

Legislative
Assembly
of Ontario



Assemblée
législative
de l'Ontario

**Official Report
of Debates
(Hansard)**

A-38

**Journal
des débats
(Hansard)**

A-38

**Standing Committee on
Government Agencies**

Intended appointments

**Comité permanent des
organismes gouvernementaux**

Nominations prévues

1st Session
43rd Parliament

Thursday 28 November 2024

1^{re} session
43^e législature

Jeudi 28 novembre 2024

Chair: David Smith
Clerk: Isaiah Thorning

Président : David Smith
Greffier : Isaiah Thorning

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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

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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

STANDING COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT AGENCIES

COMITÉ PERMANENT DES ORGANISMES GOUVERNEMENTAUX

Thursday 28 November 2024

Jeudi 28 novembre 2024

The committee met at 0900 in room 151.

The Chair (Mr. David Smith): Good morning, everyone. The Standing Committee on Government Agencies will now come to order. We are joined by the staff from legislative research, Hansard and broadcast and recording. As always, all comments by members and witnesses should come through the Chair.

INTENDED APPOINTMENTS

MS. LETIZIA FILIPPAZZO

Review of intended appointment, selected by official opposition party: Letizia Filippazzo, intended appointee as member, Assessment Review Board.

The Chair (Mr. David Smith): Our first intended appointee today is Letizia Filippazzo, nominated as member of the Assessment Review Board.

You will make an initial statement at your discretion. Following this, there will be questions from members of the committee. With that questioning, we will start with the government, followed by the official opposition, with 15 minutes allotted to each recognized party. Any time you take in your statement will be deducted from the time allotted to the government.

You may proceed. Thank you very much.

Ms. Letizia Filippazzo: Thank you. Good morning, Chair, Vice-Chair and members of the Standing Committee on Government Agencies. I am pleased to discuss my qualifications to be a part-time member for the Assessment Review Board.

My interest and desire to serve the public has led me before you today. Over the past 10 years, I dedicated my professional career as a lawyer, first in private practice, assisting clients with legal matters related to real estate, commercial, business, provincial and municipal offences, as well as licensing matters.

What I enjoyed the most about this stage of my career was having been entrusted with significant issues pertaining to families, individuals and corporations concerning their greatest assets, a responsibility that I have never taken lightly.

Being able to help clients through a legal process, I always did my very best with each transaction and interaction to help my clients understand the issues and how the law applies to them. Negotiating, finding solutions and settling matters where possible through resolution or completing transaction as efficiently as possible: These are skills and abilities I carry with me today.

Simply put, I enjoyed helping clients find a way forward from a legal issue, and work through and manage difficult situations and problems to deliver the best possible result.

Around this time, I instructed industry professionals on the applicability of legal matters as it related to their professional and licensing qualifications. After about six years of private practice, I wanted to develop my skills and work in public practice dealing with regulation and licensing.

As in-house counsel for an Ontario regulator, my role entailed prosecuting licensees and protecting the public interest. Appearing before administrative tribunals, I gained an understanding of not just what is required to obtain a licence, but the ethical, legal and professional standards required of licence holders to maintain a licence in Ontario.

Here, I could see the balance of two perspectives: (1) the licence holder seeking to obtain or maintain their livelihood; and (2) the responsibility of the regulator to protect the public interest, which is paramount.

About a year ago, I applied for this role and enrolled in a related professional development course and certificate program to complement my past experience, as well as increase my knowledge in the area of administrative law, all the while continuing to serve the public.

As a resident of Toronto, where I raise my young family, I am motivated professionally and personally to serve the public in a positive and meaningful way. My goal and motivation here as a candidate is to participate in proceedings that deliver fair and even-handed decisions for Ontarians, ensuring that: they are clear in terms of the expected process and how the proceeding will run; the applicable law that may apply to the parties; unbiased by allowing all parties a safe opportunity to exercise their legal rights; accessible so all parties may participate in the proceeding itself, including ensuring anyone new to the process or representing themselves can do so in a clear and fair manner.

My experience is balanced and can be applied to give an impartial perspective, and resolve, simplify and distill issues where possible and, if not possible, to ensure efficient process and decision-making.

I thank you for your time, and I'm happy to answer any questions.

The Chair (Mr. David Smith): Thank you very much. I'll turn attention to the government side, recognizing MPP Martin. Go ahead, please.

Mrs. Robin Martin: Thank you very much for being here and thank you for putting your name forward for the appointment. It's important to have qualified candidates, and you've obviously got a lot of qualifications here.

I was just wondering if you could describe for us your professional experience, and how you think that that has prepared you for this role on the Assessment Review Board.

Ms. Letizia Filippazzo: Thank you for the question.

In terms of my experience, I can say that my qualifications of dealing with negotiation; dealing with several different parties, having to see both perspectives; being able to interpret legislation, regulations, rules and having to apply them as required; problem solving and simplifying issues has always been important. Managing difficult and sensitive information and handling situations in a professional manner; the ability to communicate with various stakeholders; synthesizing information, both verbally and being able to communicate that in written format as well, in a clear and simple way, I think is crucial here—and maintaining an objective perspective that is consistent, fair and efficient.

The Chair (Mr. David Smith): Recognizing MPP Dowie. Go ahead, please.

Mr. Andrew Dowie: Thank you so much for being here. I'm actually elated to just hear your comments because ultimately dealing with members of the public who are frustrated with their assessment requires all those tremendous skills. So thank you for sharing that.

I'm wondering if you could dive deeper into the experience that you have with property assessments and with tax issues, particularly in the province of Ontario.

Ms. Letizia Filippazzo: The experience that I have is having dealt with, like I said, individuals, clients, corporations related to real estate matters—commercial and residential real estate. I've represented clients on transactions, negotiated contracts with them that had to do with property taxes, and this is applicable where property taxes were not yet assessed. And also helping them through transactions and walking through the legal process where taxes were assessed and adjustments had to be made in those situations.

The Chair (Mr. David Smith): Recognizing MPP Smith. Go ahead, please.

Ms. Laura Smith: Through you, Chair, I want to also thank you for putting your name forward.

The ARB is responsible for making impartial decisions regarding property assessments, and you've talked about your legal experience, your six years in private practice, and the balance and the safe opportunities that you envisioned. This might be a piggyback of the previous question, but I really want to home in on making impartial decisions and the capability of being balanced, as you've described it. How would you ensure that your decisions are fair and unbiased?

Ms. Letizia Filippazzo: Thank you for that question.

I think reviewing the case before me and understanding what each party is coming to the table with—what their motivations are; what the issues are; simplifying those issues; resolving the issues, if possible; and being able to agree to anything during a process I think is important. Working with all parties is essential.

I hope that answered your question.

The Chair (Mr. David Smith): MPP Hamid, go ahead, please.

MPP Zee Hamid: Thank you for being here. You have a really impressive résumé. I'm sure you've had to make a lot of difficult decisions in your professional career. Can you give us an example of one difficult decision you made in your professional career? What was it and what was the outcome?

Ms. Letizia Filippazzo: Perhaps I could kind of bring it back to a difficult situation that I dealt with, and hopefully this helps address your question, again.

I do recall one significant time where I had clients who were extremely frustrated at a process. They were before me, we were talking through it, and they were very vocal about their frustration. How I dealt with a situation like that is to try to calm them down, remind them what the process is and what sort of objectives everyone is looking to achieve at the end of it, and not withdrawing. So a decision that I decided to make in that scenario was to keep going with them through the process and not backing away. I'm not afraid to walk through the situation where necessary.

The Chair (Mr. David Smith): Recognizing MPP Jordan. Go ahead, please.

0910

Mr. John Jordan: Thanks for being here and sharing your time. Transparency and accountability are important elements with the ARB. Can you tell us how you would ensure transparency and accountability in the decisions made by the ARB?

Ms. Letizia Filippazzo: Yes, thank you. I think what I'd like to start with is, first, clarity of the process and making sure that all parties who are coming to the table understand full well what exactly is going to happen, how it affects them, what each role is for each individual and continuing with that theme in terms of clear and simple communication and following that through in the written format in terms of decisions. And if there are issues that can be worked through during the process, again, trying to simplify, distill.

If it's possible to do that and a decision still needs to be made, trying to do that as efficiently and clearly as possible is the objective that I would have.

The Chair (Mr. David Smith): MPP Pinsonneault, go ahead, please.

Mr. Steve Pinsonneault: Thank you for coming out today. Your résumé is impressive.

How do you prioritize your time and manage complex cases to ensure timely and effective decisions?

Ms. Letizia Filippazzo: Thank you for the question.

I prioritize my time by the practice of having been a working professional: being organized, scheduling, managing changing priorities and keeping electronic files, ensuring that all matters are continuing to progress, so fulfilling each role and those responsibilities are continuously met and ensuring that there is always a little bit of time left over in case something urgent comes in, so being able to deal with that and change as you go.

Mr. Steve Pinsonneault: Thank you for that.

The Chair (Mr. David Smith): Recognizing MPP Hamid. Go ahead, please.

MPP Zee Hamid: Related to that, I just thought of another question: What is your understanding of impartiality and integrity in the work of the ARB, and how do you maintain these qualities in a challenging and high-pressure environment?

Ms. Letizia Filippazzo: Impartiality is to understand without any sort of biased perspective as to each party and what they're looking to bring forward and get out of the situation.

I'm sorry; could you repeat the second part of your question?

MPP Zee Hamid: How do you maintain these qualities in a challenging and high-pressure environment?

Ms. Letizia Filippazzo: I think, again, just going back to trying to understand, communicate, listen—if there are issues that can be resolved along the way, I think it makes for a much simpler process, and that, ultimately, in my opinion, has always led to a more efficient and clear process. So it helps move things along. For me, I like things in a simple and clear way, so that is my outlook on it.

The Chair (Mr. David Smith): Recognizing MPP Smith. Go ahead, please.

Ms. Laura Smith: I'll circle back to my other question. We talked about your experience and your wide range and your scope of practice, but could you talk about how these experiences specifically within the ARB prepared you for this possible new role in the ARB?

Ms. Letizia Filippazzo: If I understand correctly, I think you're looking at why would I want to be an adjudicator, or what would make me a successful adjudicator.

Ms. Laura Smith: Actually, both.

Ms. Letizia Filippazzo: In terms of the experience that I have, I've appeared before administrative tribunals, and I'm aware of how they operate. I've provided legal advice and recommendations on legal issues relevant to administrative tribunals—

Ms. Laura Smith: Which tribunals did you—

Ms. Letizia Filippazzo: The Licence Appeal Tribunal, Landlord and Tenant Board—mostly the Licence Appeal Tribunal.

Ms. Laura Smith: Any others?

Ms. Letizia Filippazzo: No.

Ms. Laura Smith: Okay.

Ms. Letizia Filippazzo: So providing legal advice and drafting legal documents that are relevant to those administrative matters and constantly working to maintain a timeline that's efficient and meeting those timelines. I think that would be relevant to the role as well.

Ms. Laura Smith: Timelines are very important, yes. Thank you.

The Chair (Mr. David Smith): Recognizing MPP Pinsonneault. Go ahead, please.

Mr. Steve Pinsonneault: Why do you think the work of the Assessment Review Board is important to the communities across Ontario?

Ms. Letizia Filippazzo: I think it's a very important role because I think Ontarians care a lot about their property. It's maybe their greatest asset, and I think that it's important as the Assessment Review Board itself to have a forum

in which people can come forward and dispute any sort of issues they may have related to their property taxes.

Mr. Steve Pinsonneault: Thanks for the answer.

Ms. Letizia Filippazzo: Thank you.

The Chair (Mr. David Smith): I want to thank the government side.

Now we'll be turning to the official opposition, recognizing MPP Pasma. Go ahead, please.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Thank you very much, Ms. Filippazzo, for being here this morning. I know it's not the most comfortable process, but it's an important part of our democratic system so that the public can have confidence that appointments are being made based on merit and not connections to the government, and also that people have the appropriate qualifications for the appointment that they're receiving so that we know that our tribunals and agencies are functioning as well as possible for the people of Ontario. So we appreciate you being here this morning.

You are currently a lawyer at the Home Construction Regulatory Authority.

Ms. Letizia Filippazzo: Yes.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: The certificate that you're here for this morning is for the Assessment Review Board, but you're also being appointed to the Licence Appeal Tribunal?

Ms. Letizia Filippazzo: I believe there's a cross-appointment, but my understanding is, my application was as a part-time member for the Assessment Review Board.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: So you will only be working for the Assessment Review Board if this appointment goes forward this morning?

Ms. Letizia Filippazzo: My understanding is that I'm called to that role and, if needed, on a cross-appointment.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: So you could hear hearings for the Licence Appeal Tribunal as well, or if there are issues that fall under both of them, you would do a hearing that could issue a sort of joint decision?

Ms. Letizia Filippazzo: No, I believe they're separate, and it would be a calling for different roles. Like I said, the role that I've applied for is for the Assessment Review Board.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Sorry. I'm a little confused. But your expectation is, you would only be doing hearings for the Assessment Review Board, then?

Ms. Letizia Filippazzo: Yes. Potentially, there may be, I think, if needed, at the Licence Appeal Tribunal—I would be called there too. But I'm not sure of the workings of that yet.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: We're both confused. All right. But your plan is to continue as counsel with the Home Construction Regulatory Authority as well?

Ms. Letizia Filippazzo: When I applied for the role, I wanted to, like I said in my opening statement, complement my past perspectives in terms of having private practice and public practice. This seemed like a positive, natural growth for me to be able to apply those skills. As a part-time member, and joining the certificate program as well, this would allow me to sort of work off of all of that experience. But yes, for the time being, that's what I have in mind.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Okay, so doing both roles, but the Assessment Review Board sort of off the side of your desk, in addition to a full-time position—

Ms. Letizia Filippazzo: No, not off the side of my desk. I would say it's a very intentional role that I've applied for. I have carved out time for this in my professional career and I look forward to fulfilling that role.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: But just so I understand: full-time hours at the HCRA plus a part-time position at the Assessment Review Board?

Ms. Letizia Filippazzo: That has not been finalized, but I will adjust my schedule accordingly.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Because my concern is that we are seeing incredibly lengthy delays at the HCRA. For instance, I have several constituents who filed a complaint with the HCRA in July 2021; they are still waiting on resolution of that complaint, which I can only assume means that the workload at HCRA is incredibly high, or I don't understand how it could take more than three and a half years for resolution of a pretty straightforward complaint where people paid a deposit six years ago and still haven't received housing.

0920

So I'm wondering: Given that workload at the Home Construction Regulatory Authority, how will you manage the workload of a full-time position there plus a part-time appointment at the Assessment Review Board?

Ms. Letizia Filippazzo: I can't speak to how organizations are run. I'm happy to speak to my experience and—

Ms. Chandra Pasma: I didn't ask for your opinion on how the HCRA is run. I just asked: Given the challenges there, and the delays and the workload, how are you going to balance your time between a full-time workload there—

Mr. Andrew Dowie: Chair, point of order?

The Chair (Mr. David Smith): Do you have a point of order?

Mr. Andrew Dowie: Chair, I respect the concern of the member opposite with time allocation, but ultimately, the purpose of today is about whether the candidate is suitable for the role here in her experience and what they can contribute to the role. So I would like to return back to the conversation about her contributions to the actual Assessment Review Board.

The Chair (Mr. David Smith): I want to thank the member for recognizing that, but I don't consider that to be a point of order.

I would ask the member to continue.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Given this scenario, how will you balance the workload so that the Assessment Review Board is receiving your full attention during the time that you are working there as well?

Ms. Letizia Filippazzo: Well, this is a part-time appointment, as I understand, so scheduling and ensuring that I have dedicated—which I've mentioned that I would—time to fulfilling that role. I believe that I am a responsible professional that can fulfill my roles that I am committed to in any aspect.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: The Assessment Review Board has been criticized for delays in resolving large-dollar, non-residential appeals, which creates uncertainty for smaller municipalities. So given your heavy workload and the need for reasonable time frames for these smaller municipal-

ities, again, how are you going to manage the workload so that people who are coming before the Assessment Review Board are receiving a fair and timely hearing?

Ms. Letizia Filippazzo: What I can say is, again, as a professional who has been working for the past several years, I think managing one's expectations in a role—how I would approach when appointed, how to manage these issues, how to manage proceedings—is to come to the table as prepared as possible to work with all parties that are involved and to work as efficiently, as fairly as possible to deliver timely results. That's what I have always done and would endeavour to do here.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: The Assessment Review Board has also been criticized for a lack of transparency in decision-making and not conducting quality reviews of members' oral decisions, and oral decisions make up 80% of all board members' decisions. So as a board member, what strategies will you employ to increase transparency at the Assessment Review Board?

Ms. Letizia Filippazzo: I'm sorry; transparency in decision-making, or—

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Yes, and the quality of decision-making.

Ms. Letizia Filippazzo: I guess first, if I can talk a little bit about how I see where transparency and equality starts in the process, I think having a fair process is crucial, and being very clear and communicating in a simplified form, I think, contributes to the transparency aspect that you're alluding to. Explaining the process, ensuring fairness is present throughout the process itself, ensuring that all parties are respected and heard and listening also contributes to transparency. If issues cannot be resolved, if problems cannot be dispelled, then being able to continue to communicate in a clear and effective manner—and what I think would continue to deliver transparency is simplicity and clarity in decisions, communication and listening throughout.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Okay. Thank you.

The Assessment Review Board, like other tribunals under Tribunals Ontario, has moved to a digital-first model, meaning that the majority of hearings are being held virtually, usually electronically. In the case of the Assessment Review Board, in the past two fiscal years, not a single, in-person hearing has been held. They have been held by video conference and teleconference, and we know—we've seen that that affects people's access to the tribunals. There's not equitable access to Internet. Certainly, for lower income people and for seniors and newcomers in particular, it can be challenging to navigate a hearing where you're not sure of the rules and the process via video conference rather than in-person.

So, what will you do in your role to ensure that everybody has access to a fair hearing, regardless of their access to Internet, their ability to understand the rules and that they will receive an in-person hearing if that's what they request?

Ms. Letizia Filippazzo: I can't speak to what accommodations can be made in terms of the inner workings of policies and that sort of thing, but what I can say is, in my personal experience, how I have dealt with these situations,

either working through with clients or with the public in general, the communication aspect is key. I know I've mentioned this before, but listening to what people need is very important—and adjusting accordingly.

Many times, I've had dealings with people who've said, "Instead of communicating by email, can we speak over the phone?" Absolutely. "Instead of over the phone, can we do video conference?" Absolutely. If there's a situation where someone may have a language barrier and they feel more comfortable having a support person with them who can translate for them, that is absolutely something that I have accommodated in the past.

Those are some examples that I can think of, but I think it's important to keep that communication and understanding what it is that people need.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Thank you. I appreciate that answer.

I'm going to ask some quick, uncomfortable but necessary questions. Have you ever been a member of the Progressive Conservative Party of Ontario?

Ms. Letizia Filippazzo: No.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Have you ever been a member of the Conservative Party federally?

Ms. Letizia Filippazzo: No.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Have you ever donated to the Progressive Conservative Party?

Ms. Letizia Filippazzo: No.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Have you ever donated to the Conservative Party?

Ms. Letizia Filippazzo: No.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Have you ever worked on a Conservative election campaign?

Ms. Letizia Filippazzo: No.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Did anyone ask you to submit an application for this position?

Ms. Letizia Filippazzo: No. I did so of my own free will.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Have you ever sat at the Premier's table at a family wedding?

Ms. Letizia Filippazzo: No.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: All right. Thank you very much, Ms. Filippazzo.

The Chair (Mr. David Smith): That concludes the time for your oral questioning. I'd like to thank you for coming.

Ms. Letizia Filippazzo: Thank you very much.

MS. ANJU VIRMANI KUMAR

Review of intended appointment, selected by government party: Anju Virmani Kumar, intended appointee as member, Toronto Metropolitan University board of governors.

The Chair (Mr. David Smith): Our second intended appointment today is Anju Kumar, nominated as member of the Toronto Metropolitan University board of governors.

Thanks for coming. You may make an initial statement at your discretion. Following this, there will be questions from members of the committee. With that questioning, we will start with the government, followed by the official opposition, with 15 minutes allotted to each recognized party.

Any time you take in your statement will be deducted from the time allotted to the government. You may proceed now.

Ms. Anju Virmani Kumar: Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. Chair and members of the standing committee, it is my pleasure to be here this morning to present to you myself and my qualifications for a position on the Toronto Metropolitan University board of governors.

My name is Anju Virmani Kumar. I was born in New Delhi, India. In April 2025, I will mark a very important occasion for me: I will have been in this country for 50 years. I'm really proud of that: being a Canadian, being an Ontarian and being a very productive member of society. I did most of my growing up in North America. I was formerly the chief information officer at Cargojet, which is a Canadian success story and has played an important role in the Canadian logistics and e-commerce space, particularly during COVID time, when Cargojet was instrumental in flying PPE and other supplies from across the world. In my role as the chief information officer, I had full responsibility for the technology, information and infrastructure, to ensure that the technology strategy of the organization was in sync with the corporation's objectives.

0930

Aviation, as you all know, is a very highly regulated industry that relies on solid procedures, sound judgment, good processes and good governance. In the past, I have run successful consulting companies, mainly in the areas of implementing large-scale software solutions in order to solve complex business problems. Having been in many corporate environments, I developed a passion in the area of corporate governance and corporate social responsibility. In 2007, I decided to get more involved with governance issues at the board level. I attended a course at the Directors College at McMaster University, which gave me the designation of a charter director. I was one of the first graduating classes in 2007.

As my family and I grew up here, I felt the need to give back to my community with my skills and time, as my children needed me less. I got involved in nurturing entrepreneurship through mentoring. As a former board member of TIE, which is the Indus Entrepreneurs, I accompanied the Premier at the time on his trade delegation to India. I was also appointed by Prime Minister Stephen Harper to serve on the advisory council for national security as well as the Cross-Cultural Roundtable on Security.

Earlier this year, I had a conversation with Dr. Lachemi, the president of Toronto Metropolitan University, regarding new ways to further serve my Toronto community and foster a sense of inclusivity in the higher education sector. Dr. Lachemi advised that I consider the recommendation for a potential appointment to the Toronto Metropolitan University by the Lieutenant Governor in Council. Upon reviewing the function and qualification of the board of directors, I saw myself as a fit candidate. As a Lieutenant Governor in Council appointment, I will always act in good faith with the view to the best interests of the university, the students and all other stakeholders.

In addition to my passion for public service, I'm highly regarded for my skills in the fields of technology, finance,

risk management, communications strategies, and have an in-depth background of governance and corporate social responsibility and accountability. I'm committed to using my skills, experience and background to serve the institution and assist in carrying out its organizational goals.

I come from a family of educators and strongly believe that education is a great equalizer. I'm eager to assist in creating a safe, inclusive environment which will fuel the pipeline of talent that will meet the needs of Ontario and its growing economy. As I have always been an advocate for inclusive learning environments, I will continue to quell the negative stigma about certain fields of learning, like STEM, and help provide better opportunities for the students of tomorrow.

As a resident of the area, I know the impact this prominent university has on its community and the workforce. My qualifications speak for themselves, and I feel that I am in a unique position to offer insight, assist in decision-making and help lead the continued success of TMU.

My leadership style is inclusive and collaborative. I believe in teamwork, and my key strength is my ability to think outside the box and propose solutions to meet challenges that are efficient, cost-effective, creative and innovative. It's an honour to stand before this committee, once again, and I thank the members present for considering myself for this potential appointment.

The Chair (Mr. David Smith): Thank you very much. Turning to the government side, recognizing MPP Smith, go ahead, please.

Ms. Laura Smith: Through you, Chair, first I want to start by thanking you for putting your application forward on this very important role.

You talked about STEM opportunities and coming from a family of educators. There's a growing concern about the need to train individuals for human health care resources in Ontario, from nursing to medical—a huge need for post-secondary institutions to focus on training the next generation. You came from a generation, as you expressed, that believes so heavily in education.

Specifically, seeing how Toronto Metropolitan University will be opening a new medical school, how will you be able to leverage your experience as a woman in STEM to ensure that TMU continues to educate world-class doctors?

Ms. Anju Virmani Kumar: I actually have been already very involved with TMU's medical school. I have advised Dr. Lachemi and the dean, Ms. Teresa Chan, as they were launching the school, so for the last two years, I have been very involved with them.

Clearly, the school is going to provide first-class education, with technology-based solutions. TMU is a very innovative university, and the use of technology, AI and other resources is going to be very necessary to produce the doctors and the physicians of tomorrow. As you all know, AI and technology in health care is going to be another equalizer and serve the needs of Ontarians who sometimes don't have those resources. The fact that they are working with a very diverse student population that will support the communities around—it's really exciting for me to see

that happen, and that people get access to the care and the languages and the people who represent them.

The Chair (Mr. David Smith): MPP Hamid.

MPP Zee Hamid: Thank you for being here.

You mentioned the diverse student population. We know that it's crucial for public universities to create an environment that's free from hate, discrimination and disruption so students can focus on higher education.

How will you ensure the university's governance reflects the needs of diverse students—and staff, actually, and the broader community?

Ms. Anju Virmani Kumar: Most of it comes down to the vision of the organization and the strategy. The vision and the strategic plan clearly states that inclusiveness is a big part already of the university.

As a member of the board of governance, I think it's really important to ensure that the management follows the guidelines that have been set for inclusivity and that the board questions them and has the difficult conversations—and have those conversations that ensure that the strategic plan is being followed and that every objective that they have leads to a measurement of diversity and inclusiveness, not just in gender or race, but in age, in experience, different countries that they come from. Being able to measure those metrics is going to let you know whether we've made any progress.

The Chair (Mr. David Smith): MPP Pinsonneault.

Mr. Steve Pinsonneault: A university's board of governors is responsible for making large decisions on behalf of the institution, including selecting the president, passing budgets and approving plans for future initiatives.

As a potential board member, what would you do to ensure the continued and future success of Toronto Metropolitan University and post-secondary education as a whole?

Ms. Anju Virmani Kumar: As a board member—it's the responsibility of the board to have a clear succession plan for the president and CEO, which is a key aspect of board governance. The board would have to ensure that there is a process in place where potential replacements are identified and put through the talent pipeline so they are prepared for the transition.

Sorry—what was your other question?

Mr. Steve Pinsonneault: The success of the university—ensure the success of the university and post-secondary education as a whole.

Ms. Anju Virmani Kumar: I really do believe in education—and how do you ensure success? It's the responsibility of the board to make sure that the strategic plan of the organization is being followed, which is to create citizens for tomorrow. Are we training them in the right fields that are going to be needed? Are we training them in AI? What is our need for the next five years and for the next 10 years? How are we spending our money?

0940

Opening a medical school is a huge financial commitment—so was the law school, and we've since seen success from there. Students who have come in through the law school sometimes have been the first-time students who ever went to university in this province.

Part of the responsibility of the board, I always say, is to have antennas around you, where you actually talk to the people on the ground, see what the needs of the community and the economy are, before making those large decisions, and get help when you need it.

The Chair (Mr. David Smith): MPP Hamid.

MPP Zee Hamid: Just continuing from that: The idea of bridging the gap between education and career skills is often something that's talked about in the education sector. I don't know if my university education prepared me for this career.

As a candidate, what are some of the gaps you've seen, and what steps do you believe are necessary to prepare young people for meaningful careers—especially university graduates?

Ms. Anju Virmani Kumar: My own children, when they came out of university, weren't prepared for any careers that they could actually get a job in. I actually take that back. My daughter studied engineering and then went into the federal government, and she works for global affairs.

Career transitions happen in people's lives.

I think a university like TMU needs to be connected with the employers so they understand what kind of employees they need. There has to be this partnership between organizations and the university—so creating internships, providing them job experience, teaching financial literacy. These are things, sometimes, that are critically missing.

Obviously, people think that AI is going to take over their jobs, but the people with the AI knowledge will take over the jobs from people who refuse to learn AI.

The Chair (Mr. David Smith): MPP Martin.

Mrs. Robin Martin: If you were to receive this appointment, can you tell us what lasting impact you would like to have on the institution—you and your fellow board members. What legacy would you like to leave?

Ms. Anju Virmani Kumar: I don't feel like I'm that important to leave a legacy behind, but I would like to—I've been very fortunate. I'm considered a role model for women in STEM programs and reaching the C-level, being a woman of colour reaching the C-level and fighting all the stigma that goes with that.

My legacy would be to help women reach their potential and help men realize what they need to do to be inclusive and be partners in that process. I would do that through mentoring; I would do that through my own ability to fund some scholarships, which I have done at TMU, so—

The Chair (Mr. David Smith): That concludes the time for the government side.

We'll now turn to the official opposition. MPP Pasma.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Thank you very much for being here this morning. I know it's not the most comfortable process, but it is an important part of our democratic process, so that the public can have confidence that appointments are being made on the basis of merit and not connections to the government. So we appreciate you being here this morning and sitting through this uncomfortable process.

Ms. Anju Virmani Kumar: It's not uncomfortable at all. Part of being on a board is dealing with discomfort.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Well, I'm glad to hear that.

I'm going to read to you something from the Toronto Metropolitan University's board of governors' budget document from June, which is talking about the situational context for TMU and for their proposed budget, which they say comes in the “context of continued revenue constraints and uncertainty,” including:

“—continued tuition fee freeze for most students

“—no new funded domestic spaces from the province

“—time-limited new funding from provincial government

“—continuing to recruit international students in a challenging environment

“—ongoing cost pressures related to inflation”

I don't think TMU is in a unique position. We're hearing this from post-secondary institutions across the province, with no increased funding from the provincial government over the past six years despite a tuition freeze, the lowest per capita rate of student funding in the entire country—well below—and now this cap on international students, which universities were using to make up for the lack of increased funding from the other two pillars of funding available to them.

So given this context, TMU has actually been in a pretty fortunate position so far, that they've been able to put forward a balanced budget. Other post-secondary institutions haven't been so lucky. Algonquin College in my riding has a \$30-million deficit this year that they need to deal with. Carleton University, which is just over the border from my riding, has a \$50-million deficit.

How do you see your role on the board of governors in helping to address this financial challenge and uncertainty for TMU so that they can continue to operate as a high-quality post-secondary institution?

Ms. Anju Virmani Kumar: As you said, TMU is not in a unique position. Many industries, including education, are in very similar positions. The same pressures that apply to TMU—lack of funding, inflation—all of these you feel across the board.

So, as the strategic plan implies, we have to make sure that the budget we do have is used appropriately to fund the most important high-priority projects. As a board member, you always have to look at risk to decide which projects will go forward. That's not new to TMU; that's true for any organization that has a board.

Even if you don't have a board, you still have to look at where your money is going to go and get the most low-hanging fruit to reach the same goals—that you're creating an inclusive environment with whatever funds you have.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Thank you.

We've had quite a few questions this morning about the importance of STEM and the role of the university in supporting graduates in STEM fields.

What we've seen in this challenging financial context for post-secondary institutions is cuts coming to humanities, social sciences and arts, which are very important, especially in a context where, I think, given challenges internationally and what we've seen in the United States—the importance of critical thinkers, the importance of people who are strong communicators—even in some cases, cuts

to humanities and communication programs that do affect our future economic opportunities. Queen's University had to cut its Mandarin language courses, which—who is a big potential trading partner for Canada? It's China, and we need people who can communicate fluently.

What will you do in your role as a member of the board of governors in a very constrained financial situation to make sure that we are also protecting arts, humanities and social sciences so that we are developing fully well-rounded graduates?

Ms. Anju Virmani Kumar: It's a tough job. I agree with you. It's a tough job when you have limited funding, and the population of Ontario and Canada is on the increase. As I said before, you'd have to prioritize as a board and use the prioritization to see where funds are needed most. That's something that a board would look at in any given big capital project.

TMU has also been lucky to have raised some funds from donations. As a community, I support TMU in that and it's hard to make those decisions. Just like in your own personal life, you want to do things and you can't and you pick the one that has the most bang for your buck, to see where the needs of the province are and you focus on those programs. Clearly, health care is one of them. That's why we have the Brampton medical school.

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Ms. Chandra Pasma: We recently had university and college students here at Queen's Park. I've also met with student associations in Ottawa, and one of their top concerns right now is the challenges that students are facing around affordability, that a significant portion of their income is going to housing on top of tuition fees.

When I was in university—I won't say how many years ago—I did not need to work, apart from a TAsip, in order to pay my tuition and living fees. A lot of students now are juggling work on top of their studies and they're still having trouble making ends meet. We're seeing the expansion of food banks on campus, although they're still not able to meet the needs of students who are experiencing food insecurity. I heard when the faculty were here, also a couple of weeks ago that there are now students who are sleeping on campus because they can't afford housing in their community. Universities and colleges are dealing with some of the financial challenges by increasing ancillary fees on students, so there is an additional burden on students.

How, in your role on the board of governors, do you think you can help to address these financial challenges for students so that they don't have to be going hungry, they don't have to be sleeping on campus and they can focus on doing as well as possible in their studies so that we are producing fully qualified graduates?

Ms. Anju Virmani Kumar: I think my answer is pretty similar to what I said before. When you have a limited amount of funding—and I'm very aware of the problems that students are having. I live downtown. I see international students and other students looking for jobs. They're riding bikes to deliver food. In the Indian community, some students have committed suicide. It's hard to repatriate their bodies back home.

I'm not an economist, and I'm not a policy-maker. I can only work with what we have, and my goal would be to make sure that the funds we do have are used appropriately and deliver some results. So within those constraints, funding is very clearly—everybody needs funding right now: Health care does, education does, transportation does. As I said, I'm not an economist. I can only do what my skills and my knowledge allow me to do.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Thank you.

Another challenge that students are experiencing—and it's not unique to students—is mental health challenges. We're seeing a real crisis in mental health across the province right now: not enough resources within the community; very long wait-lists for what community services are available, including 30,000 children and young people on the wait-list.

Again, within the financial constraints of post-secondary institutions, there's not a lot of capacity for them to offer mental health and student wellness services on campus. But within your role on the board of governors, how would you see student well-being and mental health as a priority for the board of governors?

Ms. Anju Virmani Kumar: It is a priority for the board of governors to have physically and mentally healthy students. I think this is where you need to partner with other organizations that have similar goals, pool our resources effectively—partnerships with either corporations, hospitals, volunteers. This is where the community comes in. The community has to support each other during these very tough, challenging times, and I think TMU has that kind of community. People are committed, alumni are committed, and we try to gather whatever resources and share. That's what families do when things get tough.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Thank you.

Ms. Anju Virmani Kumar: It's a big Ontario family.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: I absolutely agree with you.

Another thing that we've seen—and again, it's not unique to TMU, but TMU has had maybe one of the biggest examples in the province of this within the past year—is that students at the law school published an open letter expressing their opinion on an international conflict, and then there were calls for their expulsion for having done so. TMU appointed an external reviewer, and they found that the students' expression fell within the scope of academic freedom.

We are seeing some pushback against academic freedom, protection of freedom of speech and healthy debate on post-secondary campuses.

What do you see as the role of the board of governors in protecting academic freedom and making sure that people are able to express their opinion, even if their opinion is controversial? We've seen how important that academic freedom can be in challenging the status quo, which can end up resulting in new and innovative answers to challenges that we're facing, or helping foster productive debates as a society. What do you think is the role of the board of governors in protecting that academic freedom?

Ms. Anju Virmani Kumar: I would say that the role of the board is in being transparent and in listening to both

sides and getting expertise on definitions of what freedom of speech means in an academic context. I'm not an expert on human rights or freedom of speech, and I hope that the board of governors is able to get access to experts and—so it's active listening, and listening to the students, to the representatives, to the leadership, and being open and thinking out of the box, because these are new challenges and emotions are raw.

So you have to listen, you have to communicate, and you have to be open and transparent. And I'm a strong advocate of that in any corporate board.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Thank you.

I'm going to end with some quick, uncomfortable, but necessary questions.

Have you ever been a member of the Progressive Conservative Party in Ontario?

Ms. Anju Virmani Kumar: No.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Have you ever been a member of the Conservative Party federally?

Ms. Anju Virmani Kumar: No.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Have you ever donated to the Progressive Conservative Party?

Ms. Anju Virmani Kumar: I believe I have, yes.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Do you know how much?

Ms. Anju Virmani Kumar: I had forgotten, but I was reminded that it was \$1,650.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Do you remember when it was?

Ms. Anju Virmani Kumar: Maybe five, six years ago. I don't know the exact date.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Have you ever donated to the Conservative Party federally?

Ms. Anju Virmani Kumar: I think this was the federal one—sorry; I misunderstood. I think the donation I made may have been to the federal party. I'm not sure.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Well, Elections Ontario and Elections Canada say you've donated to both.

Ms. Anju Virmani Kumar: Oh, okay. I forgot.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Okay. It was long enough ago to have forgotten.

Ms. Anju Virmani Kumar: Yes. It was—I was in different times.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Have you ever worked on a Conservative election campaign?

Ms. Anju Virmani Kumar: No.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Did anyone ask you to submit an application for this position?

Ms. Anju Virmani Kumar: Yes. Dr. Lachemi, the president of TMU, suggested that I put my name in.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: That's great. That's all my questions.

The Chair (Mr. David Smith): That concludes the time available to us in this session.

I'd like to thank you, Ms. Kumar, for coming. Thank you very much.

We will now consider the intended appointment of Letizia Filippazzo, nominated as member of the Assessment Review Board.

MPP Martin.

Mrs. Robin Martin: I move concurrence in the intended appointment of Letizia Filippazzo, nominated as member of the Assessment Review Board.

The Chair (Mr. David Smith): Any discussion? Are members ready to vote? All those in favour? Those opposed? That is carried.

We will now consider the intended appointment of Anju Kumar, nominated as member of the Toronto Metropolitan University board of governors.

MPP Martin.

Mrs. Robin Martin: I move concurrence in the intended appointment of Anju Kumar, nominated as member of the Toronto Metropolitan University board of governors.

The Chair (Mr. David Smith): Any discussion? Are members ready to vote? All those in favour? Opposed? That is carried.

The deadline to review the intended appointments selected from the November 8, 2024, certificate is set out to expire on December 8, 2024. Is there unanimous consent to extend the certificate by 30 days? I hear a yes. I hear a no. Okay.

That concludes the business for today. This committee now stands adjourned.

The committee adjourned at 1001.

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Vice-Chair / Vice-Présidente

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Mr. Andrew Dowie (Windsor–Tecumseh PC)

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Ms. Sarah Jama (Hamilton Centre / Hamilton-Centre IND)

Mrs. Robin Martin (Eglinton–Lawrence PC)

Mr. Billy Pang (Markham–Unionville PC)

Ms. Chandra Pasma (Ottawa West–Nepean / Ottawa-Ouest–Nepean ND)

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