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• (1310)

[English]

Hon. Anthony Rota (Speaker of the House of Commons): Welcome to meeting number seven of the BOIE committee. The meeting will be going from 1 p.m. to 4 p.m., maximum, so three hours if need be. It's televised, as well as teleconferenced.

I thank all of you for being here today, especially on a beautiful day like today for most parts of the country. For some of you who are avoiding the rain, this is working out very well.

We'll move on to the first point of order, which is the minutes of the previous meeting. Before moving to acceptance, I understand there are two small corrections that have to be made to the minutes that were circulated.

Maybe I can call on Michel Patrice to clarify what those changes are and to make sure everyone is in accordance with them.

Mr. Michel Patrice (Deputy Clerk, Administration, House of Commons): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Actually, it's a correction to the minutes of the March 12 meeting. There was an administrative error that was made in relation to the membership of the working group, and it has been corrected. Since it was approved at the last meeting, the amendment needs to be agreed to by the board.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Do we have agreement from everyone on these changes?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Okay, we'll go on to the second one.

Number two, is there any business arising from the previous meeting?

Mr. Mark Strahl (Chief Opposition Whip): Mr. Chair, I wasn't sure if this should be in the minutes or the business.

I asked a question at the last meeting when we were deciding on an exception for printing costs. I asked what the difference in the costs of the postage would have been for Mr. Waugh if he had used the House's preferred rate as compared to when he chose to do that mailing himself. I'm just wondering if that information has been found and if it could be shared with the group.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Yes, I remember going through that.

Who will be able to answer that with detail?

Monsieur Patrice.

Mr. Michel Patrice: The information has been sent. I'm just trying to locate the information right now.

I don't know, Rebekah, if you have the information right at your fingertips. We're looking for it.

Ms. Rebekah Kletke (Chief Operations Officer, House of Commons): I'll find it and I'll pull it up.

Hon. Anthony Rota: If it's okay with everyone, we'll proceed. When it does come up, we'll interrupt and present the information.

Does that work, Mr. Strahl?

Mr. Mark Strahl: Thank you.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Is there any other business arising from the previous meeting?

Seeing none, we'll proceed to point number three on the agenda, the LTVP working group recommendations. The presenter with us today is Mr. Stanton, who is the chair of the working group on Centre Block.

I'll just hand it over, and I'm sure we'll get a wonderful report.

Bruce, it's all yours.

[Translation]

Mr. Bruce Stanton (Chair, Working Group on the LTVP and the Centre Block Rehabilitation): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon, colleagues.

I'm here today as chair of the second iteration of the long-term vision and plan, or LTVP, working group. The first working group served during the 42nd Parliament.

I'm here to report to the Board of Internal Economy, or BOIE, on our work to date and to seek endorsement of our recommendation regarding phase 2 of the Parliament welcome centre, or PWC, which is part of the Centre Block rehabilitation program. For clarity, phase 1 of the welcome centre is what currently exists at the main visitor entrance to the West Block.

The working group has been mandated to provide updates to the BOIE on the rehabilitation project and to make recommendations as required. In addition, it will guide and inform consultations with members and stakeholders, including joint consultations with the Senate when necessary.

The working group met on June 17 to review the proposed mandate and to begin deliberations on the Centre Block rehabilitation at this stage of the project. The House of Commons administration and Public Services and Procurement Canada, or PSPC, provided an overview of the project. They gave an update on the progress made and the approvals to date. The working group was also informed of the guiding principles for the Centre Block established by the BOIE.

[*English*]

The overview provided us with a look at how the heritage conservation is being planned and is taking place in Centre Block and the importance of this significant heritage architecture. Included in the presentation was the list of architecturally significant rooms and spaces in Centre Block that require special attention and that should not be outwardly modified in a way that undermines their heritage value. The BOIE noted several of these spaces at their June 2019 meeting and asked for a recommended broader list to be reviewed by the working group. I understand that this list was provided to you, and the administration has since received additional spaces that should be included for consideration by our working group.

As this was our initial meeting, we were provided with an overview of the project plan and the roles of the various stakeholders. This very complex project is being delivered following a fast-track methodology consisting of many overlapping activities. We understand that early decisions needed to be made while requirements were still being developed.

The Centre Block rehabilitation, including the Parliament welcome centre, phase two, is one of the most significant capital works projects being undertaken in Canada. The significance ranges from its heritage value to its continued symbolism of Canadian democracy, as well as from the magnitude of the work and technical requirements. The parliamentary partners and PSPC are designing to meet the anticipated future needs that will be required to sustain the work of Canada's Parliament for the next 50 to 100 years.

As you're aware, the parliamentary welcome centre was initially planned early in the long-term vision and plan as a phased project to be delivered in sync with the major rehabilitation of the triad buildings of West Block, Centre Block and East Block. Phase one was completed at the same time as the West Block rehabilitation. It provided the secure entry that is there now for visitors, MPs and staff to West Block. That was phase one.

● (1315)

The design was based on serving the capacity of West Block with the anticipation of further phases being added to handle full capacity for the triad buildings. When completed, the Parliament welcome centre entity as a whole, phases one and two, will provide a secure and efficient entry for parliamentarians, business visitors and the public, and also meet the operational requirements of the House and Senate administrations to support the work of parliamentarians. It will also provide a visitor experience for the many thousands of visitors who are not able to pre-book a tour of the Parliament Buildings. We were surprised, quite honestly, to see what a big percentage that is.

Going forward, we will be looking at detailed requirements for key functions in Centre Block and the parliamentary welcome centre complex to ensure that building functions reflect the operations of Parliament and the members' needs in our workplace.

In terms of activities of the Centre Block rehabilitation and the parliamentary welcome centre project that needed the working group's immediate attention at our meeting, there was one main item that required further study as part of our BOIE approval in June of last year—namely, the excavation contract strategy for the welcome centre. The BOIE had tentatively approved the medium-sized welcome centre option based on a scalable excavation contracting strategy to allow enough time to review the requirements, options and associated costs while allowing the project work to still progress. The working group has reviewed the detailed information and options analysis, and brings forward our recommendation for the BOIE's consideration today.

The working group looked at three options for phase two of the welcome centre. All options considered the following implications: security, visitor experience, parliamentary functional requirements, heritage design considerations and cost. It is clear to us that excavation is required to accommodate the base building requirements, such as mechanical, electrical and plumbing, and to connect the triad buildings of East Block, West Block and Centre Block for utilities, material handling, circulation and security in order to support operations.

What we were intent on reviewing was the remainder of Parliament's requirements for the PWC. The meeting allowed us to look at those options and have our questions answered. It provided us with a fulsome understanding of those requirements and the incremental costs associated with the excavation and construction for the respective size of the welcome centre—the small, the medium and the large options.

Accordingly, the working group recommends going forward with the excavation and construction of the medium option. That's 32,600 square metres for phase two of the welcome centre. This option adequately meets the requirements of all parliamentary partners.

● (1320)

[*Translation*]

We had good discussions and exchanges in order to arrive at this consensus. I'll point out that one important consideration on our minds was the preservation of the lawn, the central stairs and the Vaux wall in their current state.

This recommended option will have no impact on these items because the PWC will be below grade. The Parliament welcome centre will provide the necessary support functions to ensure that the Centre Block is fully operational and secure for Parliament, and to ensure that Canadians and visitors have access to Parliament.

Over the summer, the working group will further review the overall requirements for the Centre Block to ensure that the BOIE can make key rehabilitation project decisions in a timely and reasonable manner so that the project can move forward with as little risk as possible.

Thank you for your attention. I'm happy to take questions or to elaborate on any of the information provided.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Thank you, Mr. Stanton.

We'll now move on to the questions.

[*English*]

The list starts with Mr. Holland and then goes to Mr. Julian and Mr. Strahl.

Mr. Holland, you're on first.

Hon. Mark Holland (Chief Government Whip): Thank you.

Thank you so much, Mr. Stanton. Thank you for your report. Thank you for the work being done by the working group. I do support the recommendations.

My question isn't with respect to the recommendations before us today. This question is for the House administration and those involved on the staff side of the project. I'm wondering whether we could get a bit of an update on the implications of COVID on construction timelines. I know that there was some concern, when we were initially talking about this project, around the decisions we were making, the speed of those decisions, and their implications for the timeline of the project. I'm wondering if we could have a bit of an update on those items.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Mr. Stanton.

Mr. Bruce Stanton: I think that, in light of the question, it might be better.... This is more or less a scheduling issue

I don't know, Michel, whether PSPC might be the best to respond on that. What's your observation there?

Mr. Rob Wright (Assistant Deputy Minister, Public Services and Procurement Canada): I'd be happy to take the question, Mr. Chair.

We actually work very closely with parliamentary partners as well as industry to develop what are, I think we can safely say, leading-edge practices for health and safety on construction sites. We worked with the Canadian Construction Association and in fact informed the development of the best practices that have been communicated nationally for construction across the country. While that is a provincial jurisdiction, the Canadian Construction Association has communicated these to ensure that there's consistency from site to site.

I'll give you a few of the elements that have been applied on site. There is a questionnaire for all individuals before entering the site. Temperature readings are taken of all people entering the site. Ev-

eryone on site wears a face covering. That's been in place for the last couple of months, I would say. There is social distancing. There's been consideration of travel routes and segregation, to a certain extent, of the site. The Centre Block site provides the opportunity, as it's a very large site of 55,000 square metres, for social distancing. From a schedule perspective, the benefit is that we have not really seen many impacts. A few adjustments had to be made on supply chains, but we were able to make those adjustments.

I would say that we've been able to keep the schedule on track. In some sense, because of the reduction in traffic in the downtown core, for example, as we are in the early stages of excavation, we've actually been able to see some benefits from a schedule perspective.

• (1325)

Hon. Anthony Rota: Very good.

We'll go on to Mr. Julian, followed by Mr. Strahl.

[*Translation*]

We'll then continue with Mr. Rodriguez.

[*English*]

Mr. Julian.

Mr. Peter Julian (House Leader of the New Democratic Party): Thanks very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Stanton, for your presentation today. Having been part of the first iteration of the Centre Block working group, I appreciate all the time and effort that I know members of the working group are putting in.

I have a comment and then a couple of questions.

My comment is that I certainly appreciate that we're not going for what many of us considered to be the Cadillac option in terms of building the visitor welcome centre. The larger option was much more expensive. We're talking about over \$110 million in savings, if my memory is correct, and I think that's very appropriate.

Mr. Stanton, perhaps you or one of the dedicated public servants here could explain what that means in terms of cutting back those requests that came forward. There were a lot of requests, as part of that larger option, around committee rooms for the Senate, which quite frankly didn't seem necessary. For the people who are watching today from the press gallery and from the public, it would be good to know, I think, what we're paring away.

Second, I don't see a recommendation around the House of Commons chamber itself. Could you elaborate a bit more on what you think the decision-making point is and will be around the House of Commons chamber?

Thank you.

Mr. Bruce Stanton: Thank you, Mr. Julian.

On the first point....

I'm sorry, Mr. Chair. I just sort of jumped into that right away. My apologies.

Hon. Anthony Rota: You did an excellent job. Please continue.

Mr. Bruce Stanton: On the first point, I don't know if we're able to put on one of the slides that we looked at in our committee meeting. It showed how and to what degree each of the options—small, medium and large—was able to meet the demands of both Houses, both chambers, as well as the administration requirements. We were satisfied that the medium option best met the prevailing necessities of both.

To your point, Mr. Julian, it allowed.... A key point for the group, when it was looking at this, was that the medium option would not create any kind of further encroachment onto the lawn of the Commons and effectively all of the new works would be below ground, so the surface-level appearance of Centre Block would be unchanged, save entranceways on either side of the centre stairs where the access for the welcome centre would be.

The medium option gave sufficient space for things like the visitor centre, to have that for the many who are unable to take a tour of Centre Block, as is done in other nations' capitals. There's a place where people can go to hear and see the amazing story about what our Parliament Buildings bring to our country and, at the same time, it meets the centre requirements. We were satisfied that the middle option satisfies the demands.

As to the specific things that were pared back, I would maybe ask Michel if there's another person who might best be able to pinpoint some of those specifics.

Mr. Michel Patrice: Thank you, Mr. Stanton.

Mr. Julian, in terms of paring back, I don't have information for all the partners, but definitely from the House of Commons I can tell you that the requirements were pared down to what we felt was needed to support the work of the House of Commons and the members.

The Library of Parliament also did its part in terms of paring down its requirements. I don't have the exact number, but at least 1,000 square meters, if not more. In terms of the exercise, that would be going to the medium option. The partners have been working since last year—not necessarily in relation to this working group—on making sure that nobody was asking too much. These are the partners I can talk about, in terms of paring down the requirements of what's required to support the work of Parliament.

● (1330)

Mr. Bruce Stanton: Thanks, Michel.

On the second point, Mr. Julian, with respect to the House of Commons, we proceeded on the basis of the overview that we were given. We accepted the recommendation of this board, in fact, that there was no anticipation of a larger footprint for the House of Commons, so the additional capacities and necessities of the chamber, the House of Commons section of Centre Block, that we know of will have to be accommodated within the existing footprint.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Very good.

Now we'll go to Mr. Strahl.

Mr. Mark Strahl: Thank you very much.

With apologies to Claude, who's in a very hot building, and Dominic, whose boat is idling nearby, I do have a number of questions about this. I think this is a very important decision point for us.

First of all, Bruce, you've indicated that you're not running again in the next election, and I would like to express my disappointment. This is my first opportunity to salute your great career. You will be missed whenever that happens—assuming, of course, I'm successful whenever that next election comes. We'll miss you when you do take your well-earned retirement. Perhaps Dominic can host you at his cottage.

I have a couple of questions on the proposed recommendations. It's interesting; these decisions, I find, are always presented with two terrible solutions and one “just right” solution that we seem to be funnelled into. We have that now with the medium option: The porridge is just right.

The medium option is referred to as being 32,600 square metres. Last year when we looked at this, the large option was 27,844 square metres. There is some talk here in the briefing about the net and gross building size, but it appears from the outside that the medium option is now bigger than the previous large option. What am I reading there incorrectly? Can you explain to me whether or not this entire project has grown since the last time we made a decision on it?

That's my first question, Mr. Chair. I do have more. I don't know whether you want me to just rattle off all my questions and have them all handled or do them one at a time.

Hon. Anthony Rota: What we're looking at is very detailed, so I think it would be better if you did them one at a time rather than rush through them. That way, you can make sure you have all the answers.

Is it okay with everyone if we continue that way? I think it will be a little more detailed. It's not like we get a lot of shots at this. Let's make sure we get all our details in place and our questions answered.

Mr. Stanton.

Mr. Bruce Stanton: Thank you, Mr. Rota.

Mr. Strahl, thank you for your kind words. I still hope to be around for a little while longer. I mean, one never knows when the next election event may come. Who knows? It could be three years from now. I still have lots of time for fun at Parliament, that's for sure.

I can answer the question on the difference in square metres. To my knowledge and understanding, the numbers you previously looked at were square metres based on usable space for the medium option. In terms of the numbers, the size has not changed. The square metres number that you see in the medium option now is the entirety of the gross square metres of the actual footprint of this phase two welcome centre. That's why the number of square metres has risen.

I'd look to Michel or perhaps Mr. Wright for any further clarification on that, but that's my understanding.

Mr. Rob Wright: You're exactly right, sir.

I guess the questions we were looking at were a little different. When last we were discussing this, we were focused most on how space would be programmed. We were looking at space that could be programmed for the different users, that being the House, the Senate and the Library of Parliament. Now we're really trying to look at the costing comparisons that include all the spaces—the common space, the corridors, the material handling space and so on—not programmed by one of the individual entities but required for the functioning of the facility. The gross is apples to apples.

Mr. Stanton is exactly right that the actual space has not grown, although I would understand the perception of it.

● (1335)

Mr. Mark Strahl: Thank you for clearing that up.

This builds a bit on Mr. Julian's comments, I think. I understand the visitor experience that Bruce talked about, giving constituents the opportunity to learn more about Parliament when they're below ground, before they're actually brought up into the visitor gallery, etc. I still want to know what functions will be contained in this option.

The costing report prepared for the department this spring said that the recommended option had a number of things. It said it would include public food services, three committee rooms and a multi-purpose room for the Senate. Did that translate over into this option, what was prepared in the costing analysis for the department? Certainly, that would be an expansion of the visitor experience. I don't believe there are public food services.

Again, recognizing that this is a shared building between the Senate and the House, it seems to me that the parliamentary functions that are being proposed here are primarily on the Senate side. Am I correct on that?

Mr. Bruce Stanton: Thanks, Mr. Strahl.

I think it would be fair to say that the parliamentary welcome centre in this medium option does include additional meeting space for the Senate side. We certainly recognize that in the expansion of services to West Block, the number of committee rooms and resources now available to the House side has significantly increased. The same has certainly not been the case for the Senate side. This was, again, a co-operative exchange to look at what those needs might be, and the medium option does provide these additional spaces for the Senate on the one floor.

I'm not party to how those discussions took place or the specifics of the square footage allocation on that. I'm looking at the deck

here to see, in fact, if there is anything more specific there, but I'm not finding it right at the moment. I think it's fair to say, when you balance the committee requirements, that, yes, it's true, a portion of this parliamentary welcome centre would be dedicated to some of those additional Senate resources.

Mr. Mark Strahl: Finally, I want to talk a bit about the costing.

The building and construction costs are estimated at \$530 million, but a further \$203.5 million in various contingencies and escalation has been added, which is about 38% of the cost. Is it normal for nearly 40% to be budgeted for contingencies and escalation? One of the line items, \$54 million, is called "escalation to mid-point of construction". I don't know what that means, and I'd like to understand that.

Again, is it normal for a procurement project to have a 40% escalation clause built into it, and what does that particular "escalation to mid-point of construction" mean?

● (1340)

Mr. Bruce Stanton: Thank you, Mr. Strahl.

I'm going to ask if Mr. Wright from PSPC could speak to that. I see the numbers that you're speaking of, and I think it's certainly a very relevant question.

Mr. Rob Wright: Thank you very much for the question. I can try to unpack that as clearly as possible. It is an important question.

One thing I would say is that the costing report that you reference was conducted by an independent costing firm, which used industry best practices for this costing effort. There are two key things. Yes, these types of contingencies are normal, especially for projects at this stage. I can clarify that a little further. Additionally, this is built upon 15 years of delivery of projects on the Hill, which has informed the different types of contingencies that result in projects coming in on budget.

The design contingency is an element for the initial stages of the project. This cost estimate was developed at a point in time before the completion of schematic design, so early stages and before some of the key decisions have been made by Parliament. There are a number of unknowns that remain. As we move into detailed design, that design contingency will be kind of ended in the next 18-month to two-year period. Then that will become a certainty from a design perspective. So the design contingency will be kind of used up, or not, over the next 18 to 24 months as we move through the design.

The construction contingency is essentially for unknown conditions as we move into construction. For example, we've just run into the first unknown element. As we've done the early excavation work, we have found, on the southeast corner of Centre Block, in front of the Senate area, that the foundation is actually a rubble foundation. That was an unknown. There will be some cost implications and impacts that will come from that.

We will run through a number of those experiences as we move through this in a 100-year-old building of which there were no blueprints, etc. We have a fairly exhaustive assessment program to reduce those unknowns as much as possible, but we will run into those over time.

Escalation is an important factor. We tried to take, I would say, a fairly conservative approach here. Any cost estimate is in current dollars, not in future dollars, so the escalation is essentially an attempt to accommodate inflationary pressures into the cost estimate. If you look back over the past 10-year period, the escalation factor in the Ottawa construction industry has been 3%: 2.95%, to be specific.

As we look forward, I would say that right now escalation is a challenging piece to get right, as we are in the COVID situation, so we will continue to assess this. We feel that 3.5% would be a safe and conservative estimate at this point.

The midpoint element that you mention is where we would not want to apply escalation to early activities. Take excavation, for example. It is not going to experience escalation, because it is a current activity and it will be done in the early points of the construction. To average out the escalation—because it is cumulative, as it kind of builds on itself from year to year to year—from a time point perspective, we apply it to the total cost above but for the first half, from a time perspective, to make sure that we're not inappropriately applying escalation to construction events that would be happening early in the project and should not experience any type of escalation pressures.

I'm happy to expand further. I know it is a bit of a technical area, and we would be happy to provide any additional information as well.

• (1345)

Hon. Anthony Rota: Mr. Strahl, has everything been answered? Very good.

[*Translation*]

We'll now continue with Mr. Rodriguez.

[*English*]

Then we'll go on to Ms. Bergen.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Rodriguez, you have the floor.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons): Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I also want to thank the committee members for their work.

The questions that I wanted to ask on this topic have already been put forward. That said, I'd like Mr. Speaker or the group mem-

bers to refresh my memory on the following matter. I know that the group must also look at the general requirements for the Centre Block. I want to know the next steps of the working group and when our committee will be dealing with this.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Mr. Wright or Mr. Patrice could answer your question.

[*English*]

Mr. Michel Patrice: I will ask Susan Kulba to maybe give a bit of detail.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Susan Kulba (Senior Director, A and LTVP Program Management Directorate, House of Commons): The next step is a meeting where the team will address the needs of Parliament. The next meeting will take place in August, at least we hope so.

[*English*]

We will get together to review the more detailed requirements. We'll be looking at the chamber, the lobbies and the gallery as a first step to make sure that, within the footprint, we're looking at creative ways to make sure that we're able to serve Parliament and its future growth. Then, we will break it down further into details that really impact the work that you do, and make sure that we've gathered any special requirements that you want to add in or elaborate on, so that we can really make sure the building is suitable for you.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Anthony Rota: Do you have any other questions, Mr. Rodriguez?

That's fine? Thank you.

[*English*]

Now we'll continue with Ms. Bergen.

Hon. Candice Bergen (House Leader of the Official Opposition): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you, Mr. Stanton, for your presentation, and to all of you for the work that you've done.

I'm going to start by saying that—at least for me, and I think for most members of Parliament on this board—we don't want to see, three years from now, costs escalating yet again, there seeming to be no answers as to why, and the taxpayer looking back on us and saying that we said yes to this without really giving it thorough oversight.

When I see the differences, for example, in the square footage that we were given as the small, medium and large options, which are being changed today, the explanation sounds reasonable to me, but at the same time it's not something I'm an expert on. I'm concerned that the same thing could happen with the costs. When we're talking about a 38% escalation cost, if you tell us that's normal, we believe you.

I guess what I'm asking is this: Can the taxpayer, and those of us who are members of Parliament representing the taxpayer, be assured that there is somebody there and that there is a check there so that these costs won't escalate even further? It's just like the square footage. There's a reasonable answer as to why we were given different square footage amounts a while ago, as compared to today. Can we be assured that these costs will not escalate beyond this 38%?

In the private sector, there's somebody paying the bill; there's a business case being made, and that usually helps provide checks and balances. I absolutely understand that in this setting we don't have that, but I, for one, want to be able to look the taxpayer in the eye and say that we, as members of Parliament on BOIE, did everything we could to ensure that these costs didn't escalate and that there wasn't a blank cheque given.

I would like some assurances around that. I'll leave that as a comment, and maybe somebody wants to speak to it.

I do have a specific question. I think Mr. Wright referred to the excavation changes. Is there an update? I think the previous number was \$48 million for that cost. I'm just wondering if that is changing, and whether we'll be given updates on that.

Second, in regard to the decision we're being asked to make, are we actually making a decision, or are we giving the minister our position? I know that recently the state broadcaster reported that BOIE recommended the \$733-million option. Obviously, the CBC was in error, because we hadn't made that decision, but I just want to know that the minister hasn't been told that we've made a decision, and whether this is a recommendation or a decision point.

Those are two questions, and then I just have one more quick comment after that.

• (1350)

Hon. Anthony Rota: Who would like to start on that one?

Mr. Stanton, maybe I'll let you start, and then you can direct it to wherever you see fit.

Mr. Bruce Stanton: I think on the specific questions, especially those relating to the costs, I'll leave that perhaps to Mr. Wright or Mr. Patrice.

Ms. Bergen, I couldn't agree more. I think one of the profound responsibilities we have as a working group of MPs is, in fact, to take that responsibility seriously and make sure we are aware of how the project is going. We have a responsibility to report to you and this board as to the progress as it continues. I think that was one of the bases of informing how an MP working group should be there in the first place. We need to be aware and completely informed of the progress of the project and report to you on some of the key decisions that would speak to how...if issues come up that you need to be fully aware of. I think the MPs on the working group take that responsibility seriously, and we'll make sure that we follow through on that.

As to the cost questions, perhaps Mr. Wright would be best.

Mr. Rob Wright: I will definitely start, and then perhaps I can pass it to Ms. Garrett on the details.

One thing that I think is important... As Mr. Stanton indicated, we have constructed the first phase of the visitor welcome centre, and it may be useful to compare the estimates that we have here and the actual costs that resulted in that project.

Phase one of the visitor welcome centre, from a gross square metre perspective, so apples to apples, is approximately 5,700 square metres. If you extrapolate that to the size here, that would give you an estimate of \$780 million, approximately, and that is non-escalated. If you added an escalation factor into that, that would take you above \$800 million. The estimate that we have here is \$730 million for that kind of apples-to-apples comparison. I think it can illustrate the comparability between something that is a completed project and the costs that were incurred against the estimate, and the estimate compares favourably to those real results.

On the excavation, in particular, we have awarded a contract, so that has moved from an estimate to a more concrete estimate, if you will. I'll ask Ms. Garrett to provide the details on that.

Ms. Jennifer Garrett (Director General, Public Services and Procurement Canada): Thank you very much for the question.

As it pertains to the excavation contract, Mr. Wright is correct. We have actually tendered and awarded the contract associated with what we call, or what you will commonly hear as, the mass excavation for the program. That represents the [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] in front of Centre Block. It does not represent the entirety of the excavation program. We still have to award the program that digs in and creates the connection between that parliamentary welcome centre and Centre Block.

For example, if you're looking at the cost table, you'll see that we are carrying \$66 million associated with that excavation activity, and that is to carry out the fulsome budget that we're carrying to conduct both the excavation of the whole and the connections into Centre Block, in its totality. When we have the second aspect of the contract tendered, then we'll have actual costs for both elements of the program.

• (1355)

Hon. Candice Bergen: Great, thank you.

Could someone just answer the question of whether we're giving the minister a recommendation here or actually making a decision? Has the decision been made by the minister, in effect?

Hon. Anthony Rota: Mr. Patrice.

Mr. Michel Patrice: Thank you for that question.

I'm just going to say a bit about the gross and the net square metres, because I kind of had the same reaction when I saw the different data. Just for the benefit of the board, I'm going to say that at that time, while we were discussing net, the amount was about the same. It was around the same number in terms of the estimated costs when we were looking at that issue, but it did create for me some kind of angst when I saw the two different sets of numbers.

Hon. Candice Bergen: That's because you knew what we as MPs would be thinking. You knew we'd be asking about that too.

Mr. Michel Patrice: Yes.

In terms of the decision, obviously the working group is looking at it and making a recommendation to the board in terms of what they think the requirements of the House would be. The board here is responsible for the facilities, and in terms of the administration of the House of Commons is basically informing the government, through the minister, what we have identified as our requirements and our needs. The decision rests with the minister and the government in terms of whether or not they will go through and undertake that spending.

Hon. Candice Bergen: Okay. Thank you.

Mr. Michel Patrice: My understanding is that there is no decision. I personally would be surprised if a decision had been made by the minister before hearing the views of the House of Commons. So nothing has been done—

Hon. Candice Bergen: Thanks for clarifying that.

Finally, through you, Mr. Stanton, perhaps you could reiterate this to the working group. When you were giving us your report, you were talking about the specific rooms in Centre Block that had been listed and how there would not be an undermining of their heritage value. I would like to reiterate that, as I recall from when we had this discussion, we really don't want those rooms changed. We'd like to be able to walk in and see that they are not changed at all.

I just want to reiterate that point. We really hope that so many of those rooms remain exactly the same outwardly as they were when we left just over a year ago. Thanks very much for the opportunity to provide that feedback.

Mr. Bruce Stanton: That's an excellent point. Thank you.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Are there any other questions? Very good.

Before we go on, I just want to comment on the fact that Mr. Stanton will not be running again in the next election. I've had a chance to work with Bruce over the last few years as both Assistant Deputy Speaker and Speaker. Rarely do we find someone with the level of integrity and dedication that Bruce has. He is just an exceptional individual, and he will be missed at all levels. I've often said that we try to keep the good guys in Ottawa, and he is one of the greats, so we will miss him.

Bruce, it's been a real pleasure.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Bruce Stanton: That's very nice. Thank you.

Hon. Anthony Rota: We'll now move on to item four, which includes the 2019-20 year-end financial report and the 2020-21 supplementary estimates (B).

I'll turn the floor over to Daniel Paquette, the chief financial officer.

Mr. Daniel Paquette (Chief Financial Officer, House of Commons): Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

[*English*]

Mr. Mark Strahl: Mr. Chair, did we actually say yes or no to the recommendations in item three? I just want to make sure we didn't have a long conversation for....

Hon. Anthony Rota: No, you're absolutely right. We did not proceed to accept that.

Is everyone in accordance with number three? Was the questioning and everything in order?

I see a lot of heads nodding.

Mr. Mark Strahl: Agreed.

● (1400)

Hon. Anthony Rota: Thank you, Mr. Strahl. I appreciate the heads-up on that one. That works out well.

We'll now proceed with Mr. Paquette.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Daniel Paquette: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I'm here to present the 2019-20 year-end financial report and to get your approval for the 2020-21 supplementary estimates (B).

Parliament gives the House authorities so that it can support members based on their usual parliamentary calendar. The authorities for 2019-20 totalling \$517 million constitute an increase of \$10.7 million, or 2.1%, compared to the previous year.

The most significant changes regarding the increase are \$3.4 million and \$1.5 million respectively for the increases in the cost of living for members and House officers and for the administration. There's also a \$2-million increase for the carry-forward related to the various major investments made.

In 2019-20, expenditures totalled \$506 million, an increase of \$18 million, or 3.8%, compared to the previous year. In the report, expenditures are also presented by type of cost. We can see that the largest increase concerns salary and benefit expenses. The total of \$17.3 million is mainly attributed to election expenses.

There are the severance payments for former members and their employees and the additional salaries that the administration paid to employees that it hired to support various election activities and orientation programs. In addition, there are salary increase expenses. The economic increases of certain administration employees contributed to this fluctuation.

[English]

Expenditures for computers, office equipment and furniture have increased by \$5 million. This is primarily due to key investments in such activities as the implementation of managed computing for constituencies and the increased capacity for broadcasting and web-casting for committees. As well, given the year of an election, there were additional IT investments in the life cycle of the infrastructure during this period of time. On the other hand, a decrease of \$5.8 million in transportation and telecom was mostly due to the decrease in travel expenditures as a result of the election period. Our revenues also went down by \$5.9 million due to a reduction in services provided to federal departments and other parliamentary institutions, as well as a decrease in catering, cafeteria and restaurant revenue, all during the dissolution period.

Finally, the report provides a comparison between the 2019-20 and 2018-19 utilization. It shows a slight increase of 1.5%. It is important to mention that the House promotes an efficient use of resources and continuously strives to minimize requests for incremental funding whenever possible. For example, financial pressures that occurred over the course of the year, such as election-related costs and economic increases for House administration employees, were all managed within existing resources rather than additional funding being sought. As a matter of fact, over the past two years, other than the operating budget carry-forward, no additional funding was sought through the supplementary estimates process.

It is customary for government organizations to carry forward lapsed amounts of 5% of their main estimates. For the House, this equates to a maximum of \$17.5 million. Therefore, I am seeking your approval to include the full carry-forward amount of \$17.5 million into our 2020-21 supplementary estimates. This carry-forward will then be allocated to members, House officers and the administration according to existing policies. In addition, I'm seeking your approval to include \$5.5 million in the 2020-21 supplementary estimates (B) relating to the 2020-21 economic increases for certain House administration that was approved by the board in February. I should also point out that, going forward, the requirements for these economic increases will be included in our main estimates for 2021-22.

In conclusion, as you know, the House is continuing to react and to adjust operations in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, including implementing appropriate measures on the Hill and in constituencies. I would like to assure you that we are closely monitoring the financial impacts associated with this situation. If needed, although it's not anticipated, a submission will be brought forward to address financial requirements through the 2020-21 supplementary estimates. In any case, we will report back in the fall on the impact COVID is having on our financial situation.

• (1405)

Mr. Chair, this concludes my presentation. I will take any questions.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Do we have any questions?

Mr. Strahl.

Mr. Mark Strahl: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I note that the House administration budget was \$186.6 million. The actual spend was \$190.8 million, so \$4.2 million more than anticipated was spent, I guess because members spent less and the monies were available for the House administration. Perhaps you just did say it and I misunderstood it, but what caused that \$4.2 million spending over the anticipated budget?

Mr. Daniel Paquette: When we manage the overall budget from a cash flow perspective, we look at the full voted appropriation. A portion goes to House administration and then goes to the members. We know that during an election year, due to the period of reduced activities, some of these funds are not necessarily used on the members' side. Knowing this, we didn't come back and ask for supplementary estimates for something like the economic increase for last year and the retroactive implications of those. It was about \$8.1 million just for that particular item. We also had the additional resources for the HR advisory services for members. That was \$2.5 million. The actual election costs for the administration were a little over a million dollars.

Knowing that the cash was there in our voted appropriation, we didn't ask for the supplementary estimates. Between our programs, it shows maybe an overspend of our planned budget but not an overspend in our overall appropriation.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Mr. Julian.

[Translation]

Mr. Peter Julian: Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Thank you, Mr. Paquette.

These financial statements are a bit like the economic update that would have been provided just before the pandemic hit. We're talking about March 31. On March 13, the decision was made to suspend parliamentary activities. I find this interesting. I don't have any issue with the financial statements. This seems very clear, including the significant decreases in committee expenses and parliamentary exchanges.

When I look at the largest and much smaller expenditures, I think that it would be worthwhile to hear how you think things will unfold this year. Since I'm in New Westminster and the other members are also at home, it seems that travel expenses are much smaller. There are no parliamentary exchanges either. The committees are meeting virtually. Does this raise or lower costs? I imagine that this lowers costs. In addition, many House administration employees are teleworking.

In your opinion, which expenditures will increase as a result of the pandemic and which expenditures will decrease significantly because of all the decisions made in the context of the pandemic?

Hon. Anthony Rota: Mr. Paquette, you have the floor.

Mr. Daniel Paquette: The expenditures that will increase are the technology and telecommunications expenditures, given the establishment of the platform. We must ensure that everyone is well connected and that we have the necessary equipment.

The decreased costs include travel costs, because people aren't travelling. There are conference and committee costs, both for members and for the administration, whether the costs involve conferences or training.

At this time, we're monitoring the situation. We have tools built into our financial system that will enable us to provide a proper report this fall on the impact of these items. Right now, it's too early to quantify this and to determine where this will lead us. I think that we'll manage to do so by the middle of the year. I'll come back here to provide an update on the actual situation, once we've made these adjustments.

• (1410)

Hon. Anthony Rota: We'll now continue with Ms. DeBellefeuille.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille (Member of the Board of Internal Economy): Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Good afternoon, everyone.

I want to start by thanking the interpreters who have been translating the comments made by my English-speaking colleagues for the past hour and 10 minutes. I must say that they're excellent, and I applaud them. I hope that they have air conditioning in their booths, because it's hot.

Mr. Speaker, I find the report presented to us today very transparent. I can see that a number of expenditure increases have been funded through the authorized budgets.

I have just one question.

One reason for the increase in staff expenditures, which total \$17.3 million in 2019-20, is the hiring of additional employees to work on the major Centre Block renovation project.

How much of this increase is related to staff expenditures in comparison with the other items identified in the document, such as information technology, advisory services and support for members? Are more human resources directed toward providing advisory services to members than toward the major Centre Block renovation project?

Hon. Anthony Rota: Go ahead, Mr. Paquette.

Mr. Daniel Paquette: Basically, the money for the Centre Block renovation comes from Public Services and Procurement Canada, or PSPC. These expenditures are not directly related to the administration. I said that our revenues were down because we have advisory services. We're recovering these expenditures from the department. This isn't a net expenditure for us.

I'll explain the \$17.3-million increase.

A significant part of this increase, \$11 million, is attributable to severance payments for members and their employees during the election period. The members' orientation provided by employees during the election period accounts for an increase of about \$3 million. An increase of over \$2 million is attributable to the human resources team that supports the members as employers.

There's also the increase in the cost of living. Retroactive payments arising from the signature of the collective agreements amounted to over \$8 million.

My calculation is just over \$17.3 million. However, this increase is offset by the \$4-million decrease in the salaries paid by members during the year. During an election period, many members have fewer employees, and new members take some time to hire employees. There's a decrease in these averages.

Essentially, this increase doesn't concern the renovation of the Centre Block. Instead, it concerns the employees responsible for providing orientation and support services to members during the election period.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Thank you.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Are there any other questions?

[English]

Do we have approval for the proposal put forward by Monsieur Paquette?

Looking around, I see heads nodding.

Very good. We have approval.

Before continuing to item five, there was a question raised by Mr. Strahl. I believe Mr. Patrice has the answer to the printing discrepancy, or the delta between the two printing levels.

Monsieur Patrice.

Mr. Michel Patrice: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

We have located the information. The mailing cost for the member at that time was \$6,590 at the rate he was charged. If he'd been charged the preferred bulk rate, it would have been \$177. The difference was \$6,400, essentially.

• (1415)

Mr. Mark Strahl: Thank you, I guess. That's a tough bill to swallow, but thank you.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Are there any other comments on that?

Everybody's had the chance to swallow? They can talk now? Okay. Very good.

[Translation]

We'll now address item five, the extension of temporary exceptions for advertising and Internet service expenses.

Mr. Paquette, you have the floor.

[English]

Mr. Daniel Paquette: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

At their meeting in April, the board approved temporary measures to include additional detailed information in their advertising around local, community, government and not-for-profit organizations that could be of interest to their constituents with regard to COVID-related matters, and to be able to solicit donations for registered Canadian charities, also pertaining to COVID-related programs. This decision also included the possibility for members to reimburse Internet service charges to their employees who are now teleworking. This decision had an expiry date of June 30. Given the continued challenges around COVID, the administration is proposing that the board approve the extension of these temporary measures until the end of the fiscal year.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Are there any questions?

Mr. Mark Strahl: Mr. Chair, I'm sorry to be this guy the whole time.

Hon. Anthony Rota: No, you're fine.

Mr. Strahl.

Mr. Mark Strahl: I support this. I would like, perhaps, the staff to come back. One of the provisions here that we are not extending is the ability to do printing in our constituencies, to have a local printer provide services. I would like to see a report on what the uptake was and what we found the cost differences were. I personally did two householders in that time frame, both printed locally, which helped a struggling local business and I had a great interaction with them. I've heard from a number of my colleagues as well who quite liked that arrangement. I would like to get an idea of how it went, perhaps for a future meeting.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Okay, very good.

I'm just getting a message here that that's not a problem. The report will be sent.

Maybe I'll defer to Monsieur Patrice. What time frame would we be looking at for that report to come in?

Mr. Michel Patrice: I think it would be beneficial for the board to do it in two steps, so we'll send a report, in terms of information that could come up in the following weeks, and maybe come to the board itself at its meeting to have the discussion and the exchange.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Very good.

[*Translation*]

Are there any questions?

Mr. Julian, you have the floor.

[*English*]

Mr. Peter Julian: Thanks, Mr. Chair.

I agree with Mr. Strahl.

In terms of the printing in the riding, normally, since we are on the other side of the Rockies, 5,000 kilometres away from Ottawa, printed material that goes out takes weeks to arrive in B.C. With local printing, it landed on the steps of people's homes in New Westminster—Burnaby five days after being printed. That's five days compared to often a month. I'd be very interested in seeing that report as well, because there is no doubt, for those of us who are far away from Ottawa, that it makes a huge difference in terms of our

constituents actually getting timely information, and around COVID-19 that was extremely important.

I certainly agree with renewing this, and I would even suggest extending it in terms of printing. My concern is that we're putting these on MOBs. Again, for example, the cost of Internet access isn't the same in ridings across the country. In an urban riding like mine, it will cost a lot less than it might in a rural or northern riding. It seems to me, for fairness, so that all members of Parliament are treated the same way, that it would make a lot more sense to have those costs go onto the central budget than to have them assumed by members of Parliament, meaning that members of Parliament in certain parts of the country will have to pay more out of their MOB, which means they will have fewer resources to actually serve their constituents.

I'd like to put that out for the appreciation of the board. We'll also get a sense of whether the administration would have any opposition to having those Internet costs absorbed centrally.

• (1420)

Hon. Anthony Rota: Very good.

Is there anyone who would like to speak to that for the administration?

Mr. Daniel Paquette: Yes. I think part of the discussion and decision to put it into the MOB was that when we established the possibility of charging them for Internet connection for their employees, it was one way of just putting it out there, having that permission and not putting a lot of instructions or parameters around it.

We know there are various Internet packages out there that are often in the form of bundles, with different speeds or data capacity. By putting it into the MOB, we gave the responsibility to the members to ensure that whatever was being charged was appropriate for their needs. If we were to put it into the central budget—and, given the current circumstances, I can't say I would have any objections—we would have to establish the parameters and have those approved by the board to make sure that this is what we are accepting will be charged for the central budget.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Okay. Are there any other questions?

Do we have approval for this? Is everybody fine with this?

[*Translation*]

I can see that you're fine.

We're expecting this report in a few weeks.

[*English*]

We are on number six, “Annual report on the House of Commons policy on preventing and addressing harassment for 2019-2020”.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Daigle, you have the floor.

Ms. Robyn Daigle (Director, Members HR Services, House of Commons): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Today, I'm presenting the annual report stemming from the obligations set out in the House of Commons policy on preventing and addressing harassment. This policy applies to members as employers and to their employees.

During the period covered by the report, the Office of the Chief Human Resources Officer dealt with five new cases. One case was formally investigated, one case was resolved through the mechanisms established in the policy, and three cases are still ongoing.

[English]

The report also outlines the training and awareness activities related to the policy framework. There is online training available to members and their staff. Thus far, 782 employees and members have participated in the training. There is also mandatory in-class training that is made available to all new members.

Following the last election, five sessions were offered to members, and in the current Parliament, 250 members have completed the training. In terms of the remaining members, we had actually scheduled a couple of sessions for March, but those were obviously cancelled due to COVID. We are currently working to provide those sessions virtually. We are also looking at the same option for the members' staff so that they can participate in that training virtually as well.

I am happy to take any questions at this time.

[Translation]

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Did you give me the floor, Mr. Chair.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Yes, Ms. DeBellefeuille.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Sorry. I didn't hear you.

Hon. Anthony Rota: No problem. Go ahead.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Daigle, how do you pronounce your last name?

Ms. Robyn Daigle: Good question, Ms. DeBellefeuille. When I speak in French, I pronounce my last name the French way, and when I speak in English, I pronounce it the English way.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: My name shouldn't be pronounced the English way. Whether we're speaking in English or in French, my name is pronounced the French way. I'll pronounce your last name the French way. Does that work for you, Ms. Daigle?

Ms. Robyn Daigle: Absolutely, Ms. DeBellefeuille.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: I studied your report carefully. I want to congratulate you, because I find the report very clear. I have some questions regarding your level of satisfaction.

Have the new practices and resources put in place, such as the support provided by the human resources advisers that you added to your team, affected the number of complaints regarding psychological or sexual harassment or abuse of authority? Has this made a positive impact, or is the impact still difficult to measure?

• (1425)

Ms. Robyn Daigle: Based on the data for the past three years, the number of complaints addressed has decreased. It was also an election year, and a decrease was expected.

That said, the report shows a significant decrease in requests regarding conflict or harassment. This decrease is attributable to the respectful workplace program. I'd like to think that, with the establishment of human resources services for members, we'll deal with many more cases of conflict before a complaint is made. Many of the cases involve labour relations. We get involved at the start of these cases. I think that this helps to resolve them and to avoid more formal complaints.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: The added staff has made a difference. Specifically, I'm referring to the HR advisers assigned to each caucus to support members in their roles as employers. The advisers work proactively, before workplace conflicts turn into the formal complaints classified in your report. That's my understanding.

I'd like to take this opportunity because public servants are often criticized. They aren't always depicted in a positive light, so I'd like to point out how outstanding the HR advisers assigned to the Bloc Québécois caucus are. They are competent and do an excellent job. They have shown the utmost professionalism. They are very committed to supporting members in their roles as employers.

As someone who spent much of her career as a manager in Quebec's public sector, I can say that those two people from your team have all the necessary skills and professionalism to support members in their roles as employers. Not only do I want to thank them publicly, but I also want to commend you. They say good leaders or managers surround themselves with good people. That's a compliment for you as well, Ms. Daigle.

Ms. Robyn Daigle: Thank you.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: I have one last question for you. I don't think I heard the total number of members who took the three-hour training course on sexual harassment prevention.

Did you tell us already? Did I miss it?

Ms. Robyn Daigle: Yes. It's 250 members.

The remaining members were supposed to complete their training in March. We're going to try to meet with them virtually.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: I see.

As whips, we play a vital role in mobilizing our party members. Finding time in their schedules can be challenging. As far as the Bloc Québécois is concerned, I can say I'm quite proud of our results.

Can you tell those following the proceedings how many Bloc Québécois members have completed the training?

Ms. Robyn Daigle: Nearly 100%. I think only two are left.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: I'm quite pleased.

Rest assured that, by the end of August, we'll be at 100%.

Ms. Robyn Daigle: Excellent.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Once again, kudos to you on the great job you're doing.

Mr. Chair, investing in HR advisers is smart spending. It makes for even better members who are more respectful employers.

Thank you, Ms. Daigle.

Ms. Robyn Daigle: Thank you.

Hon. Anthony Rota: If there are no further questions or comments, I'd like to ask a question, even though I think I know the answer. It's about members' staff.

I know members have to complete the training, but do their staff? Should more people have to take it?

Ms. Robyn Daigle: Thank you for the question.

I believe that, further to a 2017 decision, the training was made mandatory for members' staff as well. That's why we are exploring virtual options to meet with all new staff. We also have a new onboarding program for members' staff. It will incorporate the training, so new staff will have completed it before they start.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Very good. It's not just for new staff, but also for existing staff. Is that right?

Ms. Robyn Daigle: Yes.

Hon. Anthony Rota: All right.

Any other questions or comments?

• (1430)

[English]

We don't have to get approval for that. It was strictly a report.

We'll go on to number seven, "Report to Canadians", and it will be the Clerk, Mr. Charles Robert.

Mr. Charles Robert (Clerk of the House of Commons): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[Translation]

I'm pleased to present the "Report to Canadians 2020", the latest annual report. As you can see, it describes members' activities and the support provided by the House of Commons Administration.

[English]

The big event of the year was the general election, which ended the 42nd Parliament and began [Technical difficulty—Editor]. One of the things we did this year as an administration was to offer more support to the members, the 98 new members who came in with this election, through a revamped members' orientation program. In addition, listening to the members and the comments they made on various occasions in the past, we offered more support to members in transition—those who decided not to run and those who were not successful in the campaign. Toward the end of this period, of course, the members, the House and the administration are now addressing the issue of the COVID pandemic.

That is the report in a nutshell, and it is for you to decide whether you wish to recommend the adoption and approval of this report.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Do we have any questions or comments?

I see none.

Do we have approval of the report?

I see heads nodding. Very good.

[Translation]

We will now move on to item 8, which pertains to a request for exception for outdoor furniture.

Mr. Paquette, you may go ahead.

Mr. Daniel Paquette: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

A member is asking the board to consider his request for reimbursement for outdoor furniture. The space the member is leasing includes exclusive access to an outdoor area. In order to use the space, the member purchased two tables and six chairs, for a total of \$2,958.

[English]

Given that this was a non-standard purchase, the administration completed its assessment in accordance with the existing board policy. We concluded that this type of furniture is not typically needed in an office, nor is it needed in order to enable a member to carry out their parliamentary function. So that is our conclusion, that it is not office furniture. Furthermore, we conclude that it is not transferrable, since members' constituency offices do not typically include outdoor space that can be furnished and used by the member. As a result of our assessment, the expense was denied.

As per the member's request, we are seeking the board's direction on the review for this matter.

[Translation]

Hon. Anthony Rota: Are there any questions or comments?

[English]

We have Mr. Rodriguez, followed by Mr. Julian.

[Translation]

Mr. Rodriguez, please go ahead.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

It's not so much a question I have, as it is a comment.

My understanding is that the rules make no mention of patio furniture. We would be setting an unacceptable precedent, were we to grant the request. As mentioned, this type of furniture does not count as office equipment. If we agree to reimburse a member for patio furniture, next, we could have someone asking to be reimbursed for a barbecue, and it would never end. I think denying the expense was the right decision.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Mr. Julian, you may go ahead.

Mr. Peter Julian: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Did the member contact the House administration before making the purchase? I don't mean through a formal letter, but did they make any sort of inquiry? It's clearly an unusual request.

My constituency office has an outdoor space. Would I be allowed to buy patio furniture? It's clear from looking at the file that there weren't any formal inquiries, but did someone from the member's office or the member, himself, reach out to finance services about it?

Once I know that, I'll comment further.

• (1435)

Hon. Anthony Rota: Mr. Paquette, please go ahead.

Mr. Daniel Paquette: According to the notes in my report, the member didn't ask for any information, formally or informally, before buying the furniture.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Mr. Julian, go ahead.

Mr. Peter Julian: All right. Thank you.

This is a member with considerable experience, not just at the federal level. I think reimbursing a member for the purchase of patio furniture would set the wrong precedent. Had the member made some sort of attempt to contact the House administration, or had there been some ambiguity as to whether the expense was eligible, I'd be more inclined to consider the member's request.

The Board of Internal Economy should advise all members, especially new ones, that if they want to make an unusual purchase, they need to submit a formal request beforehand to make sure it's an eligible expense.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Mr. Paquette, would you care to comment?

Mr. Daniel Paquette: No, thank you.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Very well.

It is now over to Mr. Strahl, followed by Ms. DeBellefeuille.

[*English*]

Mr. Mark Strahl: Thank you.

I certainly agree with the previous two colleagues who agree with the recommendation from the House administration. I think if you go down this road, perhaps members who do not have patio space.... Obviously, under no circumstances would the House administration approve creating a patio space for an existing office. To say that your office has room and you could put a little patio in a courtyard or expand your space to the outdoors—I don't think that is a reasonable expense for taxpayers.

We had an example earlier today of where a new member had an additional cost of \$6,400. It was absorbed within this member's office budget, so you could argue that there was no additional cost to taxpayers. It was still within the existing budget. It seems to me this may be where members believe they have more experience, or they believe they know the rules, or they believe they won't be captured by the members' allowances and services manual. We're dealing with a number of people who were here in a previous regime, when there was a lot more discretion given to members on how they spent their office budgets, or we're dealing with new members who either don't lean on staff or don't seek information from their whips early enough in the process.

I would say this simply as a global measure. It seems to me that when the House administration is onboarding people, clearly, with the number of cases we're dealing with where people are printing and mailing householders on their own or buying patio furniture, there almost needs to be a “do not” circled in bright red ink. There's clearly some disconnect between what members believe they can do early on and what they can actually do. Ignorance of the rules should really not be an excuse here. We're here to make those judgment calls, but it seems to me that perhaps we can review this with the goal of avoiding these kinds of discussions in the future. I know that this is rare and is not a huge percentage, but clearly there are some members who believe they can do things that they clearly should not be doing. I'm hoping we can find a way to avoid those situations in the future.

I just make that as a broad comment, perhaps for the team that looks at onboarding. I wonder whether that needs to occur before the member is sworn in, almost as soon as they're announced as preliminary winners from Elections Canada, almost a “spend no money, do nothing, until you've talked to House administration financial management”. I throw it out there as maybe a way we can improve that system.

• (1440)

[*Translation*]

Hon. Anthony Rota: Ms. DeBellefeuille, you may go ahead.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I listened to what my fellow members had to say. They seem to be focusing on the patio set, not on the item or its purpose. I more or less agree with them. I know this won't change the outcome, but it's still worth explaining.

Yes, he's an experienced member, but it didn't occur to him that the expense would be denied, because he was focused on the opportunity to meet with constituents in a safe outdoor setting with sturdy furniture made in Quebec of recycled materials. The furniture can also be used indoors. You saw the photos in the file. It's not a conventional patio set any member of the public can buy. It's special.

The Board of Internal Economy also needs to consider the fact that members in the regions can practise politics differently than those in heavily populated areas. More and more, members have office spaces with access to areas where they can meet with constituents outdoors. For example, my office is in a heritage building with a beautiful large gallery. I might've decided to buy chairs so I could meet with constituents outside, while still on the property where my constituency office is located. I think the member was under the impression that, if he furnished the space, it would give him a place where he could meet with more constituents or where people could eat, while adhering to physical distancing, especially during the pandemic.

Given the cost and the unusual nature of the expense, I see why he should have sought permission first, which he didn't. Nevertheless, I don't think we should be closed to the idea. I'll come back to what Pablo Rodriguez said about setting precedents and members buying barbecues. Let's not forget how much many members spend to put on barbecues for their constituents. It might save taxpayers money if we organized our own barbecues.

All that to say, it's not an idea we should reject out of hand. I don't think the Board of Internal Economy should take an overly conservative view of the matter. It should focus on the fact that practising politics differently also means providing access to spaces that may not have been available a few years ago.

Be that as it may, I realize I'm probably the only one who thinks we should broaden our view of a member's role and the ways they communicate with their constituents.

I know this request is going to be denied, but I want to make clear that I agreed with my fellow member's rationale. We will accept the Board of Internal Economy's decision.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Any further comments?

[*English*]

Do we have a consensus, or do we have approval for the report that's being presented to us right now?

Mr. Julian, did you have something to add to that? I noticed your hand went up.

• (1445)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Peter Julian: I want to be sure I understand. Is the House administration recommending that we not allow the expense to come out of the member's office budget?

Hon. Anthony Rota: Yes, that's exactly right. Do we have unanimous agreement on the recommendation?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

Hon. Anthony Rota: All right.

I'll just clarify that, if the recommendation isn't unanimous, the existing decision stands, in other words, the request is denied.

[*English*]

We're going to go in camera. I'm going to ask everyone to sign out for a few minutes, and we'll start again in 10 minutes. It's now 2:46. Let's say we will start again in camera at 2:55, if that's okay. That should work out well.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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