID-19

pandemic. I hear it from the people of Brampton, which I would put forward to the House. My city has been hit particularly hard by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, our government has never lost focus and the spirit of Ontario remains strong. If I can say on behalf of the residents of Brampton North, I think this budget is another reason for Ontarians' spirits to be even stronger.

Our government, led by our Premier, has ensured a thoughtful and transparent plan ahead to balance the budget and still ensure this province is building for the future. We're building Ontario by attracting and protecting investment in jobs. We're investing in hospitals, schools, transit and highways.

I know the member for Waterloo referenced a particular highway in my backyard, Highway 413, and called it a highway to nowhere. I would say it's actually a highway kind of from your part of the world to Brampton, and I invite the member to come to Brampton. You used to have members in Brampton, but I think that idea and mentality from the NDP leadership is why there are no NDP members in Brampton anymore.

We're working for the people of Ontario to manage today's challenges. We're training workers, we're providing connected and convenient health care and we're providing better public services. We have the right plan that is building an Ontario that the people of this province can be proud of, not only today but also in the future: an Ontario that continues to have a resilient economy, an Ontario that is strong. I'd like to thank the Minister of Finance for delivering a budget that truly hears what Ontario needs and delivers for its people.

I spent a few years working at the Ministry of Finance in a stakeholder relations role—

Interjections.

Mr. Graham McGregor: Well, clap for that. Don't clap for me, clap for this new team. The work that I've done—I don't know if I've ever seen a budget with this much stakeholder appeal and this much stakeholder accolades.

Now, one of the stakeholders that we hear from are the residents of the city of Brampton, and this budget addresses Brampton's most critical needs after we were forgotten for 15 years under a previous Liberal government. We finally have a government for the people that invests in the ninth-largest city in Canada and the fastest-growing city in the country. It should be a no-brainer, right? Well, like many other things, the Liberals weren't able to wrap their head around the importance of supporting Brampton for its significant growth, but this government does. This government will continue to invest in the people of Brampton.

Speaker, we need to take stock when we're looking at this budget. We've got to think about not only where we are but where we're going. We have to understand the significant population growth that Ontario is going to be going through year over year: 300,000 immigrants per year moving to this amazing province for the prospect of a better life for their families and a chance to contribute to our Canadian family. We couldn't be happier to have this type of immigration because we have a labour shortage

right now of 380,000 skilled workers right here in Ontario, and that's a figure that's growing.

When I was nominated as a candidate, the first time I ever quoted that stat—I guess a year and a half ago now—that number was closer to 300,000, so this is a problem that we have that is growing, not a problem that's going to be disappearing. But under our work and the incredible funding, some of it announced in this budget, we're very proud that we've trained and reskilled over 400,000 workers right here in Ontario, helping them to get a better job and a bigger paycheque and a better chance for a better life for their family.

The Minister of Labour is also doing a great job to ensure that immigrants are able to receive opportunities that put them in a position to succeed in this province. And there's plenty of opportunity for them to succeed.

As I mentioned, in this budget we're providing \$224 million in 2023-24 for a new capital stream of the Skills Development Fund to leverage private sector expertise and expand training centres, including union training halls, to provide more accessible, flexible training opportunities for workers.

We're also enhancing the Ontario Immigrant Nominee Program with an additional \$25 million over three years to attract more skilled workers, including in-demand professionals in the skilled trades, to the province.

Ontario is providing \$4 million to BHive in Brampton. I almost look at it like the Ontario Immigrant Nominee Program, but instead of attracting immigrants here with in-demand skills in terms of a trade or health care, etc., it's actually attracting entrepreneurs and bringing entrepreneurs from other countries to come start up their business, whether it's tech, health or otherwise, and build wealth and create jobs right here in Ontario, right here in Brampton.

We've got a plan to build 1.5 million homes in 10 years so that every family, every person in Ontario has a home that they can afford and that meets their needs. We often quote the fact that Canada has the lowest homes per capita of any G7 country, and then you also wonder how that is when we have the lowest population of any G7 country and we also have the biggest G7 country. So how are we stuck in this place where we don't have enough homes for the people that need them? And what I've seen is that we actually need political leadership to stand up and do the right thing, to fight to get shovels in the ground and build the dream of homeownership for new Canadians, young Canadians and seniors, to make sure that everybody in this country is able to find a home that meets their needs and their budget.

Our government is not just building homes when we talk about that growth. We're also moving forward with the most ambitious capital plan in Ontario's history by investing more than \$180 billion over the next decade to build the roads, highways, public transit, hospitals, schools and long-term-care homes that the province needs to support growing families, businesses and communities.

1700

Speaker, in my riding of Brampton North, over 90% of homes have a driveway. A car is a vital part of our way of

life in Brampton North. You can't take the bus with the same efficiency to take your kids to school or take your parent to the doctor or get to work. One of the best economic things somebody could do to actually improve their economic prospects is to get a car, because the amount of places that you can work rises dramatically. The ease of getting health care for a loved one or for yourself rises dramatically. The extracurriculars you can bring your child to rise dramatically.

But we hear from the members of the opposition, when we're investing \$27.9 billion in new highways, that they call this a waste of money. They call it a highway to nowhere. When we put money in to continue lowering the fees and getting rid of the fees on licence plate stickers, \$120 per year per car going back into people's pockets to make their life a little bit more affordable, we hear the opposition scoff at the idea. When we extend the gas tax cut 5.7 cents, reaching our 10-cent-per-litre commitment to make driving more affordable, again not a luxury—a necessity in the area that I represent—we hear the opposition scoff.

I'm glad I don't hear the PC Party scoff. I don't see the government scoff. I see the government stand up, do the right thing and support this bill.

I know in Brampton North we're tired of waiting. We're tired of waiting in traffic. We're tired of waiting in bumper-to-bumper traffic on Highway 410. We're tired of waiting in the waiting room or on a surgical wait-list to get much-needed health care. Frankly, we're tired of the excuses from politicians telling us why we can't have something. We're ready for politicians to get it done, deliver and build a strong province, a strong Ontario.

In our government, that's exactly what we're doing. On Highway 413, I've heard from truck drivers. Major cities in the United States have loops that get trucks out of the main city centres so they can bypass these already congested corridors. The 413 helps do that for one of the busiest corridors. Brampton and Peel region is the logistics hub of our province. It's one of the busiest logistics hubs in North America. Investing to get that done is not only a smart thing to do, it's the right thing to do.

By building our economy, by investing in infrastructure, by managing our debt levels, we're going to build a stronger Ontario.

I'll pass the rest of my time to my colleague the member for Whitby.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutla Karpoche): The member from Whitby.

Mr. Lorne Coe: The member from Brampton North talked about laying a strong fiscal foundation for future generations. I look at this budget as a generational budget. Within that context, I think of my two granddaughters, Annette and Sophia, and the strong foundation that this budget does and lays out for other young people in our great province. What's clear is that we're building Ontario so we can have a strong economy for the future and the infrastructure needed to support growth across the region of Durham and other parts of the province.

Today, I'm going to talk about the effect of this budget within the region of Durham, for example: continuing to

relieve gridlock, create jobs and connect communities by investing \$70.5 billion over the next 10 years for transit. Importantly for the region of Durham, this includes the Bowmanville GO rail extension, where a procurement process is underway to construct the rail infrastructure required to extend the GO rail service east of Oshawa. Why is that important? It's part of the region of Durham's economic recovery plan. We have eight municipalities in the region of Durham. Whitby, Oshawa, Bowmanville and Ajax will be directly impacted, as will their local economies, by this investment going forward.

We're eliminating the double fares for most local transit services in the greater Golden Horseshoe where commuters also use GO transit services. The effect of that: We're directly responding to recommendations from the Whitby Chamber of Commerce and other chambers of commerce in the region of Durham. The government is working to expand this initiative to support more people using public transit coming into Toronto. That makes sense, doesn't it?

Some \$27.9 billion to support the planning and construction of highway expansion and rehabilitation, including work to widen Highway 401 from Brock Road in Pickering—our great finance minister's riding, Pickering—Uxbridge—through to eastern Ontario.

We're implementing the most ambitious plan for hospital expansion in Ontario's history by investing more than \$48 billion over the next 10 years in hospital infrastructure, including \$32 billion in hospital capital grants. That is going to allow a brand new hospital up in Uxbridge—a long-awaited hospital in the region of Durham. Regionally, the funding has also allowed for a new purpose-built facility in Cannington to consolidate community-based health services from six community locations by December 2023.

We're also investing \$15 billion in capital grants over 10 years to support students' achievement by expanding and renewing schools and helping create 86,000 new child care spaces by December 2026.

Remember who closed schools, supported by the NDP.
Interjections.

Mr. Lorne Coe: Yes, you did.

With respect to the energy sector, supporting the first grid scale small modular reactor in Canada at Ontario Power Generation's Darlington new nuclear project site. The effect of that site is going to be enormous in terms of supporting local hospitals and other hospitals across the region of Durham. Added to that, we're supporting refurbishments at the Darlington nuclear facility and OPG's continuing safe operation of the Pickering nuclear generation station—6,500 jobs. We support nuclear; they don't.

We're providing an additional \$425 million over three years to connect more people to mental health and addictions services, including a 5% increase in the base funding of community-based mental health and addictions service providers funded by the Ministry of Health. That includes the Ontario Shores Centre for Mental Health Sciences in Whitby. It serves the entire region of Durham—incredible work that they're doing going forward.

We talked about fighting gun- and gang-related crime and building safer communities. That's something we've

been doing, as a government, within the region of Durham for a number of years. This budget is investing \$13.4 million in 2023-24 as part of the Guns, Gangs and Violence Reduction Strategy. This additional funding, particularly in the region of Durham, will continue effective gang prevention and intervention strategies that are known to work.

I was at the investiture of the new Durham Regional Police Service chief this past Friday, and there were a number of police forces there—of course, you would expect that—the Toronto Police Service and York. They are so pleased with this continued investment from this government and the effect it's having across the province. I'm so pleased with the leadership of Premier Ford and our finance minister for this level of investment because it is going to make a difference going forward.

Another area I want to turn to is providing \$224 million in 2023-24 for a new capital stream of the Skills Development Fund to leverage private sector expertise and expand training centres, including union training halls to provide more accessible, flexible training opportunities for workers.

Just a quick quote here from Mike Gallagher—he's from the International Union of Operating Engineers Local 793. Unions are lined up with our government. They know the work we're doing, the effect we're having. This is what he had to say: "Ontario's 2023 budget continues to show a clear commitment to the skilled trades through ongoing support of the industry's efforts to recruit more people and provide them the training they need to succeed." That's just one union; I can go down three, five, another eight of them.

Another initiative that's in the budget is a \$9.6-million investment that's supporting a full continuum of care for first responders experiencing post-traumatic stress injury and concurrent mental health disorders at the Runnymede Healthcare Centre. I know not only our government members but the official opposition interact regularly with first responders—regularly. They know the effect this level of investment will have on the work that our front-line responders are doing. This is really significant going forward. It's going to accelerate the project's development toward this next round of approval. But many of our first responders were in the galleries when the budget was presented, and they're very grateful for that particular effect that it's going to have.

1710

Supportive housing: the additional \$202 million each year in the Homelessness Prevention Program and Indigenous Supportive Housing Program to help those experiencing or at risk of homelessness. I spoke to the regional chair, region of Durham, at the swearing in of the new police chief of the Durham Regional Police Service. He was really pleased with this level of investment. He'll be even happier in a week's time when he gets the figure of how much the region of Durham is going to get juxtaposed to two years ago. It's more.

I'm going to speed ahead here, Speaker, because I've got a minute, 14 seconds to speak.

Finally, the government is helping to remove barriers, as it should, that exist between employers looking to hire workers and people with disabilities looking to find work,

like my son. This is why the government is investing an additional \$3.5 million over three years to continue to support the work of the Abilities Centre in my riding of Whitby. The Abilities Centre is a community hub that delivers a range of inclusive programming to promote health, community relationships and skills development for individuals with disabilities.

Speaker, with our thoughtful, transparent approach, we have a plan to balance the budget while delivering support to hardworking families, workers and businesses across Ontario. We will continue with this approach that is building an Ontario the people of this province can be proud of not only today, but in the future.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to speak on this. My colleague from Brampton North and I look forward to the questions.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutla Karpoche): Questions?

Mr. Chris Glover: I heard the members boast about their funding of \$202 million for homelessness. I just got a text from somebody who's in a mental health crisis, and for the past week we've been trying to get him into a shelter. There have been no shelter beds available; he has been sleeping on the street most of the time. The \$202 million sounds good, but last year the funding was \$391 million. The funding for the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing has been cut by \$124 million. How do you expect to deal with a homelessness and affordable housing crisis when you're actually cutting the funding from last year?

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutla Karpoche): Response?

Mr. Lorne Coe: Thank you, Speaker, and through you to my colleague opposite, thank you for that particular question.

He'll know that we launched the Roadmap to Wellness, and it's a plan to build Ontario's mental health. The dollars attached to that are \$3.8 billion over 10 years. The government's providing an additional, as I just said, \$425 million over three years, a 5% increase in base funding. That's going to be a type of increase that will have a real effect, particularly in areas like the region of Durham. It's a collaboration. We have an upper-tier government. It's a collaboration of eight municipalities working together, through our service managers, to have the type of effect that my colleague opposite just described.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutla Karpoche): Question? The member from Nepean.

Ms. Lisa MacLeod: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Great to see you in the House, and a strong female leader at that. That's what I want to talk about to my colleagues, if they can answer this question.

I had the opportunity to spend some time doing a women's economic empowerment forum on Friday. One of the things that came up was from one of the vice presidents of the Invest Ottawa organization thanking our government for \$3 million in investments. But one of the things that came up consistently were some of the challenges that women face post-pandemic regarding child care, pink pricing and of course some of the other issues that relate to burnout and mental stress and some of the other

issues that, quite personally and frankly, I have confronted myself.

I'm wondering if my colleagues, either of them, would be able to elaborate on some of the investments that we've made to make life more affordable and accessible for everyday Ontarians.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutla Karpoche): Response?

Mr. Graham McGregor: I thank my colleague for the question. As my dear friend our Associate Minister of Women's Social and Economic Opportunity always says, "When women succeed, Ontario succeeds." And that's why it's so important when you look at a program like our child care program—there were members of this House that were here actually saying to the government, "Take the first deal that crosses your table." They were saying, "Why didn't you sign a deal right away?" And I'm very proud to be part of a party, part of a government that didn't take the first deal and shortchange women that are entering the workforce. We actually got the best deal in the country, and we're going to be investing in 86,000 new child care spaces. We've got immediate reductions on child care fees getting to \$10 a day on average in 2025. The mental health supports, everything else—we know when women succeed, Ontario succeeds. That's why we're getting it done.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutla Karpoche): Question?

MPP Jamie West: The member from Brampton North just said, "When women succeed, Ontario succeeds," and it reminds me that in this budget there's not one single word on autism. The Premier, before being elected, had promised there would never be a need for autism families to protest on the front lawn of Queen's Park, and as we know, prior to COVID, when they weren't allowed to, when they were allowed to there were constant protests out front.

Last year, the hashtag was #50kIsNotOkay. You were supposed to reduce it, but now the hashtag isn't relevant anymore because there are more than 60,000 kids on this waiting list. If you truly believe that when women succeed, Ontario succeeds, when will you start taking action on the autism file, start putting money into it and start reducing that list so that women, who typically end up staying home with these kids, are able to be successful?

Mr. Graham McGregor: I appreciate the member's question. Look, this has actually been one of the—since I've been elected as an MPP, talking to parents who have children with autism and the challenges that they go through is something that maybe I didn't fully appreciate before I got elected. I don't have any kids. I'd love to have kids one day. I certainly have never had a kid on the spectrum, and the unique challenges, the unique circumstances that they go through is something that we've got to take seriously.

I am proud to be a part of a government that doubled the funding for the Ontario Autism Program. I am proud to be part of a government that is continuing to keep working.

Interjections.

Mr. Graham McGregor: I know the opposition can heckle because they probably voted against the doubling of the funding, and I appreciate why they don't like my answer, but this is a fundamental part of building a strong Ontario. It's something we're very committed to doing and getting right.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutla Karpoche): Question?

Mr. Anthony Leardi: To the member from Whitby: We touched upon a portion of the budget which deals with guns, gangs and violence reduction. That's a strategy of this government which I think is a very important strategy. I'm wondering if the member from Whitby can touch upon the \$3.4 million that's in this budget and how it relates to guns, gangs and violence reduction.

Mr. Lorne Coe: Speaker, through you, the investment that's in the budget is going to have a significant effect, particularly within the region of Durham. The Durham Regional Police Service has a long-established guns and gangs unit, and historically, since we formed the government, since 2018, we have provided funding to that unit. Recently, the Durham Regional Police Service had a public consultation—and they do this every year. They do the public consultation to have the broader community—appreciating, Speaker, that we have close to a million people there now—identify priorities within communities. And repeatedly, there was a request that the guns and gang unit continue the work that they're doing and be able to share with the broader community the effect of their work, which they do quarterly in reports to Durham regional council, and to the broader community through reports that they post on their website. I thank my colleague for the question.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutla Karpoche): Question?

Mr. Joel Harden: My question is for the member from Whitby. In his speech, Speaker, the member spoke about the importance of transit, so I have a question for the member that I think I'm going to be asking as transit critic a few times this week: Why was there no funding in last week's budget for operational transit needs? Fares just went up for the TTC. Toronto has the third-most-expensive public transit system in the world. Why was there no operating funding to make sure that transit riders and transit workers can do better? Because right now, we are in a death spiral of less transit service because of the government's cuts and higher fares. We need to get people on the bus, get people on the train—not the magical ones you talk about, but the ones we have. What's the plan?

1720

Mr. Lorne Coe: I thank the member from Ottawa Centre. It seems that, on days like this, he and I are part of the discussion on a range of topics, and I appreciate the range of questions that he brings to the debate going forward.

I can speak only from my experience, both as a Durham regional councillor and, more recently over the last seven and a half years, as an MPP about the process that evolves. I know that out of previous budgets, we have provided millions and millions of dollars to Durham Region Transit

for their operation going forward. There's ongoing discussions that take place with not only the staff at the region of Durham, but also with the eight mayors and regional chair. To that extent, we have a meeting coming up on April 21 and transportation is on the—

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutla Karpoche): Quick question?

Mr. Anthony Leardi: Very quickly to the member from Brampton North: Highways are important in my riding, particularly Highway 3, which was widened by this government. Please tell us about the importance of highways to your riding.

Mr. Graham McGregor: Oh, massively. And you know what? We've still got to widen that 410, just for the record.

Look, when you're in my riding—I look at my colleague from Brampton East here and you're in his riding—a car is not a luxury item; it's a necessity. It's something that, I think, is a bit worrying for progressives because they seem to have this almost insidious anti-car ideology where they say, "Anybody who ever dares get behind the wheel, all of a sudden you're a bad person and you should move somewhere where you've got to get on public transit." I mean, it used to be about emissions and now we're building electric vehicles. We're investing in clean-steel-tech cars—two million cars' worth of emissions off the streets. The argument doesn't make any sense anymore. I invite the opposition to get on board. Cars are here to stay.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutla Karpoche): Further debate?

MPP Jamie West: I'm very proud to be here to talk about the budget, Bill 85. This is a weird thing to talk about because I have stuck in my head the quote—and I forgot to write it down—how this budget is like getting a pack of tube socks—

Mr. Graham McGregor: White socks, white socks.

MPP Jamie West: White tube socks; thank you to the member from Brampton North—and how it's an inadequate mediocrity because it's there, it's nothing to get excited about. But there are a lot of things missing in this budget. I think that's really what stands out about it: the absence of what people really want in the budget. I think our leader, Marit Stiles, when she said the budget fails to meet the moment—that's pretty accurate. It fails to meet the moment.

I know we're very busy at Queen's Park in debate. I know we're very busy as MPPs in general, and I hope that my colleagues from the Conservative party are able to get out in the community and talk to average people. I'm sure many of them do, but I think the conversations they're having are different than mine. They're different than mine because what I have been hearing since the end of last winter—definitely in the spring, all through the summer, specifically during the election—was that people were having a hard time making ends meet, that people really, really are struggling to make ends meet. They see it as a situation where they themselves or their kids can't affording rent and never see owning a house in the future.

When they're doing groceries, they're putting food back or they're simply going to food banks.

Feed Ontario was here last Monday to tell us—I remember when I was first elected in 2018, they were here and told us we had hit a tipping point where working families were accessing food banks at a higher rate than non-working families. And then the usage of food banks by working people and seniors in retirement—just everyone is falling behind. The food banks aren't supposed to be part of the system; they're supposed to be the stopgap until the government fixes the system. And now it's become this situation that people rely on.

It stuns me when I hear about the billions of dollars in the contingency fund, this kind of slush fund—"the rainy day fund" I heard it called. As I said earlier today, it is pouring rain, Speaker. It is pouring rain. And if you aren't aware of it, talk to some people who are homeless, who are living in these tent cities where it has been pouring rain on them; talk to the seniors who are desperate for any sort of work, or who are standing at streetlights panhandling because the fixed income they have isn't there; or people on OW or ODSP or minimum wage workers. Talk to anyone, and they're going to tell you it is pouring rain.

The turning point for me was this summer, after the election, in my office, hearing from people telling me, "I'm relatively affluent, but I just went for groceries, and I don't know how people can afford to do this." Typically, I don't hear from people saying, "I'm worried about somebody else." I hear about people saying, "I need help." But we're at a level of crisis where people are recognizing that it is simply unaffordable for the majority of the people in this province to make ends meet.

I'm not talking about luxury items; I'm talking about food. I went for groceries last week, and Gouging Galen Weston had a special on bread: two loaves of bread for eight bucks. It was more if you bought one. I've been buying groceries for a long time. It floats about two bucks, depending what kind of bread you're getting. Sometimes you get a special, it's a buck-eighty-nine or something, 2.50. Two for eight bucks? And the government comes forward with kind of a milquetoast budget. I know that word specifically is "milquetoast," but I was thinking of bread soaking in milk and how you could eat it. It's probably got some nutritional value, but no one is really excited to do that.

It is pouring rain. There's a list of things. I'm just going to name the things that I am frustrated with, but I really believe our role is to amplify the voices of the people we represent.

I was very disappointed not to see Highway 69 even mentioned in this, except for the fact that the Conservative Party—I'm very happy they didn't cancel the work that was in progress. But the Premier promised he was going to finish this. Not one cent, not one movement towards this. People still dying on Highway 69—not important to the Conservative government.

NOSM, Northern Ontario School of Medicine: We need doctors. Nothing about NOSM in here.

Laurentian University: You remember the crisis? CCAA, 200 people lost their jobs, all kinds of crisis. Nothing about Laurentian University.

Nothing about clean drinking water. Lots of excitement about expanding mining in the north, and I think that's excellent, but we still have areas in northern Ontario where they have boil-water advisories. We could chip away at that. Think of what you could do as a Conservative Party if you said, "Justin Trudeau dropped the ball, but look what we did for clean drinking water." Just imagine that. Don't do it for them; do it for you. I don't care how we get it done, what motivates you, but let's get it done. It's embarrassing that we have boiled drinking water.

No funding about hospice—actually, there is some. There are 23 new beds to add to 500 existing ones. I was at a hospice on Friday. A good friend of mine, Marcel Charron, is in hospice. His family is very worried about him. He has been battling cancer for five years and was recently moved into hospice. But I went to the Maison McCulloch Hospice in Sudbury. I have never heard anyone criticize the amazing work that they do, but I found out that there is no government funding for food at the hospice, and there is no government funding for the people who prepare the food. They have to fundraise for that. People at the end of their life who are waiting to die, the families supporting people who are going to die, who are terminal, and there is no funding to feed those people who are in those beds.

The same with the cleaning: no funding for cleaning or cleaning products. When you talk about red tape, there's legislation telling them exactly what cleaning products they have to buy with the money they fundraise, but there's no funding to pay for it or for the people who clean it. That's not in this bill.

Opioids: The city of Sudbury, the number-two—Thunder Bay passed us; thanks for nothing. Thunder Bay got worse than Sudbury did. Provincial government on the hook for \$1.1 million to fund a supervised consumption site—the Premier couldn't reach his wallet last year; he can't do it again this year. That money is going to be downloaded to the municipalities, \$1.1 million. Bill 23: The developer fees were downloaded to municipalities all across the province. How about a billion dollars province-wide? Taxpayers are going to see that in their property taxes that go up, because municipalities can't run a deficit.

Health Sciences North: There's some talk about hospital funding and stuff, but Health Sciences North was built too small. I went for a tour of Health Sciences North with the member from Nickel Belt, our health critic. We wandered through, and we saw the hallway medicine. We were told that these are now funded beds. A bunch of places we couldn't take photos because people were in the hallways and we wanted to respect their dignity. But now these are funded beds because the shower rooms, the staff rooms, the TV room and literally people in the hallways are now counted as funded beds. It literally looked like wartime. This is how they've been running. This isn't COVID; this is how it was when I was elected. I went for a tour in 2018.

1730

I want to share some of the stuff—I said it was raining.

Joanne had sent in an email to me. Joanne is 64. "I work in community looking after special needs. I am classified as part-time," like many workers, "so I don't get benefits. I am living on survival wages. I take six medications including insulin. I am making choices of food over medications. With rent, food, gas and regular bills all increasing I can't keep up. Also, I can't sleep." It is raining out there for people, Speaker.

For Hansard, I'll hand all these in afterwards so you don't have to worry about the spelling of anything.

The OFL's response? I know sometimes you don't want to listen to the OFL but they do represent literally millions of workers. So, in terms of workers, if you want to be the "working for workers" party, the OFL calls this budget "another missed opportunity to address the hardships facing working people in this province: stagnant wages and weak working conditions, crumbling public services, unaffordable basic goods, housing and rent; and rising economic inequality."

The Conservative "government has touted its budget as 'staying the course.' Meanwhile, Ontarians are losing access to health care while" the Premier "underfunds and privatizes our public services. Workers shouldn't have to pay for crises they didn't create...."

"The budget is about priorities and the Ford government has the wrong ones. Enough is enough...."

"We need a government that invests in workers and public services, not one that helps the rich get richer at our expense...."

"The OFL articulates a bold and progressive vision for Ontario with its Enough is Enough campaign, which includes demands such as"—and this is stuff we should be striving to get together in government as—"decent working conditions, easier access to join a union, strong public services, economic equality, affordable housing, and healthy communities for everyone." This isn't a radical idea. This is what people in your communities want.

Another thing they'd like—it's not specifically budget-related, but anti-scab legislation. We brought that in. You like to criticize Bob Rae; Bob Rae brought in anti-scab legislation. Mike Harris removed it; one of the first things they did was remove it. The Liberals promised for 15 years they would do it but I guess they had other things to do; they never got around to it.

I spoke today at question period, Speaker, about these ferry workers and how, for some reason, the Conservative government is content to spend on replacement workers—what we call scab workers—two to three times what they pay these normal workers. Why not negotiate a deal? If you've got the money for these scab workers, just pay these workers. It's a ridiculous thing to do.

I mentioned autism earlier when we were in my colleague's debate. I asked questions about autism. Sean wrote to my office; I asked some what they would want. He said:

“Sufficient funding and additional resources to clear the backlog of 60,000 Ontario autistic children who are waiting for support.

“My three-year-old non-verbal autistic son just received his autism assessment and we are in a race against time to get him the support he needs to battle his diagnosis. His mother and I are praying that he will be able to one day speak to us—without the help of the government, he may never speak or be able to live a fulfilled life. Please help us and the other 60K kids waiting for their government’s help.”

Nancy said, “Ideally? Autism treatments” should be “covered by OHIP. Otherwise? Autism funding.... Today when I called and asked for a status update on funding for our son. There is a wait-list—they can’t tell us where we are on the list and they don’t know when any new funding will become available. No plan, no transparency, no details.... Today they were processing applications from 2017—our application was made in 2019. Why is this so hard?”

In terms of post-secondary, Fabrice wrote to me. Fabrice is the president of the Laurentian University Faculty Association. He said, “An appropriate funding of the post-secondary sector in Ontario. For more than a decade, the Ontario per-student funding over time in current dollars constantly decreased. Also, according to data from OCUFA, in the Canadian context, Ontario’s per-student funding levels now sit 43% behind the rest of the country. In 2019-20, the last year for which data is available, the average level of per-student funding in Ontario was \$7,425 compared to \$12,930 for the rest of the country.” You talk about supporting workers and being successful; who do you think is paying for the tuition for these kids?

He also would like “a full severance pay for all employees and faculty members terminated at Laurentian University as a result of the CCAA proceedings. The report of the Auditor General of Ontario and the unsealed correspondence between former president Haché and the MCU prior to the CCAA clearly demonstrate that the recourse to the CCAA was strategically planned and used to circumvent provincial legislation (labour law).”

Getting away from post-secondary to regular education, Rick is from Elgin–Middlesex–London. People sent in stuff from all different ridings: “My husband and I” both “work in education and only get” about a buck’s “raise after being frozen at 1% for three years, on top of years of no increase or very minimal. We work full-time and can’t afford our bills.... I’m stressed and anxious about bills every single day.”

Debbie, who is in my colleague from Ottawa Centre’s riding, says “We need to invest in education—public not private—for the future of our province.... Class sizes have also been increasing which does not help students. I want students to be successful and get the supports, including mental health, that they need; not further cuts.”

Libraries came up. Marzio said, “Restore the provincial library grant, which was reduced by over 50% by the Harris government, and it was never restored. Libraries

have been struggling ever since. Rural and remote libraries, especially in northern Ontario, have been especially hit hard. I was the chair of the Federation of Ontario Public Libraries. I have seen rural and remote libraries struggling. Conservatives cut funding. Liberals did not restore it. The Harris cut was an injustice perpetrated on people who are struggling, but it seems to be forgotten by many.”

There’s lots on housing. Jessica from Nickel Belt said, “Investing in condo-style co-op geared-to-income housing with a focus on one-bedroom units”—this is a great suggestion. “It’s the right time for a provincial investment in housing during a tent encampment/unhoused people epidemic.”

She grew up in co-op housing in Minnow Lake: “I was an only child raised by a single mom” and “the co-op afforded me a level of stability.” This resonates with me; I grew up in Sudbury housing, geared-to-income housing. “Unfortunately, the living situation did not remain tenable with my mom.” She was forced to leave before she started college and it extended the time and debt she took on to go to school. “And as anyone who has been in poverty knows, these problems are ... cyclical. It’s hard to work enough to support yourself around your class schedule, pay rent.... I often missed school, or I was too exhausted to be there and stay awake, I was sleeping between classes in my car, or I didn’t have time to complete labs.

“If I had stable housing from the get-go, I know I could have started my life earlier, and with less debt....

“I have broken out of the cycle of poverty that I was raised in, and I could not have done it without Palace Place Co-op, which gave me a start where I could learn, play and grow safely.... I am so certain when I tell you, one more stressor or unfortunate event or systematic factor would have made my current life impossible. I think about this whenever I see the tent encampments in Memorial Park.” That’s a homeless encampment. “I want to know that we provide all Ontarians with a chance, not just the ones with wealthy, stable, supportive families.”

When it comes to health, Kiran from Etobicoke–Lakeshore said, “Would like to see investment away from private health care back into public health care.

“Getting access to my family doctor has been harder than ever. The people in my life have been telling me that it’s taken days to try and get any kind of appointment, even just to refill a prescription, and when they go to their appointment, they are sometimes waiting hours on end for their doctor.” Meanwhile, they’re “being told that if they paid \$30 a month they could have better access.... The PC government disregards us the people in favour of their corporate friends.”

Debbie, again from my friend’s riding: “More money for health care ... and education. Our health care system is failing and it needs money, not privatization.”

Tammy from Nickel Belt says, “More resources in health care/blood work.... I suffer from many health issues and have numerous specialists caring for me. The yearly blood work goes up in price and is constantly costing” me “more and more. This needs to stop. No one goes to blood

work just because.... When I have to pay for this it becomes a choice. Food or blood work.”

Rob from Chatham-Kent–Leamington: “Health care, vision care, dental care, mental care, pharmacare, physio, chiro.” I am “dealing with pain I can’t afford to have treated.”

ODSP: Kyle—I asked a question about Kyle earlier. He’s trying to get by on a measly \$1,228 a month. He said: “More programs do not make for more solutions. As I responded in my last letter”—he was responding to the minister who replied to his question—“I called the increase and those programs band-aid solutions—and Band-Aids have adhesives that eventually wear off.” The minister’s “answers wore off immediately, and disappointed thousands of Ontarians who were hoping for change for the better.”

Melissa says, “My son is autistic and an adult and there are very little support in” the Premier’s “Ontario for him”—or the Conservative Ontario, I guess. “Not only has the wait-list for autistic children ballooned and none of the promised support has returned, ODSP does not cover for market-value rent. My severely autistic son would be homeless if anything happened to me.”

Alicia talks about ODSP: I would like “to be able to live more comfortably month to month with the rise of living costs and groceries.”

Jane says, “My story is far from unique.” She’s from Newmarket–Aurora. “I reside in a Conservative riding.... ODSP does not provide adequately for housing, water, or food, and my health has deteriorated over the last 10 years of being unable to afford health care for things that wouldn’t have been an issue except” for the “10 years of starvation/undrinkable water in my community.”

1740

Jade says, “Doubling of ODSP because it’s shameful that Ontario does not provide disabled people with enough for even a basic living. Most people’s rent alone is more than their monthly ODSP payment.”

Jill, from Mississauga–Lakeshore: “Yes. I’m on ODSP.... Studio apartments and even just the cost of being someone’s roommate exceed the total ODSP monthly amount. I’m scared and anxious. I don’t want to become homeless. Where are we supposed to live?”

I have more on ODSP but I want to make sure that I have time to get to not-for-profits. Angels of Hope sent this in. Angels of Hope help with human trafficking—excellent job. They’re being recognized next week. They “would like to see more sustainable long-term funding for survivors of human trafficking.... If more funding and support is not provided to community-based organizations, survivors can easily be brought back into the sexual exploitation of trafficking because they have no services and do not trust the current criminal legal system. There is also a need for alternative forms of justice and accountability that are survivor-centred, community-based and healing-focused, such as restorative, transformative and Indigenous justice....”

“These funds would help us increase our capacity and assist/support more survivors of human trafficking in Ontario and work on prevention workshops and initiatives

to reduce human trafficking, gender-based violence, and increase community safety.”

In terms of challenges, I was told, “We are not getting sustainable funding for long periods of time so we cannot keep staff with expertise, limited capacity to take on more clients, clients do not like bouncing from multiple workers....”

This is an ongoing thing for not-for-profits, where they’re always applying for funding, looking for funding and they can’t keep the qualified staff that they have because of the wages that they have and the fact that the funding is always running out. People can’t afford to live like that.

SWEAC, the Sudbury Workers Education and Advocacy Centre, says the same thing on “What would you like to see in the budget?” They have three things, and because I have less than a minute: “Increase of funding for legal aid and legal clinics. Currently the clinics are barely able to meet the demands upon them....”

“Increase of funding for the Landlord and Tenant Board and for the Human Rights Tribunal. Both of these organizations are backlogged because of budget cuts....”

And, number three: “Not a direct budget measure but impacting economically: We need paid sick days!” So people can afford to take time off when they’re sick and be able to pay for rent.

Thirty seconds—Sudbury Women’s Centre: “I would like to see more stable funding as organizations like myself on a yearly basis constantly worry at year end what I will be doing with staff. Most of our funding is yearly and I spend more time applying for various grants, we currently have eight grants we are awaiting for approvals on. We are at risk of losing 75% of our staff, which in turn affects our community and the services that they receive. We all know that the demand has increased and losing funding and programs will only create more issues.”

That gives me three seconds to say thank you, Speaker, but I have so much more that I could share from across the province on what should be in this budget and what people are asking for. We need more than just tube socks.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutila Karpoché): Further debate? The member for Bruce–Grey–Owen Sound—sorry, questions. I apologize. Questions?

Mr. Rick Byers: Just pulling up my socks here. I want to thank the member for his comments. It was great to get to his community in the finance committee meetings during the pre-budget consultations.

I want to ask about health. There are so many measures in this budget on health staffing: 6,000 health care students; internationally educated nurses and doctors; “learn and stay” and our community plan for connected and convenient care—such a practical program. But the funding: \$15.3 billion more over three years, \$81 billion in health care funding in 2023-24. I want to ask the member, through you, Madam Speaker: Surely, is that not that funding, this huge record funding in health care for Ontario, enough to have you support this budget?

MPP Jamie West: Thank you to the member from Bruce–Grey–Owen Sound. I’m always leery of the funding. I was excited when I was first elected when I

heard the budget, but then I would hear the FAO report about what was actually spent. The devil is in the details.

I welcome any funding toward health care. I think it's important. But you need to recognize the fact that Bill 124—which is basically dead. You guys lost; you're going to lose again. Why you are appealing it is beyond me. Bill 124 is chasing workers away. If you own a bathtub, turn both taps on full blast. Those are the workers you're hiring. Now pull the plug. That's actually what's happening with health care. People are rushing out the door. As quickly as you bring people in, you are losing the most experienced workers, who cannot wait to get as far away from you guys as they can. That's the root of it. We need to retain and attract so we really solve these problems with health care.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutla Karpoche): Questions?

Ms. Sandy Shaw: You've said and we've said that this budget failed to meet the moment, and I would say that this budget failed no one greater than it failed seniors in this province. I mean, we know the context. We know that seniors living in long-term care continue to exist where there are orders that aren't being enforced. We know that emergency rooms have been closed in this province—emergency rooms that seniors might turn to. There are no true rental protections, which include seniors. There could be nothing even more miserly, if I have to say, than a government now that is reducing seniors' ability to have eye exams. I mean, really. Even if you have cataracts, the standard is that you have to have clinically significant decreased vision that impacts your daily life. That's the standard.

Can you explain how you how this budget failed to meet the moment when it comes to our seniors?

MPP Jamie West: The short story is, yes, it did. It failed to meet the moment. Most seniors are on a fixed income, and we all know that. We all know seniors and care about seniors. They're on fixed incomes. Reducing things like their access to glasses and saying that it's more valuable to have young people have access—it's more valuable for people to have access to health care in general.

I had perfect vision. I have LASIK now, but I'll have to go get glasses again. As you get older, your vision typically gets worse. Taking away vision from seniors is just unbelievable to me, especially that so many seniors—even if it's your vision so you could read, the pleasure that a lot of seniors have to be able to read and visit libraries and check labels and check prices because they can't afford to make ends meet is so important. I don't know why they would take this away from them.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutla Karpoche): Question?

Mr. Sheref Sabawy: I really like the question about the eye vision and seniors and all the backlog we see for people who need eye surgeries. And, actually, by allowing more outlets, more centres to perform operations, we can clear that backlog faster. Again, as we mentioned, it's not as they keep saying privatizing, because nobody will pay

using his credit card; everybody is paying using OHIP. We are just trying to create extra locations where the operations can be performed and clear out the backlog. So can the member opposite tell me why you are objecting to clear it and make life easier for seniors?

MPP Jamie West: Thank you to the member opposite. Private, for-profit clinics are being touted as a way to bring procedures forward, but we have surgical suites that are publicly funded that are available, but the funding for the procedures caps out. So what it means is that in Health Sciences North, for example, they stop doing procedures at about 4 p.m. or 5 p.m. depending on what day, and on the weekends there's even less. What we could do is we could fund more workers and more procedures so they can do it 24 hours a day.

Think about if you're mowing your lawn: Your lawn needs to be mowed, you do the front half yourself because you own a lawn mower. Instead of doing the back half, you hire a private contractor, you pay him to buy a lawn mower and you pay him to hire somebody else and they top up on top of it. You still get your lawn mowed, but it cost you a lot more money for the back lawn than the front lawn, and that's what we're saying. Just get the privatization out. It doesn't matter that it's paid by OHIP—if you're paying more through OHIP and you're wasting taxpayers' money by doing that.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutla Karpoche): Question

Mr. Joel Harden: I just want to say for the record that my friend from Sudbury was absolutely “based,” to cite the language of young people back in Ottawa Centre. I loved your discussion of “Gouging Galen Weston”—\$8 for two loaves of bread.

I look at Oxfam International. Oxfam International has recently told us that every single day—every single second, actually—the five largest energy companies on the planet are making a profit of \$2,600 per second. We actually have now 62 food billionaires that have been created in this pandemic.

Member, I'm wondering what this government has done to ask the super-rich like Gouging Galen to pay their fair share so seniors and low-income people can get a break?

MPP Jamie West: Thank you, Speaker, and thank you to the member for Ottawa Centre. You know, when you're talking about Gouging Galen Weston, my younger son is vegan and so there are very few types of popcorn that don't have butter in them or something that doesn't match being vegan, and this one brand he really likes—if I'm at Shoppers or one of the Loblaws locations, it's always seven or eight bucks. If I go to another grocery store or a smaller chain, it's about \$3-something or four bucks.

1750

You cannot tell me it's supply chain issues when it's one of the largest organizations. You cannot tell me that it's COVID-related. The only thing that makes sense to me and to working people across this province is they're getting ripped off. And they're waiting, they're desperately

waiting for the Conservative government to stand up and say, “Enough is enough.”

The Premier has said several times, “If you see gouging, let me know.” How has he not seen it? How has everyone not seen it? And nothing ever happens because it’s always about the Premier’s wealthy and well-connected friends, Speaker.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutla Karpoche): Question?

Mr. Sherif Sabawy: I still would like to follow-up on my last question about the laser surgery for eye surgeries because I don’t know what’s new in that. My dad, who passed away about nine years ago, already did his cataract surgery in a private clinic and we paid using OHIP. We didn’t pay anything. We went, got an appointment, got the surgery done; we didn’t pay any money for that. Actually, the clinic which we did this surgery in is on College Street, maybe about 500 metres from Parliament. That’s 11 or 12 years ago.

I don’t understand why this is a big thing, especially coming after COVID and we have a backlog and we are trying to clear it. Again, can you please explain it to me?

MPP Jamie West: It’s a very similar question to last time about the private surgeries and private clinics. I was sitting in committee for Bill 60, this bill so that they can privatize and put more money into their wealthy friends’ pockets. Time and time again we were told, “You aren’t going to pay with your credit card and it can’t be abused.” And then time and time again people would come forward and they would say three things: (1) “I was never consulted or asked”; (2) “Oh yes, yes, there’s upselling all the time. It happens all the time because the doctor says, ‘Well, you could get this, but I recommend this’” and we believe doctors and trust them, so it happens all the time; and (3) “I don’t know why you’re doing this when we can do this faster, cheaper, more effectively through the public option.”

The only thing that makes sense to me is, when you sell off private services, it makes a lot of people rich. When you sell off the 407, it makes people rich; when you sell off Hydro One, it makes a lot of people rich. And do you know who pays a lot more for it? The public. The regular taxpayers pay a lot more money for it.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutla Karpoche): Further debate?

Ms. Stephanie Bowman: I rise today to debate Bill 85, Building a Strong Ontario Act. It is disheartening to see that Ontario is getting more of the same in this year’s budget. It’s a status quo, uninspiring budget, when even this government acknowledges that their status quo is not working.

Life in Ontario is not better under this government. Health care isn’t better; it’s worse. Education isn’t better; it’s worse. Housing affordability isn’t better; it’s worse. People feel less safe. Commuting time isn’t better, and the greenbelt certainly isn’t feeling any better. And this budget does not make life better for Ontarians who are sick and in need of ER care, nor for Ontario families, students, teachers and education workers. It doesn’t make life better for the three million people in this province’s largest city

who are seeing service cuts on the TTC, who are seeing property taxes rise because of Bill 23, nor for the 50,000 Ontarians who decided to look for a better life outside of this province because, to them, the current and future here look grim.

Speaker, this is a budget from a government that has a history of overpromising and underdelivering, and this budget looks to be no different. People are the most vital part of our economy and this budget fails to meet the needs of the people of Ontario. It fails to provide money to retain our health care workers for a healthy health care system. It fails to learn from the education experts and provide sufficient operational funding to our education system so that kids can learn with teachers and education workers who are supported.

Ontario’s economy has been the envy of the country because we have a vital publicly-funded health care system and education system, because we have had a well-educated workforce, and because we have a diversified economy.

This budget repeats the government promise to build 1.5 million new homes by 2031, but the budget shows the government won’t even be halfway there in the first five years of a 10-year plan. One would expect the government, then, to do something different, like building more of that housing themselves, but they’re sticking to the uninspiring status quo.

Speaker, if this government were serious about helping those most in need of affordable housing, they would build it themselves. Last year, a government news release titled “Ontario Providing More Affordable Housing in Barrie” touted the construction of two units. Speaker, this budget makes one wonder if the members opposite understand the scale of the problem and whether they believe they need to play a role in fixing it. This government could have enacted in this bill a crown corporation to finance and build housing, especially deeply affordable housing. This budget could have been the “aha” moment for this government to realize that it needs to build homes, not just highways. Instead, we see an 11% increase—\$2.8 billion dollars more—dedicated to building highways, but that kind of increase is not there for affordable housing.

Similarly, this bill makes amendments to the Dedicated Funding for Public Transportation Act. I believe in that kind of funding, but I’m wondering about this government’s commitment to it, considering the massive cuts the TTC is being forced to make. This budget was an opportunity to make sure public transit systems across the province have the funding they need to keep running their services that commuters rely on, to make sure they feel safe on a transit system that is busy and full of riders. Once again, they are letting commuters down.

We know that affordability is a challenge for people in Ontario, especially those with lower incomes. The rent of a one-bedroom has reached \$2,500 a month in Toronto, and it’s approaching that level everywhere, even in smaller cities. Speaker, if you’re a young person in Toronto starting out and make \$50,000 a year—a healthy income—your net pay will be \$3,055 per month, so you have \$555

dollars left to pay for the rising cost of food, transportation, your phone etc. No wonder young people are leaving Ontario for a better life elsewhere.

And while I welcome the \$202-million increase in funding for supportive housing and homelessness programs, this money is likely insufficient when it comes to addressing the homelessness crisis. But I say “likely,” Speaker, because we don’t really know, because this is a government that stopped reporting how many homeless people we have in our province. It’s hard to understand how the government believes it has a credible plan for working with cities to help the homeless when it refuses to count the number of people who need help.

Speaker, this budget also leaves behind people when it comes to health and education. The expansion of GAINS is welcome, and it’s something that my Ontario Liberal colleagues and I have advocated for in the past. We need to support our seniors, and we need to support families too. A \$50 increase to the Ontario Child Benefit for low-income families would have gone a long way to helping them put food on the table during this affordability crisis. We debated earlier today the underspending of this government on education and the impact that that is having on teachers, education workers and, especially, students. As school boards face tough decisions to cut workers, this government sets aside \$4 billion in contingency funds.

And, Speaker, let’s talk about daycare and how that program is leaving people behind. Just last week, I received a frustrated call from a constituent who manages a daycare in Don Valley West. She said that out of the three new ECEs who she wanted to hire, two declined her

offer because they were leaving to work in Alberta. And she says she’s not the only one in her industry who has experienced this. The federal government is giving billions to Ontario to create \$10-a-day child care, and Ontario needs to meet its end of the bargain and pay daycare workers enough to ensure they can afford to live and work here.

And finally, Speaker we need a budget that invests in Ontario’s future now. We need a budget that drives productivity in all sectors. I know this government likes to say they run things like a business, but smart businesses diversify their portfolio. This government is keen to invest in manufacturing jobs, and that’s good; we need jobs in the sector. But we also need good jobs in other important sectors: the green economy, where Ontario could be a leader; the high-tech sector; agriculture; biotech—the list goes on. Toronto has a very solid foundation as the third-largest tech hub in North America, but we need to invest in workers, in our universities, in research hubs, to make sure that Ontario graduates want to stay here in Ontario because they believe they can rely on the health care and education system that helped them reach their full potential.

We need a government that invests in young, high-potential—

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutla Karpoche): I’m sorry to interrupt the member, but it is now 6 p.m.

Second reading debate deemed adjourned.

The Acting Speaker (Ms. Bhutla Karpoche): The House stands adjourned until tomorrow at 9 a.m.

The House adjourned at 1800.

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Thanigasalam, Vijay (PC)	Scarborough—Rouge Park	
Thompson, Hon. / L'hon. Lisa M. (PC)	Huron—Bruce	Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs / Ministre de l'Agriculture, de l'Alimentation et des Affaires rurales
Tibollo, Hon. / L'hon. Michael A. (PC)	Vaughan—Woodbridge	Associate Minister of Mental Health and Addictions / Ministre associé délégué au dossier de la Santé mentale et de la Lutte contre les dépendances
Triantafilopoulos, Effie J. (PC)	Oakville North—Burlington / Oakville-Nord—Burlington	
Vanthof, John (NDP)	Timiskaming—Cochrane	Opposition House Leader / Leader parlementaire de l'opposition officielle
Vaugeois, Lise (NDP)	Thunder Bay—Superior North / Thunder Bay—Supérieur-Nord	
Wai, Daisy (PC)	Richmond Hill	

Member and Party / Député(e) et parti	Constituency / Circonscription	Other responsibilities / Autres responsabilités
West, Jamie (NDP)	Sudbury	
Williams, Hon. / L'hon. Charmaine A. (PC)	Brampton Centre / Brampton-Centre	Associate Minister of Women's Social and Economic Opportunity / Ministre associée des Perspectives sociales et économiques pour les femmes
Wong-Tam, Kristyn (NDP)	Toronto Centre / Toronto-Centre	
Yakabuski, John (PC)	Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke	
Vacant	Kanata—Carleton	