



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

43rd PARLIAMENT, 2nd SESSION

Standing Committee on Health

EVIDENCE

NUMBER 040

Wednesday, June 2, 2021

Chair: Mr. Ron McKinnon



Standing Committee on Health

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• (1635)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Ron McKinnon (Coquitlam—Port Coquitlam, Lib.)): Welcome, everyone, to meeting number 40 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Health.

The committee is meeting today pursuant to Standing Order 106(4), as requested by four members of the committee, to discuss a work plan until the summer recess.

Before I recognize Ms. Rempel Garner to move her motion, I would like to acknowledge and recognize that Ms. Sidhu's private member's bill, C-237, an act to establish a national framework for diabetes, just passed third reading in the House. On my own behalf, and since it passed unanimously, I dare say on behalf of the committee as well, congratulations indeed.

Ms. Rempel Garner, if you please, go ahead.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner (Calgary Nose Hill, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

I move:

That the following regularly scheduled meetings of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Health be programmed as follows:

On June 4, 2021 the committee undertake one more three-hour meeting regarding Patented Medicine Prices Review Board guidelines, that each political party represented on the Committee be given leave to invite two witnesses of their choosing to provide testimony on the topic for this meeting, and that upon the completion of this meeting, the analysts of the committee be directed to commence the development of a draft report based on witness testimony and written submissions received by the committee on this subject to date;

On June 7, 2021 that the Law Clerk and Parliamentary Counsel, the Clerk of the Privy Council Office, Canada's Privacy Commissioner and Canada's Information Commissioner be invited for the duration of a two-hour meeting to discuss issues related to, but not limited to, the production of documents regarding the October 26 House of Commons motion, and that the total time allotted for opening statements be limited to five minutes for each witness up to a maximum of 20 minutes in total to ensure adequate time for questions to be posed by committee members;

For the first hour on the meetings scheduled for June 11, 14, 18 and 21, 2021, each political party represented on the committee be given leave to invite one witness of their choosing to discuss issues related to, but not limited to, the federal government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and that the total time allotted for opening statements be limited to five minutes by witnesses to ensure adequate time for questions to be posed by committee members;

For the second hour on the meetings scheduled for June 11, 14, 18 and 21, 2021 the deputy minister of Health Canada, the deputy minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness, the deputy minister of Public Services and Procurement, the president of the Public Health Agency of Canada, the chief public health officer of Canada, the vice-president of logistics and operations for the Public Health Agency of Canada, and the head of the National Advisory Committee on Immunization, be invited to discuss issues related to, but not limited to, the federal government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, that the Min-

ister of Health be in attendance for at least one of these meetings, that the meeting that the Minister of Health is in attendance be held on a Friday, be three hours in length, that the minister and officials be in attendance for two consecutive hours, and that the total time allotted for opening statements by officials (and the minister) during this portion of the meeting be limited to five minutes by witnesses up to a maximum of 20 minutes in total to ensure adequate time for questions to be posed by committee members.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Rempel Garner.

Mr. Davies, please go ahead.

Mr. Don Davies (Vancouver Kingsway, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm going to speak to the motion very briefly and then move an amendment. Having listened to the concerns expressed by my colleagues at the meeting on Friday, obviously this motion does one thing that's essential: It proposes further dates with a more updated calendar, since the motion on Friday would have allocated meetings for Monday and for this Friday, so it had to be changed.

I heard the concerns of some members of the committee. One was that deputy ministers were very busy people and it was seen that having four meetings with the deputy ministers at the health committee might be too taxing on them, given their responsibilities and duties. A second was that there was a desire for more witnesses, Canadians or stakeholders, or experts, or otherwise. I'm going to amend this motion to respect those wishes. Essentially I'll just explain it in plain English and then I'll read the motion into the record.

Essentially what my amendment will do is keep this Friday for the PMPRB meeting. I think there's consensus around the room that we will each have two witnesses, effectively combining two meetings into one, and that meeting will be extended to three hours so we can have a fulsome discussion. That then completely honours the motion of my colleague, Luc Thériault.

It would then allocate the following Monday to be a meeting for the law clerk and the Clerk of the Privy Council to deal with documents. For the first three of the remaining four meetings, the first hour would be one witness from each party and the second hour would be the deputy ministers. At the very last meeting, which is on June 21, there would be no deputy ministers; there would be only witnesses, and each party would have two.

Really what my motion does is remove the deputy ministers from having to attend four meetings down to three meetings. By adding the extra witnesses on the last meeting, it also increases the number of witnesses we'll be able to hear from.

I would finally just say that this motion puts everything under the general rubric of COVID, so it allows each party and each person to put forward whatever witnesses they believe are important. I've heard it expressed that some members have a great interest in long-term care. Others might have other issues they want. I think this gives the flexibility to call the witnesses you want.

I should give a spoiler alert, because I understand there may be a further amendment to this that might improve my amendment, but I'll move mine into the record now so we can deal with that and deal with any further amendments that need to happen.

I move that the motion be amended by deleting all the words after the second paragraph and substituting the following:

For the first hour of the meetings scheduled on June 11, 14, and 18, 2021, each political party represented on the committee be given leave to invite one witness of their choosing to discuss issues related to, but not limited to, the federal government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and that the total time allotted for opening statements be limited to five minutes by witnesses to ensure adequate time for questions to be posed by committee members and for the second hour for these meetings, the deputy minister of Health Canada, the deputy minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness, the deputy minister of Public Services and Procurement, the president of the Public Health Agency of Canada, the chief public health officer of Canada, the vice-president of logistics and operations for the Public Health Agency of Canada, and the head of the National Advisory Committee on Immunization, be invited to discuss issues related to, but not limited to, the federal government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic; provided that

For one of the meetings scheduled on any of June 11, 14, or 18, 2021, the supplementary estimates (A) be discussed and disposed of, and that the Minister of Health be in attendance for this meeting with her officials, including the deputy minister of Health Canada, the president of the Public Health Agency of Canada, the chief public health officer of Canada, the vice-president of logistics and operations for the Public Health Agency of Canada, and that the head of the National Advisory Committee on Immunization, the deputy minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness, and the deputy minister of Public Services and Procurement also be in attendance, that all witnesses be in attendance for at least two consecutive hours, and that the total time allotted for opening statements be limited to 10 minutes in total to ensure adequate time for questions to be posed by committee members; and

That for the meeting on June 21, each political party represented on the committee be given leave to invite two witnesses of their choosing to discuss issues related to, but not limited to, the federal government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and that the total time allotted for opening statements be limited to five minutes by each witness or witness group to ensure adequate time for questions to be posed by committee members.

• (1640)

Finally, colleagues, you'll know that the one thing that's in there is that whichever meeting the Minister of Health chooses to come for, because it's in the second hour of the meeting after we've heard the first hour of witnesses, changing that wording to say they'll be here for two hours ensures that the meeting will be a three-hour meeting, so that we have ample opportunity to question the minister. She will be appearing on the supplementary estimates.

I would take it that that meeting would probably have to be on a Friday, because I think that's the only day we can get a three-hour meeting on.

Thanks.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Davies.

Can you submit that in writing to the clerk as well?

• (1645)

Mr. Don Davies: Yes, I will.

The Chair: Would you happen to have that in French as well?

Mr. Don Davies: I do.

The Chair: If you could get that to the clerk, he can distribute it to all the members ASAP.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: On a point of order, Chair, I think the clerk might already have it, in both official languages. Things happen.

The Chair: That would be great. Things happen like that.

Mr. Clerk, if you have it, please distribute it to the members.

Next up, after Mr. Davies, I have Mr. Kelloway. Do you wish to speak to Mr. Davies' amendment?

Mr. Mike Kelloway (Cape Breton—Canso, Lib.): I think so, and it probably does touch to some degree on Michelle's main motion, but I'll be brief.

Number one, Don, I think you deserve a glass of water or a large bottle of water after that, so I won't take up too much time.

We've been talking a lot about the issues contained in the 106(4), and I think we have agreement, or we're almost there in terms of coming to some kind of conclusion here, which is really beneficial. What I normally did in the past, when I taught at the University of Calgary, or elsewhere, in Cape Breton, was I wanted to try to sum up the main components of what I was hearing.

Don and Michelle, please correct me if I'm wrong. I know there's a lot in what you said, Don, but I want to maybe bring it down to just some modular points. We have one PMPRB meeting for three hours. Following that we would have three meetings with the witnesses for the first hour, and then I believe the deputy ministers for the second hour. For these meetings, each party would select one witness. I don't think that's changed. In addition, we would have one three-hour meeting with the minister and one meeting with another of the officials in the motion.

It seems like we're really trending towards that right spot, from what I'm seeing. After I finish speaking, which will be in a few moments, I am going to read Don's amendment to it, to see if it captures what we're hoping to achieve here.

I don't know if I can ask this to Don, through you, Chair. Is that basically the meat and the guts of what we're talking about here?

Mr. Don Davies: May I respond, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: Yes, please do.

Mr. Don Davies: It's pretty close, Mike. Again, I understand that there may be a further tweak we want to make to this, but we're going step by step.

Basically, what my amendment would do is nail down three hours this Friday for the PMPRB, with two witnesses each. The following Monday would be the law clerk and the Clerk of the Privy Council on documents. That's two meetings done. The next three meetings would be that structure of the first hour being a witness from each party and the second hour being the deputy ministers.

To one of those three meetings we invite the minister to come. We don't know which one that will be, but it likely would have to be on a Friday. She would come for the two hours on top of that one hour, so that would be a three-hour meeting. The last meeting, the sixth meeting, which is specified on June 21, is just a plain witness meeting, with two witnesses from each party.

I think you had it, but sorry if I didn't quite get up to that. I think it's important to be clear.

Mr. Mike Kelloway: I appreciate it, Don, and I appreciate the cliffhanger to come. It reminds me of one of those serials back in the 1930s and 1940s.

I just wanted to make those comments and try to capture, in my own mind, where I think we're going, which I think is a better spot than we were in last week, and just to capture the key elements of what you're proposing in the amendments.

I appreciate that and I yield the floor.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Kelloway.

We go now to Dr. Powlowski, please.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski (Thunder Bay—Rainy River, Lib.): Yes, I wanted to make an amendment too, but my wish is to do so after we've dealt with Don's amendment, as we want our amendment to apply to the motion as a whole.

I'd like to note, in passing, that Mike Kelloway talked about when he taught at the University of Calgary and elsewhere in Cape Breton, thereby implying that Calgary was part of Cape Breton. I'm glad to see Cape Breton is expanding its borders across the country there, Mike.

• (1650)

The Chair: It's clearly an expansionist government.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Gaudreau, you have the floor.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau (Laurentides—Labelle, BQ): I'd like to express an opinion, actually.

The result is indeed what is important, and given the analysis of the proposed amendment, the result seems to be good.

What is also important is my colleague Mr. Thériault's proposal. Indeed, if I am not mistaken, there is also a deadline. It is not in the amendment, but I am quite happy that it still falls under section 106(4) in terms of June 4.

Otherwise, I look forward to hearing other people's opinions, because that is very much in keeping with the objective we would like to use to get there.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Gaudreau.

[*English*]

Seeing no further hands up, we can proceed with the vote on Mr. Davies' amendment.

(Amendment agreed to: yeas 11; nays 0)

The Chair: Thank you, Clerk.

We'll go now to Dr. Powlowski.

I believe you indicated you wished to make a further amendment.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: Yes, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to move the following amendment: that all dates be removed from the motion, with the exception of the date for the PM-PRB meeting, which is to occur this Friday for three hours.

I believe this leaves the minister still appearing on Friday with that change, as stated.

The Chair: Thank you, Dr. Powlowski.

We have Ms. Rempel Garner.

Go ahead, please.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: I'm concerned that with this amendment, by removing the dates and not specifying that these meetings happen before the end of day on June 21, that might allow for wiggle room on when the meetings are going to be scheduled.

I'm wondering if the mover can clarify what the intention of the motion was. Was it to, in fact, have these meetings scheduled before the end of day on June 21? I realize that the motion is on the floor and I would ask the clerk, procedurally, if you can amend a subamendment? I think you have to have one on the floor, but if we were to support this, we would then put forward another subamendment that would clarify that these meetings would be required to take place before the end of day on June 21.

The Chair: My understanding is that we can have a subamendment. It's certainly my understanding, as the chair, that all these meetings need to be conducted prior to when the House rises.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: With that clarity then, I would move an amendment to the subamendment. I believe that's correct.

I move that at the end of the proposed amendment the following be added: "but that the meetings referenced in this motion be scheduled during regularly scheduled meeting slots prior to the end of day on June 21, 2021".

The Chair: Thank you very much.

That's just a subamendment, because we're in an amendment. It's not an amendment to an....

Anyway, I have it.

We now have this debate on Ms. Rempel Garner's subamendment.

Mr. Davies, go ahead, please.

Mr. Don Davies: I think we can probably dispense with this just with the simple understanding, so that we're all on the same page, that the paragraph of the motion that remains unamended says, "That the following regularly scheduled meetings of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Health be programmed as follows".

I think the intention, and I hope it's the consensus as to what we want to do by Dr. Powlowski's amendment, is that the meetings will happen on our regular scheduled time between now and June 21. All we're doing is saying that the first meeting, the only meeting that's scheduled for the topic on the date, is the one for this Friday, and then I suppose we leave it up to the clerk to determine when those other meetings will be.

We're going to have a meeting on the documents; we're going to have three meetings with the deputy ministers and we're going to have a meeting just with our witnesses, but we're not allocating those meetings to a certain date.

Dr. Powlowski, is my understanding correct as to what we're doing? Of course, that's with the understanding that, as you said, the meeting with the minister has to be on a Friday or we can't get the three hours.

Is that the intent?

• (1655)

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: Yes, that is the intent. We're not trying to get out of any of these meetings. It's just the matter of the timing of the meetings. We just want to make sure that we have the PM-PRB, and we have the minister on the Friday and then the other dates to be set by the clerk as agreed upon.

Mr. Don Davies: Right.

The only other thing I want to mention, just as a matter just of practicality, is that I believe the clerk has already lined up witnesses for this Friday for the PMPRB, so I think that's taken care of, but Monday is approaching fast.

It being Wednesday, in fairness to the clerk, and to all of us, really, we should have some idea of what meeting we want to have on Monday. The original motion called for that meeting to be the law clerk. If it's not going to be that meeting—and it's fine with me if it's not—that means it would have to be either one of the meetings where we each put two witnesses forward, or the first hour with our witness and the second hour with the deputy ministers.

Before we end this meeting today, we'll have to know what that meeting is because we'll have to get our witnesses in very quickly, I would say probably by the end of tomorrow.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: Yes.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Davies.

We will put a pin on that request and see where we end up with this motion.

We have Ms. Rempel Garner again, please.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: I just want to reiterate that I would like my subamendment voted on. It seems to be a pretty simple technical request that gives clarity to the motion.

The Chair: I'm 100% with that. I like following through so we know clearly what we're doing.

The discussion remains on the subamendment.

[*Translation*]

You now have the floor, Ms. Gaudreau.

Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: I completely understand the situation regarding the availability of witnesses, deputy ministers and ministers, among others.

Again, it is the intent and purpose that is important. If it will enable the committee to work more quickly and effectively for the well-being of our citizens, I am in favour of this.

I think things are going very well, even if there are subamendments. Things are proceeding.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Gaudreau.

[*English*]

We'll go back to Dr. Powlowski, please.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: I'm not sure if it's going to require a formal motion as to what happens on the Monday meeting, but I'm certainly happy with getting some witnesses and getting back to actually studying COVID again. We haven't had a genuine meeting about COVID for a while, so I'd be happy and I think we would be happy to try to get some witnesses together for the meeting on Monday.

I don't know whether that has to be formal or can be an informal agreement.

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Jean-François Pagé): Mr. Chair, the law clerk and all the witnesses for Monday have been contacted by me just to give them a heads-up that I was going to invite them for Monday, so they are prepared to come on Monday.

The Chair: Thank you.

We will leave the discussion and vote at this point on the subamendment.

The subamendment is on whether to add the text that Ms. Rempel Garner has proposed, to provide that these meetings happen prior to December 23—well, certainly before December but before we rise at the end of September.

That's the vote in question. We have Mr. Davies.

Go ahead, please.

• (1700)

Mr. Don Davies: It was just that last comment you made, Mr. Chair, that confused me, and maybe I'm misunderstanding Ms. Rempel Garner's amendment.

I heard you say, "provided these meetings occur by September".

The Chair: No, I misspoke. Her amendment is that they happen prior to when we rise this June.

Mr. Don Davies: I don't even know if we need this necessarily in writing. I'm happy to do it if we want.

Are we not just in agreement that our regularly scheduled meetings between now and June 21 will be allocated this way?

The Chair: I think that's—

Mr. Don Davies: Monday, Friday, Monday, Friday, Monday, Friday, Monday—

The Chair: Yes.

Mr. Don Davies: —and then we're just leaving the clerk open to have flexibility.

The Chair: It's my fault that I misrepresented or misstated what the subamendment is, but that's exactly what Ms. Rempel Garner has proposed, actually, in better language.

Mr. Don Davies: Finally, just before we vote on this, I presume that afterwards we will have to come back to the issue of what we do on Monday.

The Chair: Absolutely. Once we decide how we're proceeding, we will be able to carry on.

Seeing no more hands, I will call the vote on Ms. Rempel Garner's subamendment.

(Subamendment agreed to: yeas 11; nays 0)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Clerk. The subamendment carries.

We go now back to Dr. Powlowski's amendment, which was to remove the dates. Is there any further discussion on this amendment?

(Amendment agreed to: yeas 11; nays 0 [*See Minutes of Proceedings*])

The Chair: Thank you.

That brings us back to the main motion of Ms. Rempel Garner, as amended several times.

Is there any further discussion on the main motion as amended?

(Motion as amended agreed to: yeas 11; nays 0 [*See Minutes of Proceedings*])

The Chair: Thank you. The motion as amended carries.

That leaves us with the question of what to do on Monday. I'm very happy to work with the clerk and the various officials involved to plan out the next several weeks and do things as best we can.

Ms. Rempel Garner, I see your hand up.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: On that point, Chair, just for clarification perhaps, I have a question for the clerk. Did he say the law clerk and other officials would be available on Monday for a meeting? That seems reasonable to me. I would look for consensus from other colleagues, but first I'd like clarification from the clerk that they are available on Monday.

The Clerk: Yes.

The Chair: I know from the clerk that he has approached them. I'm not sure that all of the witnesses who have been requested for that meeting are going to be available on that day, but I would like to be able to adjust the schedule according to the availability of ministers and so forth for the other meetings as well, so that we can properly deal with all the matters that are before us.

That being the case, I would ask members to submit their witnesses for Monday, assuming it is not through the clerk, and then we'll do the best we can to make this motion a reality.

• (1705)

The Clerk: Mr. Chair, I must inform the committee that I will make the request for a three-hour meeting for Friday, but the whips have to decide in the end, so I don't know if we'll get permission to extend for one hour, to make it three hours. I just wanted to inform the committee.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Clerk. We will try to adjust the schedule however we can or fit in that extra hour, if need be, somewhere else to make it happen. We'll do the best we can.

Dr. Powlowski, please go ahead.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: I would just like the Monday meeting to be back on COVID. I don't think we've actually talked about COVID for a couple of weeks. There are some issues that have come up in the meantime. For example, mixing and matching vaccines is kind of a new strategy. There are several other issues that we haven't addressed because of what's happened in the last number of weeks. I think we're all agreed that in previous speeches in our last meetings we've been taken away a little from our duty, which is dealing with COVID in the time of a pandemic, so I would hope that at our next meeting we could actually get back to the business of dealing with COVID.

Thanks.

The Chair: Thank you, Doctor.

We'll go to Mr. Davies.

Mr. Don Davies: Thank you.

That being the case, I think we have to know what Monday's meeting is going to be on. If it's not going to be on the documents issue, then the only other two choices are to have the meeting on Monday, for which we each call two witnesses or to call one of those meetings where we have one witness in the first hour with the deputy ministers in the second.

I'm going to ask the clerk which he prefers, and I will canvass my colleagues as well, because if we're going to use Monday for that, we have to have our witnesses in by the end of tomorrow for sure in order to give the clerk a chance to notify the witnesses. Imagine calling witnesses who don't even know on a Thursday that they're being called to testify on the Monday—

The Clerk: The headsets are an issue also. I will have to ship them a pair of headsets.

Mr. Don Davies: I'm easy with either of those options, whether it's two witnesses or one, but if we do the one, then it's a fairly healthy list of deputy ministers. I'd like to ask the clerk if he thinks he can get the vast bulk of the deputy ministers to the meeting on Monday, if he asks them tomorrow.

The Chair: Let's leave that as something the chair and the clerk can work out together with the officials and see what we can work out as a schedule. I would agree with you that by tomorrow you should have together your witnesses for Monday. That will give us the scope of action we'll need.

Mr. Don Davies: Is it one or two, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: Let's make it two...whatever works. We can do it either way, but I just want to be able to schedule the meetings coming forward according to the availability of all the different parties. There are a lot of chess pieces on the board. We'd like these meetings to be as effective as possible, so we want to make sure all the people who need to be in them are available.

Please do get your witnesses in to the clerk by tomorrow, and then we'll do the best we can to make all of this stuff happen in good order.

Mr. Don Davies: Might I suggest then, Mr. Chair, that by the end of the day tomorrow we have our two witnesses in and prioritized, and then if the meeting on Monday will have only one witness in the first hour, with the DMs in the second hour, the clerk will know the schedule to contact the first witness.

In fact, that gives the clerk the flexibility to pick one or the other.

The Chair: Absolutely. I think that's a great suggestion, and I think that's what we should go with.

Ms. O'Connell, please go ahead.

Ms. Jennifer O'Connell (Pickering—Uxbridge, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I was going to suggest that committee members should probably get their witnesses in. The fact that these meetings are no longer kind of themed, providing, as Don said, if you want to put a priority list so that the whole point of not having fixed dates was for flexibility based on attendance.... I would suggest that, even if you have more than two witnesses, maybe send that in, and the clerk can start sending the headsets. Even if they're not until next week or the week after, that gives the clerk something to work from.

We should be prepared for that, given that we need to be a bit flexible with schedules and House resources, etc., but I would suggest we put in our priority lists of witnesses, and if multiple wit-

nesses are available, those parties can decide which ones, on which date and whatnot, but you can't do so until you get them in and get those headsets out.

• (1710)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. O'Connell.

We'll go back to Mr. Davies, please.

Mr. Don Davies: Thank you.

That is a really good suggestion by Ms. O'Connell.

This motion we've passed means we'll have five witnesses. There will be one meeting with two, and three meetings with one witness each. I would suggest that it not be a requirement necessarily, but perhaps we should try to get five to eight witnesses in by the end of tomorrow.

I want some flexibility, though, because if I'm going to be rushed to put five.... I haven't thought of all five witnesses yet. I can easily put in a couple, but if we try to put in five witnesses in a priority order, that might be helpful for the clerk.

The other thing I was going to mention, Mr. Chair, is that it will help the committee if, over the next few days, you come back with a schedule of how you want the next five meetings to go. I don't think we can know this meeting by meeting. It's hard to prepare that way—not to put a deadline on you—but it would be helpful if early next week you had some basic map of how the meetings are going to go.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Davies. I agree 100%, and I'll do the best I can. I will talk to the clerk and work with all the various moving pieces involved here, and make sure we do the best we can.

That being the case and seeing no more hands, I believe we have reached a meeting of minds. Therefore, thank you, everybody, and I declare the meeting adjourned.

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