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• (1035)

[English]

Hon. Anthony Rota (Speaker of the House of Commons): This is meeting number 12 of the Board of Internal Economy in this session. It will be televised and available by video conference.

Is there anything arising from the minutes of the previous meeting? Are we okay with those?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Is there any business arising from previous meetings?

Mr. Richards.

Mr. Blake Richards (Chief Opposition Whip): I wanted to touch base on one item where a follow-up was required. We had sent a letter and there was a deadline of December 18 for a response. Would we be looking at scheduling a meeting sometime shortly after that, or early in the new year, to discuss that item, based on any response we receive?

Hon. Anthony Rota: The letter has been sent. I don't believe we have received a response yet.

Mr. Blake Richards: I understand, but we gave a deadline of December 18. Are we planning to schedule a meeting shortly after that to discuss our response?

Hon. Anthony Rota: We'll have to wait until a response comes back. The letter has gone out, and we'll see what happens from there, if that's fair.

Mr. Blake Richards: I was just trying to get a sense as to what we thought.

Hon. Anthony Rota: The letter did go out within a couple of days of when we met last. It's all taken care of.

Mr. Blake Richards: All I'm getting at is that it leaves a long time after the response would be received. I wouldn't want to leave that hanging over anyone for a long period of time. I know we ordinarily wouldn't meet for some time after that. I just wondered if we were giving some consideration to meeting sooner, so that it wouldn't be left hanging.

Hon. Anthony Rota: I think that's fair. If it's okay with everyone, we'll wait until the response comes back, and then we'll deal with it when we have the facts in front of us. Is that fair?

There's consensus around the room. Perfect.

Our first presentation this morning concerns the LTVP working group recommendations. The presenter is Mr. Bruce Stanton, co-

chair of the Joint Interparliamentary Council and Deputy Speaker par excellence.

Before Mr. Stanton, Ms. DeBellefeuille, please go ahead.

[Translation]

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille (Whip of the Bloc Québécois): If I may, Mr. Chair, I'd like to thank Mr. Janse for having provided some details about the questions I had asked him.

I had asked how many witnesses gave evidence in French in parliamentary committees. What I'm trying to do is document the technical problems that sometimes come from failing to wear a headset. These problems mainly occur when unilingual francophone MPs are speaking.

At the last meeting, I said that I thought 90% of francophone witnesses gave their evidence in English. I was wrong by 4%. It would seem that 86% of francophone witnesses who appear before parliamentary committees do so in English. We've been saying from the outset that interpretation and technical problems have been having more of an impact on interventions by francophone MPs. And now we have facts and documentation to support our claim.

Mr. Chair, there have been many recommendations and suggestions. For example, it was suggested that the chair of the Liaison Committee should require an internal economy motion for the parliamentary committees asking each committee to adopt an internal economy motion to have witnesses do some technical tests before giving evidence in order to ensure that sound connectivity and quality are satisfactory.

Would House Administration and the clerk move this suggestion forward or should we take a position on it? I'd like some specifics on this point.

Is it up to us to do the follow-up or will it be delegated to the Liaison Committee? Are the clerks going to follow through on these suggestions made in the letter sent by the deputy clerk to the Committees and Legislative Services Branch?

Once again, I'd like to thank the team of clerks for having documented the problem and passed the information on to us. It'll be very useful to us in our future work.

• (1040)

Hon. Anthony Rota: I know that this is very important for us all. Could Mr. Janse answer the question. He could perhaps describe what's been done so far.

Mr. Janse, you have the floor.

Mr. Eric Janse (Clerk Assistant, Committees and Legislative Services Directorate, House of Commons): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Mrs. DeBellefeuille, for your question.

If the Bureau of Internal Economy were in agreement, I thought I might send the letter I gave you to Ms. Sgro, the chair of the Liaison Committee. She could then forward it to the chairs of the 24 committees, and each in turn could discuss the matter and decide whether they want to adopt an internal economy motion. Of course, the MPs on each committee could propose such a motion.

As I mentioned in the letter, witnesses are often called at the last minute, and it's sometimes not possible to send them a headset before they appear. We nevertheless make every effort to do so.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: What I understood was that technical tests would be a good idea, wherever possible, right before witnesses appear. One example of an annoying technical problem was during an appearance by the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship. The problem was fixed afterwards.

Right before someone is to give evidence, it would be useful to do some tests and remind the witness to wear a headset. If the witness doesn't have a headset, possible options could be suggested, or another witness could go first. The goal is to emphasize the importance of how to set things up to make interpretation possible.

Mr. Eric Janse: That would definitely facilitate things in various ways.

Our current procedure is to contact witnesses by email to send them the information. We strongly suggest that they connect 15 to 30 minutes before their appearance so that we can conduct some tests.

My impression is that many people don't read all their emails and if the witnesses don't read ours and connect only a few minutes before their appearance, there could be problems.

In our discussions with the committees branch, it was suggested that we telephone some witnesses, particularly if this is their first appearance, to underscore the importance of connecting ahead of time so that we can do various tests.

We hope that this might improve the situation.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Thank you very much.

Hon. Anthony Rota: The next speakers are Mr. Julian and Mr. Deltell.

Over to you, Mr. Julian.

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

Thank you, Mr. Janse.

This information is very useful and very important to us, given our current concerns about the decline of French in Canada. Over the past few weeks, we've initiated some parliamentary debates on this topic and have adopted several motions.

I was interested to learn that over one-third of witnesses can speak French. The problem is not so much the number of franco-

phone and francophile witnesses, but rather the infrastructure shortcomings.

At meetings of the Standing Committee on Finance, I saw interpretation problems several times, as a result of which people who were speaking French felt obliged to switch to English.

I believe the figures would back me up on this. People don't feel comfortable speaking French if the equipment is unsatisfactory and the interpreters can't do their work. As a result, they tend to switch to English, which is something that really should be avoided. The recommendations being made here should be forwarded to all the committees. Furthermore, it's important to firmly support the idea that the technology needs to be perfect so that witnesses can speak French in the knowledge that they'll be able to count on the excellent House interpretation services.

These statistics are very important, and I'd like to thank you for passing this information on to us. I think everyone around this table would be in favour of immediately and forcefully implementing the recommendations that were made.

For me, it would be a dream come true.

● (1045)

Hon. Anthony Rota: Thank you very much.

Mr. Deltell, you now have the floor.

Mr. Gérard Deltell (House Leader of the Official Opposition): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I fully agree with what my two predecessors have said. I'd like to add something, though. Many of my caucus colleagues have mentioned this problem, and I'm sure that it applies to all the political parties. Every time a technical problem of this kind occurs, it results in lost time in terms of evidence and our parliamentary work. Every now and then, this might be considered acceptable, but unfortunately, a lot of time is being lost, with interruptions of up to 10 or 20 minutes, because of technical problems. I'll admit, however, that it's occurring less often than before.

I'm in favour of all the observations that have been made. I'm also in favour of the recommendations, and welcome the initiative suggesting that people be called before they give evidence. I think the House should adopt this approach systematically. Emails are all very well, but we get up to 50 of them per hour and it's easy to miss one. People may not be watching their inbox closely. A return to the good old days might be required, by which I mean calling people directly on the telephone and checking and double-checking the information.

I'd like to thank you, Mr. Chair, for having reminded people once more yesterday, and this week in the House on several occasions, that it was absolutely essential for us to wear the headset supplied by the House of Commons.

I have a final observation, which is that like all of us here in the House, many of our colleagues attend meetings from home, from their riding office or from their parliamentary office. We might consider providing parliamentarians with more than one headset.

[*English*]

Hon. Anthony Rota: We will go now to Mr. Richards.

Mr. Blake Richards: On this topic, it's one thing with external witnesses we're asking to appear. I think some of the suggestions that have been made are good ones. We've seen this occur with ministers who are being asked to come to committee to be held accountable before the committee. I really think that in these cases....

This is not something that is surprising or unexpected for ministers. They need to have headsets and they need to ensure that they have a proper connection. I know it isn't exactly directly related to the committees, but in committee of the whole we had a minister who hadn't prepared to have a proper Internet connection.

I really believe that in these kinds of cases, the expectation should be that the minister will make up the time with the committee. If they've wasted 20 minutes of committee time because they didn't have the proper headset or something of that nature, the expectation should be that they make up the time so that the committee has those opportunities. We're seeing that those opportunities are being lost, and ensuring that ministers are accountable is a very important part of our democracy.

I think it's different from the situation with a regular witness. Sometimes a witness has been asked, as you say, on short notice and maybe isn't aware of the requirements with respect to our committees, but ministers certainly are. I really think that, if we're going to put something out, we should include in it as well that ministers will be expected to make up time if they do not come prepared with the proper equipment and connection.

• (1050)

Hon. Anthony Rota: That's very good. We'll take that under advisement.

Are there any more comments?

[*Translation*]

We're now going to study the recommendation made by the working group on the Long Term Vision and Plan, or the LTVP.

We have with us today Mr. Bruce Stanton, the chair of the working group on the LTVP and the Centre Block rehabilitation.

[*English*]

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

Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'm delighted to be here today.

I'm joined by Susan Kulba, who is the DG and chief executive architect on the House administration side, as well as Rob Wright,

assistant deputy minister with PSPC for the science and parliamentary infrastructure branch.

[*Translation*]

I'm here today as the chair of the LTVP working group, to update the board on our work since our last meeting, and will be seeking your support for the design direction regarding four areas: the lobbies, the galleries, the west light court, the west foyer light well, and a potential increase in space in the centre light court.

I'll also update you on two subjects regarding the independent design review panel and the issue of outreach to parliamentarians. I'll comment briefly on those last two items first.

[*English*]

On October 28, we discussed a plan for the engagement with our working group and the independent design review panel, IDRP, regarding the entrance to the Parliament welcome centre.

The IDRP is an eminent group of Canadian architects with extensive experience on projects of this nature. The working group had an opportunity to meet with them by Zoom on November 6, and we found their expert advice to be informative, helpful and consistent with the working group's opinion on things like the entrance design and retention of the front lawn and the Vaux wall.

We conveyed the importance of the House of Commons as a complex functioning workplace for parliamentarians, which also greets hundreds of visitors and guests daily and serves as one of Canada's most iconic heritage buildings.

We think the panel benefited from their meeting with us, and it will contribute to the panel's discussions and advice to PSPC in the time ahead.

• (1055)

[*Translation*]

Secondly, at our last meeting of November 27, we reviewed several means by which parliamentarians could become more involved and informed on the pace of work in Centre Block and even some possible areas where the working group could invite direct input, before interior formats and designs are finalized.

We anticipate that parliamentarians could be informed using various communications tools— video conferences, in-person meetings when they become possible again, website presence and video, as well as through the Speaker's regular newsletters. We believe that a project of this importance, not only to this cohort of parliamentarians, but to future ones, would benefit from direct input from the people who are at the centre of this large, complex workplace and centrepiece of Canada's system of government.

Turning to the four design recommendations, I would like to now discuss the lobbies, galleries and ideas for the existing light courts.

As you all know, the government and opposition lobbies are an important space for parliamentarians. It's where we conduct our parliamentary work, meet with colleagues, and where members will usually spend at least one ten-hour sitting day per week, and occasionally much longer. It's also the gathering place for votes and question period every day, all the while being close to our whip's and House leader's team and available at a moment's notice for duty in the House.

We've seen that this space was often overcrowded, and that's before the expected growth in MP numbers over the coming five decades, when these important spaces will be under even greater pressure. So, in finding ways to address the space pressure on the lobbies, the working group was presented with, and agrees with, a plan to expand the lobbies across two floors and parts of an adjacent courtyard.

This page shows a proposed plan for both floors. The second floor exists now. More space will be added on the ground floor.

The plan will keep the lobbies at the chamber level, but expanded vertically, to the ground floor, by adding a space at least as large as the current 2nd floor lobbies, with independent stair and elevator access for the level below.

The plan also includes expanded accessible washroom space. The image shows, in the centre of the plan to the left on the ground floor, that the washrooms are between the two lobbies and are exclusively for the use of parliamentarians and ground floor lobby staff.

In relation to the lobbies, we recommend for the board's consideration a design for both the government and opposition lobbies that includes additional support space located on the ground floor and adjacent courtyard, with dedicated vertical circulation for both.

[English]

Going to the galleries, on our meeting of October 28, the House presented us with a proposed design approach for the Centre Block galleries for our review and questions. You'll see the designs. On the left are the existing galleries on the third floor, and on the right is the proposal.

We recognize that the Centre Block galleries needed to be modified to become more accessible. The current physical design is well short of national building code standards for accessibility. In fact, prior to the closure of the building there was minimal accessibility. Meeting code and accessibility standards will result in a reduction of seating capacity in the galleries from 553 seats to 296.

The working group had a really good discussion regarding the average public attendance in the galleries over the periods of time that we experienced them, the extra demand during school visits and special addresses, and comparisons with comparable parliaments and legislative assemblies.

We asked the administration to investigate the possibility of using some flexible space in those galleries so that the design of the seating would permit a scaling-up, if you will, under those special

circumstances, while assuring that it meets national building code standards. In relation to the galleries, we agreed to recommend that the board endorse the proposal of a design that complies with national building code requirements for accessibility, recognizing that there will be a significant reduction of available seating and that the architects be instructed to consider flexible solutions to accommodate more visitors.

That's the second item. Now we'll move on to the west light court and the west foyer light-well.

At our November 27 meeting we agreed on a conceptual design approach and strategy for the west light court. That's what you see in front of you now. That is an image of the west light court looking south. You would see the outer wall of the House of Commons on your right, with the stained glass windows, and then the lower levels as that area or space is closed in.

The primary purpose of the light courts is to bring natural light and ventilation to interior spaces not located on an exterior facade. This is an important part of the architectural and heritage character of Centre Block. We were informed that closing in the light courts at the roof level will provide significant improvements on energy performance for the building. The proposed design would convert the larger west light court into an open, light-filled space that would provide public access to the galleries, and where visitors to the chamber could circulate between level B1—that's the main level of the Parliament welcome centre—and levels two and three in Centre Block.

• (1100)

It would greatly improve the circulation of the public within Centre Block, but importantly, it keeps the original architecture of Centre Block intact. It also allows the light court to continue to bring natural daylight to the chamber and other interior spaces.

There's an additional light court on the west side. It's proposed that a new glass enclosure cover what's called the west light-well. This is right above the House of Commons foyer, essentially to provide natural light in the foyer area. This would effectively restore natural light to that area, intended as part of the Beaux-Arts planning for the foyer in the original structure. You will recall that there's a beautiful heritage glass laylight in the foyer ceiling. Currently, that whole light-well is closed in, due to damage and leaking, and so on, many decades ago. The idea would be to put a covering over it that would allow natural light to be restored to that light-well.

Accordingly, the working group recommends that the board accept and adopt the proposed design approach for both the west light court, the larger one, and the west foyer light-well.

The fourth and final item is the centre light court. This is a much bigger space. In the sectional view of Centre Block, I'd draw your attention to the purple area in the middle. The centre light court spans a much wider space, and in particular, the area above the roof of the Hall of Honour. If you were going down one of the interior hallways in Centre Block on the fourth or fifth floor and looked out towards the centre light court, you would see the roof over the Hall of Honour at the third level. The idea would be to add additional floors on top of that roof that would extend right to the top on floors four, five and six, and then, of course, join the north and south hallways in Centre Block on each of those floors.

We think it's an excellent opportunity to infill the space in Centre Block to add much-needed space for parliamentarians. Up to 600 square metres of space would be added to the functioning interior space and it would be done in such a way as to not interfere or reduce in any way the natural light that comes into the building. Also, of course, as mentioned earlier, by capping over the light court and still allowing natural light, it will permit much better energy efficiency for the building.

It should be noted as well that none of this infill would do anything to interrupt the features or construction of the Hall of Honour. It would all occur above that level.

We therefore recommend to the board that the proposed infill approach be endorsed for the centre light court with the expectation that conservation principles will be respected, and of course, the working group will return to you at a later time to discuss some options for the use of that interior space.

[*Translation*]

Overall, I'd like to congratulate all the members of the working group and all the parties for their contribution to the work. I realize that it's important for MPs to be involved in the project.

Finally, I would like to point out that the working group plans to hold another meeting early next year. I'd be happy over the coming months to come back with further updates as our work progresses.

Thank you for your attention. I'd be happy to answer any questions you may have or to provide more details on any of the points discussed.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Thank you Mr. Stanton.

We'll now begin the question period.

Over to you, Mr. Julian.

● (1105)

[*English*]

Mr. Peter Julian: Thank you very much.

Thank you, Mr. Stanton.

I know there's a tremendous amount of work involved, in addition to all the other hats you wear, so our thanks to you and to the team of members of Parliament working with staff on this difficult issue.

I have a number of questions, so I'll just lay them all out. I think that is easiest.

First off, in terms of the centre light court infill, you haven't mentioned what the possible use would be for that shared space. It would be helpful to have a few more details on that proposal.

On the infill courts, the west light court and the light-well, those seem to me to be no-brainers. Having had an office a number of times on that west court, I know the amount of wasted energy that is required to heat the four walls of the courtyard rather than just covering it over and using that space far more effectively. On the light-well, it never made sense to me why that was blocked in the first place. Again, there's an energy loss there, so bravo for looking at that.

My concern about the galleries, quite frankly, is that we are cutting basically in half the participation of people who are able to come directly into the House of Commons and see parliamentarians at work. As someone who comes from the far west of Canada—5,000 kilometres away—I know that when any of my constituents make their way across Canada, they want to have the full experience of our democracy, and often, they want to be able to participate in the House of Commons. That hasn't been a problem generally, but if we're cutting the number of seats in half, I think that would be. I would raise concerns about that.

Yes, absolutely we need to have the ability for people with reduced mobility and people with disabilities to be able to participate fully. There are designated spaces that could achieve that, but I'm very concerned about the cuts in the number of people who can actively participate. Could you perhaps explain a little bit more? You mentioned a scaling-up on occasion. That may happen more often than not. Particularly when we open the new building, we'll have people coming from across the country to see it. We certainly saw that with the Library of Parliament, so if you could go a little bit more into that, I would appreciate it.

I gather that a dedicated internal vertical circulation is Ottawa-speak for stairs or an elevator, and I'm wondering in terms of the lobby what that actually means. It would seem to me that given the narrowness of the lobby space, what we are actually doing is having the lobbies one floor down, and how that access up and down is achieved is important.

My final question is the most important one. What are the cost differentials in doing this? I assume from the west light court and the light-well that the energy savings will probably be far beyond the renovation costs. For some of the other things, it would be helpful for us to know at least in a ballpark way what the differential is between what would be a scaled-down version and what could be proposed. As we're going through a pandemic, most Canadians want to make sure every dollar spent is spent effectively.

Nobody wants to see a deterioration of the Centre Block. Quite the contrary, they want to see a renovation, but they don't want to see frills. We have to be very conscious of that to make sure that every dollar spent is effective.

Those are my questions. Thank you.

Mr. Bruce Stanton: Mr. Julian, as usual, you have covered all the bases here, and I'll do my best to take them one at a time.

On the centre light court additional infill of those three floors, we did look at very preliminary options as to what that would add. That is one of the things I think we would like to come back to the board with. Potentially, I don't mind saying, this would be one area where, in reference to, say, consultations with parliamentarians, it would be something that we could chat with them about as well.

We're far from a decision as to what that interior format would need to look like, but as an example, one could anticipate that on floors four and five you could add up to, say, three different office suites on each floor, an additional six offices in there. Members should know that across the entirety of Centre Block the number of offices available will be reduced for a number of reasons, so it gives an ability to sort of catch up on some of that.

The sixth floor we believe, because it will be at the top of the building, affords the possibility—and again, not finalized—of creating a space for parliamentarians to gather. Senators and members will know that there are opportunities for that. We will get back to you with that and, again, it could be the subject of some consultation.

With regard to the galleries, Mr. Julian, your concerns were shared among the working group, real concerns with the overall reduction in the number of seats in the gallery. When we looked at actual attendance in the gallery outside of question period and special events, we all know as parliamentarians that, for the most part, the 553 seats were well above what was needed.

You're right, at certain special times of the year and certainly for an address to a joint chamber, senators and parliamentarians, when you need a full gallery.... That is why the working group suggested this as an example. If you look at the east and west interior walls, you'll see in the galleries' design—opposition, government lobbies and the Speaker's gallery—that some of those spaces protrude inward into the chamber. Those would be the locations for accessible seating. There will be occasions during those special addresses, as an example, where not all of that accessible seating will be needed. Similarly, perhaps in the north gallery, the design of seating could be done in such a way that it could, as we suggest, be flexible or scale up to accommodate more persons and still meet national building code standards.

We've asked the House administration and PSPC to come back to us, in this case, the House. I think Susan's team would come back to us with some suggestions. Sure enough, we'll have fixed seating and meet all the code for 296, but maybe there's a way some of that seating could be designed so that we could scale up to some standing room or some other means to accommodate more people on those special occasions.

Finally, we'll say that the 296, relative to the number of members who are in the House, is relatively consistent with the other chambers and legislatures that we looked at as well, comparing the number of members to the number of seats in the gallery.

In terms of lobby access and the idea of having an expanded lobby area on the lower floor, you all know that essentially what's on the second floor now where the lobbies are situated will effectively stay the same, with the exception of the area that protrudes into the light court on the right-hand side. There's a little bit of expansion there that will permit elevator access, for example, and other stair access for the opposition lobby side. On the lower floor you'll effectively have a space equal in size to the second floor, and each of those sides, both the opposition and government side, will have their own independent stairway and elevator so that members attending the lobby during the day can move up and down freely, and it would be fully accessible.

• (1110)

We appreciate that it will create some potential issues around keeping members connected to their whips and leadership teams while they are there. However, considering the number of MPs that the House will need to accommodate in the usual proportions over the next 50 years, if the same formula is kept in place—we're already under space pressures now—it's only going to get worse down the road.

Finally, on the cost differentiations on the light court proposals, I'm going to ask Rob to comment on that.

Mr. Rob Wright (Assistant Deputy Minister, Public Services and Procurement Canada (PSPC)): Sure. Thank you very much for the question, Mr. Chair.

I will speak first about the lobbies. We looked at two options essentially for the chambers. The option that is proposed here—and these costs include the work on the galleries in the chamber and for the lobbies—is costed at approximately \$75 million. The alternative option, which was the expanded chamber option that we looked at, was a little in excess of \$300 million. Those were the two comparative options that we looked at. The proposed option here, which again includes the work on the galleries, the chamber and the lobbies, would be approximately \$75 million.

On the light-wells, as you quite correctly point out, there are a number of puts and takes from a cost perspective, so it is a little more complex. We could come back with cost comparisons on that, because there are the energy consumption considerations. The covering in the light-wells is essential to the sustainability strategy for the Centre Block. We have a carbon-neutral strategy for the Centre Block. Before it closed, the Centre Block was the worst performing from the perspective of energy performance, energy usage and GHG emissions within our portfolio. That is essential to the strategy, going forward.

The other thing that would be important to note is that, especially with respect to the west and east courtyards, the use of these courtyards provides universal accessible access for Canadians to the galleries. Without using the courtyards in this way, we would have to find another and probably more costly way that would impact the heritage components of the Centre Block.

This sidesteps a number of those issues. It is critical to the sustainability strategy, it is critical to the universal accessibility strategy and, as the Deputy Speaker indicated regarding the growth in the number of parliamentarians, it provides some additional elbow room for the building, which is critical. It's part of returning the Centre Block to the original vision of John Pearson, of making sure that there's symmetry, a light-filled space and common-use space for Parliament. This is essential and has been a bit lost over the years as functionality has, with the need for space, overtaken some of this common space.

• (1115)

Hon. Anthony Rota: That's fine. Okay.

We'll go to Mr. Richards, followed by Mr. Deltell.

Mr. Blake Richards: Just to follow along, one of my three questions was addressed already but I have two additional. I'll just follow up on the light court proposal.

We have the proposals for the west foyer, the west light court. Is there a similar proposal being put before our colleagues in the Senate for the east side and a light court there? I'm just curious on that front.

Mr. Bruce Stanton: Indeed, there is. You may know that there is a working group much like ours on the House side that is getting constituted this month to deal with these issues as well. There is an east light court as well that is primarily surrounded by the Senate offices, but it's worth noting that there are House of Commons offices that typically face onto that light court as well. That's the subject of some discussion right now. It has not been finalized as of yet, but we are in the midst of discussions with the Senate working group to meet with them, hopefully in the new year.

Mr. Blake Richards: Okay.

Just as a follow-up on that, you mentioned that there are, for example, House of Commons offices that back into that area as well. How will the interface between the two work to ensure that things are coordinated in a proper fashion and we are not getting two very different outcomes on each side?

Mr. Bruce Stanton: We're looking at finding a way to certainly get agreement on what is done there, but I think that, overall, the core objectives are around ensuring that we are maintaining the heritage objectives and keeping the architectural integrity of this amazing building in place.

Yes, we can modernize it and make it better from an energy efficiency point of view, but we're going to do all we can to make sure that we walk that line between an incredibly complex and busy operating workplace and, at the same time, maintaining that integrity and keeping the character of the interior services and spaces in such a way that it retains those remarkable features for generations to come.

• (1120)

Mr. Blake Richards: There's one other question I have. It wasn't really within the scope of your presentation this morning, but I am really curious about the welcome centre and how that will now look in terms of the entrance.

Right now, of course, we have the one entrance in front of the Peace Tower. Is that preserved in this or will something be done? I've always found that a bit of an odd and very awkward circumstance. What are the plans for that going forward, or can you address that today?

Mr. Bruce Stanton: For the Parliament welcome centre, we did adopt an approach there that will have the main entrance for Parliament, if you will, essentially on either side of the main stairs, right in the centre section as you walk towards the Peace Tower, as you approach those main stairs.

The entrance for the public and for others is still somewhat part of a discussion on how we're going to finalize the uses. That's a discussion that's being had, and it's one of the things that the IDRP spoke with us about as well. It's to make sure that, as the public come up there, they'll enter what is essentially the centre point of the whole parliamentary triad, as they say: the East Block, West Block and Centre Block.

On what you will see on the surface, though, as you look from Wellington up towards the Peace Tower, much of that is essentially going to stay the same. The lawn will be the same size. The Vaux wall, that stone wall that originates from the original structure, will be there. Members and senators will still have their own private entrances, as they do now, at grade level, on the east and west ends of the building.

The main public will enter from the sides of the stairs and essentially go slightly downward at that point. The main level, B1, in the Parliament welcome centre is where most of the public will clear security and we'll have those features of the welcome centre there. It's from there that they would proceed. If they were going to the galleries, they would take the elevators up to the third floor from that location.

Mr. Blake Richards: When you say "the sides of the stairs", do you mean the stairs that are there now—or were there—right under the Peace Tower? Are you talking about stairs that are going up from the lawn level?

Mr. Bruce Stanton: The latter.

Mr. Blake Richards: Okay.

Mr. Bruce Stanton: If you walk up that main walkway, there's that grand staircase that goes up to the upper level—we'll call it a mezzanine level, almost—that's at grade level with the entrance to the Peace Tower. It's at the base of those main stairs. The left-hand and right-hand sides are where you will go into the welcome centre.

Mr. Blake Richards: Okay. I think that does address what I was concerned with, which is the way it was previously. We all know that there have been situations where someone is coming directly into the building. We're avoiding that situation now. Someone will have to clear security before they enter the main building itself.

Mr. Bruce Stanton: That's exactly correct. Yes.

Mr. Blake Richards: Okay.

Mr. Bruce Stanton: The fact is that it will be a prominent entrance. Wayfinding was an issue. As people walk up to this grand building, the entrance literally will be right in front of them. The closer they get to the building, they will immediately see that the entrance is welcoming them there.

Mr. Blake Richards: That's great. Thank you.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Very good.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Deltell, You have the floor.

Mr. Gérard Deltell: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Stanton.

I'd like to address three points with you.

First, I'd like to speak about the floor area in the House of Commons. There are currently 338 MPs. Needless to say, while there won't be any work over the next two weeks, there will be for the next century. Demographics being what they are, we may well need more MPs. If so, it'll be difficult to expand the space if the walls are put up.

Have you looked into the potential number of MPs who might sit in the future House of Commons? If so, do you expect future alterations?

It's hard to see how the current configuration could sit 500 MPs.

• (1125)

Mr. Bruce Stanton: Thank you for this relevant question, Mr. Deltell.

The working group took this into consideration. We have not yet had discussions about the details for this space. Over the coming year, we're going to examine options that could accommodate all the MPs.

The schedule for the renovation work shows that it'll be spread over 50 years, from 2018 to 2068. The current number of MPs is 338. By 2060, we expect that there might be as many as 460. We'll find a way to accommodate all MPs in the House of Commons. The Board of Internal Economy has already said that for the time being, it would like to keep the official opposition on the other side of the house.

The best approach would probably be to review the possible options for the future and to present several of these to the board.

Mr. Gérard Deltell: It's going to take a lot of creativity.

I have a highly technical question.

Are you going to keep the floors the way they are now?

Mr. Bruce Stanton: I'd like to ask Ms. Kulba to take this one.

There are several options, but this isn't the time to go into the details.

Ms. Kulba, do you have any comments about this?

Ms. Susan Kulba (Senior Director, A and LTVP Program Management Directorate, House of Commons): Thank you.

We've already established the available options for arranging all the seats in a way that would accommodate approximately 460 MPs, but they are still at the concept stage. More work is required before we can return to the working group with detailed plans. At that point, the possibilities can be studied and the best possible option for the House could be determined.

Mr. Gérard Deltell: Thank you, Ms. Kulba.

A month ago I was able to visit the worksite with some colleagues and enjoyed what I saw very much. The people there said they had not encountered many surprises because they had a good work plan even before the sod-turning ceremony, which is a good sign.

Do you have a timeline for completion of the work?

Mr. Bruce Stanton: We certainly do.

I'd like to thank you for having visited the Centre Block worksite. In fact, all members of the Board of Internal Economy are welcome to do so.

There have not been many surprises in the course of the renovation work on the Centre Block because we were indeed well prepared.

What was your question?

Mr. Gérard Deltell: The timeline for completion of the work was, to say the least, vague. There was talk of 10 to 20 years. Could we have a more precise idea of when the Centre Block renovation work will be completed?

Mr. Bruce Stanton: I'll ask Mr. Wright to answer your question.

Mr. Rob Wright: Thank you very much for the question.

In fact, decisions about what we are discussing today are critical for coming up with a base budget and timeline. I'd say it'll be closer to 10 years than 20 years.

• (1130)

Mr. Gérard Deltell: Good. Thank you.

The third matter is more a comment than a question.

Mr. Stanton, I'd like to thank you and congratulate you on the quality of your French. Just because we've been talking about it so much of late doesn't mean we need to talk about it even more, but I did want to point out that you've always spoken French, and I'm truly grateful for it.

Mr. Bruce Stanton: Thank you very much, Mr. Deltell.

Hon. Anthony Rota: We'll now go to Mr. Rodriguez.

Hon. Pablo Rodriguez (Leader of the Government in the House of Commons): Mr. Deltell has asked the two questions I wanted to ask. Thank you.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Are there any other questions?

Mr. Gérard Deltell: I can confirm that there has not been any collusion, Mr. Chair.

Hon. Anthony Rota: That's too bad. It's gratifying to see people working together.

Are there any other questions?

[*English*]

Mr. Stanton, thank you for your dedication. I know you've been putting a lot of time into this, and I want to thank your team as well. We look forward to seeing you again with more good news.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Bruce Stanton: Thank you very much.

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

[*English*]

Do we approve the five recommendations?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Great, you have good news to bring back.

The next item is proposed 2021-22 main estimates. Our presenter is Daniel Paquette, chief financial officer.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Paquette, you have the floor.

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

I'm here to present the proposed 2021-22 main estimates for approval by the Board of Internal Economy. The estimates summarize the funding for items already approved by the board. There will accordingly not be any new funding requests during this presentation.

The proposed main estimates for 2021-22 total \$543.7 million, an increase of 5.3% over the main estimates for the previous year.

In compliance with the Parliament of Canada Act, the House must prepare an estimate of the sums that will be required to pay the expenditures for the fiscal year to come and shall transmit the estimate to the Treasury Board, with the estimates of the government of Canada.

The main estimates for the House of Commons include an estimate of voted appropriations and statutory items. The voted appropriations are estimated at \$383.5 million. They include the expenditures of MPs and senior officials; committee, parliamentary association and exchange expenditures; and administrative expenditures.

The statutory items are estimated at \$160.2 million. These include salaries and allowances for members and House officers; contributions to members of Parliament retiring allowances; and contributions to employee benefit plans.

[*English*]

These main estimates include the cost of living increases based on previously approved policies and existing legislation. These are the office budgets and supplements for members and House officers, as well as the travel status expense accounts for 2021-22, which have been increased by 1% for a total of \$1.7 million. This is in accordance with the adjusted consumer price index.

The main estimates also include a budget adjustment of \$1.2 million to some members' office budgets to account for changes in elector supplement, following the general election in 2019. In addition,

the sessional allowance and additional salaries for members and House officers have been increased by 2.1% or \$1.3 million, as provided by the Parliament of Canada Act.

Economic increases for House administration employees, which were approved by the board earlier this year, amount to \$5.6 million, which has been included in the main estimates for the next fiscal year.

In addition, these main estimates include the funding related to initiatives that have recently been approved. That is a net increase of \$4.5 million for the long-term vision and plan, \$6.6 million for security enhancements for members, as well as the \$5.2 million in funding to stabilize various administrative functions within the House administration.

The main estimates include a decrease of \$1 million related to the funding for conferences, associations and assemblies, leaving \$300,000 for the 65th Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference, which was postponed from this year due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and is now planned to take place in August 2021.

Finally, an increase of \$700,000 in contributions to members' pension plans has been included due to the revised contribution rates for members.

I would like to point out that while we are still considering uncertainty surrounding the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic and its continuing impact on operations and associated public health measures that will be required, these main estimates have been prepared using the planning assumption that operations would return to near normal during the upcoming fiscal year.

This has been done to ensure that sufficient funding is available to meet the needs of the House over the coming year. That being said, we'd like to assure you that we will continue to monitor these unprecedented and evolving situations, and will take any necessary adjustments over the course of the year to ensure we can continue to adapt operations of the House to make sure we meet the needs of members in the fulfillment of their parliamentary functions.

In conclusion, it is recommended that the board approve the proposed 2021-22 main estimates for the House of Commons for the amount of \$543.7 million.

This funding will be divided between two programs: \$321 million for members and House officers, and \$222.7 for the House administration.

This concludes my presentation on the proposed main estimates. We can answer questions the members may have.

• (1135)

Hon. Anthony Rota: Mr. Julian has the first round of questions.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Peter Julian: Thank you very much.

I honestly find it disturbing that the main estimates show an increase of approximately 5% over last year. The inflation rate is around 1%. In the presentation you just made—and I thank you very much for it, Mr. Paquette—you say that salaries rose, which is normal, but also that expenses for computers, security and administration also increased. You also discussed the effect that the COVID-19 pandemic had during the past year and that it will also have over the next fiscal year.

Mr. Paquette, I'm going to ask you two questions. First, can you tell us, in general terms, about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and its potential repercussions for next year's main estimates?

Second, do you anticipate that the main estimates won't be as high? I think people expect that overall budgets won't increase significantly during the pandemic and that they'll be reasonable. If the main estimates rise considerably relative to last year, but the supplementary estimates are much lower next year, we'll approach a balanced budget. However, it will be more disturbing if there are just as many increases in the supplementary estimates.

Thank you for all the details included in these estimates.

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

Mr. Daniel Paquette: There is an item on expenditures during the pandemic a little further on in the agenda. We'll be discussing the impacts on this year in greater detail. As for the current trend, some expenditures are lower because we can't travel, create events or provide training. The reductions are greater than the additional costs stemming from the need to adapt to this new environment. We will address those items in more detail.

Here's some brief background. Some changes have occurred in the House administration and the House itself over the past two or three years, and many new technologies have been adopted. There is the new Parliamentary Precinct as well as the West Block and the new buildings. New statutes are having an impact on occupational health and safety—you mentioned security, Mr. Julian—as well as accessibility.

What we see in the proposed main estimates for 2021-2022 is the investment we need to develop the competencies and capacity that will ensure this transformation continues into the future.

As for the supplementary estimates, all we have at this stage is the reprofiling of funds, which is one of our standard practices. We aren't anticipating these amounts. This year—and I mean the current year—we requested a little more than a reprofile of funds, since previously negotiated collective agreements had a retroactive effect. Without anticipating surpluses that might have resulted from the pandemic, we wanted to ensure we had the necessary funds to meet our financial requirements.

At this point, we believe that no projects or initiatives will raise our supplementary estimates above normal levels. We are seeking only the usual reprofile of funds for next year.

• (1140)

Mr. Peter Julian: Thank you.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Are there any other questions? I see there aren't any.

Do we approve this recommendation?

Agreed. Very well.

Now we will move on to item five, quarterly financial report for the second quarter of 2020-2021.

[*English*]

Mr. Blake Richards: Pardon me, Mr. Chair. I thought I had raised by hand and I hadn't. I did want to ask a couple of questions.

Hon. Anthony Rota: We'll go back then. Please ask your questions. Mr. Paquette is still with us.

Please go ahead.

Mr. Blake Richards: There are a couple of things I wanted to touch on. One was similar in nature to Mr. Julian's questions, but I'll leave it for the second part.

The other side of this is that some areas have seen decreases as well. One of them was the office of the law clerk and also legal services. I'm just concerned because I know at the health committee, the law clerk indicated to us that there were some resource constraints he faced in vetting some of the documents that he is going to have to do in response to the order made by the House on the 26th of October.

I'm just wondering if we can have any comment on that decrease in resources, and whether the law clerk has the resources he needs now to be able to process those documents that the House and its committees have asked him to vet and to redact.

Hon. Anthony Rota: That's very good.

I'll open it up.

[*Translation*]

Go ahead, Mr. Dufresne.

[*English*]

Mr. Philippe Dufresne (Law Clerk and Parliamentary Counsel, House of Commons): Thank you, Mr. Richards.

The indication about increases in resources for the legal services at the House were increases that occurred in this past year. In terms of your question with respect to the committee, I did appear in front of the health committee last week and gave information about what we are expecting in terms of the potential volume of disclosure. We indicated that we had organized our resources to be prepared to deal with the task that the House has given us and we gave some parameters in terms of volume and the time that it would take us to review a certain number of documents.

To give a sense to the committee, there had been some testimony about documents being in the millions of pages. That gave us a sense that it may take some time, but we were prepared to do what was necessary to achieve our task.

Mr. Blake Richards: You don't feel there are any additional resources that you require to be able to complete that in a timely fashion.

Mr. Philippe Dufresne: We indicated we could conduct the review of about 50,000 documents in seven days. There was talk of a much higher number than that, but we don't know yet how many we will receive. We also indicated that we would advise the committee as soon as we knew the specific number so that next steps could be considered.

Mr. Blake Richards: On the other side of things, I share the concern generally about some pretty large increases. Mr. Julian has addressed them to a large degree, but I want to touch on it specifically. Looking at line items, there are some pretty huge increases in specific line items. Two of the largest were employee relations, which is a 78% increase, I believe, and human resources service centre, which is a 76% increase. One of the others that is among the larger ones is occupational health, safety and environment, which is up 26%. Those all seem to group together in the category of labour and employment issues.

Is that driven by the pandemic or is there something else that it's responding to? Those are pretty alarming increases.

• (1145)

Mr. Daniel Paquette: I'll start, and then ask my peer, Ms. Laframboise, to add to it.

Some of that are the increases related to when we talked about the capacity for HR services for members. That was increased last year, and now we're stabilizing the funding. Then there was some capacity relating to some of the new legislation that was also stabilized this year. If I'm not mistaken, there has been some reallocation of resources and alignments within HR.

I'll let Ms. Laframboise address the items more closely.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Michelle Laframboise (Chief Human Resources Officer, House of Commons): Thank you, Mr. Paquette.

[*English*]

In essence, one of the questions you asked was around the large increase to the HR service centre. That group is a new unit that was put in place in response to the implementation of the enterprise resource planning program and system. The ERP is an integrated resource planning function that, over the long term, is going to help

us align and streamline our resources and stabilize the organization indefinitely, which in the long term will help us manage our funding and our resources better.

That is one piece of it. The other part you spoke about was occupational health and safety. There absolutely has been an increase in that function as a result of the implementation of Bill C-65, keeping in mind that we onboarded the members and the organization to a relatively significant piece of legislation, put in place the regulations, and adopted and incorporated new programs and new policies. There was definitely a significant amount of training to onboard Bill C-65. That is definitely an increase as well.

Our plan going forward is to stabilize the organization, to leverage the enterprise resource planning in the integrated business planning piece and to maintain and continue our protections and our policies under the auspices of Bill C-65.

Those are the bigger pieces of what you asked about.

Mr. Blake Richards: What you're saying to me is that it's been established in response to Bill C-65.

Ms. Michelle Laframboise: A very large portion of it is Bill C-65.

As I mentioned earlier, we have 17 programs and policies that need amending. The employer's obligations are significant and require a lot of work up front. In the long term, hopefully we'll be able to stabilize that, potentially looking at aligning and streamlining some of those resources going forward. It is absolutely my plan to do that.

Mr. Blake Richards: Okay.

More broadly, I want to get a sense of what measures are in place internally to slow down expenditure growth. Mr. Julian mentioned that we're seeing an increase of over 5% in what we're seeing here, but I believe if you look back from 2014 until now, there has been a 29% increase in the expenditures in the House's estimates. This is a pretty large increase over a five- or six-year period.

I'm wondering what measures are in place to ensure that this expenditure growth can be slowed down. What should the board be looking at? Is there any advice you can provide us on what we can be looking at as a board in terms of measures that can be put in place to ensure that we have stronger fiscal prudence and stronger controls and to make sure that we're not seeing these continual increases year over year?

Mr. Daniel Paquette: I can reassure you that definitely in the last two or three years we have been putting a lot of effort into making sure, if we come forward with any requests for funding, we do an assessment and make sure we restabilize some of the resources and realign where we can to make sure the requests are only for what we need.

There has been a progression of many legislative changes or other demands around services. The cost of living is obviously one of the big ones here, and there are some pieces above and beyond that. There are incremental services when we look at some of the pieces of legislation around disclosure and legislation around health and safety. Then we have the increased capacity around services for members, around HR, around the security that's more recent and around the onboarding. The most significant portion of the growth over the last three or four years has been the onboarding and taking control of the various new buildings in the parliamentary precinct. For those we made sure we challenged the work with the experts and just asked for what we needed to maintain these various systems and the tools given to us for that assignment.

Many of these things are outside of the control of the administration to react ahead of time to try to manage these. We try to make sure our request for funding is limited to what is needed to maintain and support the infrastructure.

• (1150)

Mr. Blake Richards: I wanted to come back to this idea of finding ways to put in place controls for better fiscal prudence, but you sort of led me into my other question, which is about the fairly large increases in terms of the employment figures.

We saw an increase, I believe, from 1,827 to 2,214. That's about a 21% increase. It's a pretty big jump. A couple of the bigger jumps were in procedural services, which we saw go from 261 to 442, and then in the office of the deputy clerk of administration, which we saw more than double in size from 37 to 77. I'm wondering if that's an increase because there are more part-timers with the pandemic or if that's really a legitimate full-time equivalent increase. What's driving this huge 21% increase in the employment figures?

Mr. Daniel Paquette: The report we provided to you, with the documentation at this time, represents the staff on force at the time we prepared the documentation. It gives you a full sense of how many people we have working at the precinct. Previously, the 1,700 or so people you saw were representing more or less the numbers that we're looking at: the actual full-time indeterminates, full-time long-term terms, or long-term terms part time. It didn't have some of our short-term seasonal workers and it didn't have many of the other people we have who are supporting and who are not necessarily there on a permanent basis at the precinct.

For you to have a full picture, we made sure we had the complete on-site at that particular point in time. My apologies; we should have had a note to that effect on the documentation that we were presenting a different number, not a growth in numbers.

That said, there has been some growth, given all of the items I identified earlier. Many of the services we offer require the capacity to support that, and that growth is there, but it's not the 21% difference that you see in the documentation.

Mr. Blake Richards: What you're saying is that what we're seeing there is a snapshot in time, and the 21% wouldn't be an accurate portrayal of the growth. What would be more accurate in terms of a percentage of growth?

Mr. Daniel Paquette: I don't have that number in front of me. We could reproduce the report you received last time for the main

estimates on the same basis so you can have that, and we can provide that to the board members to have a better analysis.

Mr. Blake Richards: That would be appreciated.

Could you ballpark that for me? I wouldn't hold you to it, of course.

Mr. Daniel Paquette: No, I can't at this point, because I look at so many different numbers and I don't typically have the FTE numbers or full-time staff with the financial ones.

Mr. Blake Richards: Perhaps you could give us a better picture of what the growth would be in terms of FTE.

Mr. Daniel Paquette: Yes.

Mr. Blake Richards: Just going back to what I was on before with regard to measures that can be put in place, I understand about responding to legislative changes and things like that, but obviously 29% is far over and above inflation, for sure, in terms of the expansion of growth.

I'll throw out something that comes to mind for me. What about looking at requiring some sort of offsetting decreases where there are new increases in spending? Is that something the administration would welcome? What kinds of suggestions could you give us that we can look at in terms of ways we can ensure that we're not seeing such continual growth?

• (1155)

Mr. Daniel Paquette: Definitely, we can work with the board members and list out all the various services that we provide and provide an opportunity to balance off and maybe reduce some of the service levels or the types of services we offer to support members.

We can also offer to look at what I'll call the back office that supports all of these to make sure we keep those under control going forward. We have been doing some of this, but we can definitely work with the members of the board to do a bit more.

Mr. Blake Richards: Thank you. I appreciate your answers.

Hon. Anthony Rota: I just want to reconfirm, based on the new questions, are we still in accordance with the recommendation?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

[Translation]

Now we will move on to item five, quarterly financial report for the second quarter of 2020-2021.

I will let you continue your presentation, Mr. Paquette.

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

Now I would like to present the second quarterly report for the 2020-2021 year. I just discussed next year, but now come back to the current year. Since it's very difficult to explain this year's financial trends without considering the actual impact of the pandemic, I'm going to present the second quarterly report at the same time as the report we prepared for the update on pandemic-related expenditures. Items five and six will thus be presented together.

I'll begin with the quarterly financial report, which compares cumulative financial information from the current year with that from the same quarter of the previous year. I would emphasize that it's somewhat unusual to compare the two years as they are two atypical years. The factor we've cited this year is the pandemic, which has substantially affected our expenditures. Last year, it was the general election, which also had its own trends. The comparison between the two years is influenced by atypical spending habits, as we will see in the results I'm about to explain to you.

In the September 30 report, approved authorizations for 2020-2021 amounted to \$539 million, an \$18 million, or 3.5%, increase over authorizations for 2019-2020.

The most significant changes were a \$5.9 million rise in economic increases for certain House administration employees, \$4.4 million for significant investments and an amount of \$3.1 million due to cost-of-living increases for members and senior officers. In addition, a \$1.7 million increase in authorizations is attributable to budget adjustments following the general election.

As of September 30, expenditures totalled \$230.8 million, compared to spending of \$240.1 million for 2019-2020, a decrease of \$9.3 million, or 3.9%.

[English]

The expenditures are also presented by type of cost. The most significant decrease in expenditures relates to the reduction of \$8.1 million in transportation and telecommunications, which is due to the significant decrease in travel as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The expenditures for professional and special services have decreased by \$4.8 million, mostly due to the reduction in temporary help for members and House officers, and training and hospitality across the whole organization as a result of COVID-19, as well as the difference in some of the timing of certain payments to external partners from one year over the next. The decreases were also partially offset by the cost of accommodating the virtual House proceedings and committees.

In addition, the expenditures for material and supplies decreased by \$2.7 million due to the temporary closure of the food services and the printing facilities as a result of the pandemic. The decrease was partially offset by the purchase of consumable items such as the face masks and hand sanitizer used across the House of Commons.

The expenditures for computer, office equipment, furniture and fixtures has decreased by \$1.1 million, primarily due to the differences in timing of certain payments from one year to another as well as a decrease in equipment purchased relating to the managed computing for constituencies initiative. The decrease was partially

offset by the cost incurred for virtual House proceedings and committees and by the costs incurred for the equipment that was used to enable the House administration employees to work remotely during this pandemic.

I will also elaborate a bit more at the end of this presentation on some of the COVID implications of our various other costs.

I also note that salaries and benefits increased by \$4.3 million, mainly due to the cost of living for members and their employees, as well as House administration. This increase was partially offset by the fact that we had a reduction in part-time staff and overtime as a result of the pandemic.

Finally, the report provides a comparison of the utilization of our authorities between the two years that shows a decrease of 3.3%, which was not unexpected given the current situation.

It's important to mention that the House promotes an efficient use of our resources, and we continuously strive to minimize the requests for incremental funding whenever possible. Given the current situation surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, we are closely monitoring and considering potential savings as well as any financial impact when making funding decisions in this truly exceptional year.

Given this, I'll take a couple of minutes to highlight the financial impacts the pandemic has had on the House spending. This is looking at the analysis that was provided in your tab 6 for background. You'll see that in addition to the reassignment of resources and the cancellation or slowing down of certain initiatives, we have had significant expenditures relating to specific measures taken for a total of approximately \$4 million.

Those include about \$1.5 million invested to accommodate the virtual House proceedings and committees; \$1.2 million for external printing services; \$340,000 spent for constituency office reconfiguration and COVID-19-related supplies; and \$380,000 for the House administration for computer equipment and personal protective equipment such as non-medical masks and sanitizing products. We have also noted that we've had approximately \$500,000 of administrative salaries and overtime specifically related to the activities for the current situation.

Overall, though, when looking at the various patterns that I mentioned previously, the reduction in certain costs like travel and material and supplies more than compensate for these increased costs related to the pandemic.

Mr. Speaker, this concludes my presentation. I can answer any questions members of the board may have.

• (1200)

Hon. Anthony Rota: Do we have any questions?

[*Translation*]

Are there any questions or comments?

Go ahead, Mr. Deltell.

Mr. Gérard Deltell: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for your presentation, Mr. Paquette.

I'd like to make two observations. A figure of \$341,000 is reported for the purchase of equipment and constituency offices reconfiguration. I'm referring to document 6 here. So the cost to fit up offices to accommodate people and to purchase disinfectants and masks amounted, on average, to \$1,000 per constituency office. Is that correct?

Mr. Daniel Paquette: Yes.

Mr. Gérard Deltell: Are there any members who didn't have to reconfigure their offices?

Mr. Daniel Paquette: Yes. Some decided not to open their offices. In some cases, as a result of the existing office configuration, there was no need to erect a physical barrier or install transparent plastic panels. Quite a large number of members have not yet had to incur those expenses.

Mr. Gérard Deltell: I see.

One line above, I see expenditures of \$1.2 million for external printing services for householders.

Is that the amount saved by the normal printing service, that is to say the House of Commons service?

Mr. Daniel Paquette: I believe the economic gains are slightly less than the amount of that expenditure because we continued paying the salaries of employees at our printing centres. We saved money on equipment and supplies, but the figure I have combines all the services that were interrupted, including food services. So I don't have the exact amount for printing services.

• (1205)

Mr. Gérard Deltell: What were the duties or the output of printing service staff during that time?

Mr. Daniel Paquette: We were in isolation, and employees were using the "other paid leave" code. The offices hadn't yet been configured, and the necessary adjustments had been made so employees could work safely in the printing centres.

Mr. Gérard Deltell: So production was stopped at that time. Is that correct?

Mr. Daniel Paquette: That's correct.

Mr. Gérard Deltell: Thank you.

[*English*]

Hon. Anthony Rota: We'll continue with Mr. Richards.

Mr. Blake Richards: Thanks.

Just to be clear first, Mr. Speaker, items six and seven are closely related. Are we doing them together or is item seven going to be presented separately?

Hon. Anthony Rota: Five and six are close but I plan on doing them separately. I believe it was Mr. Paquette who brought it in. We will be dealing with it in the next step.

Mr. Blake Richards: Okay.

Mr. Daniel Paquette: Item seven will be presented separately.

Mr. Blake Richards: Okay.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Let me clarify, then.

Monsieur Paquette, are we doing five and six together?

Mr. Daniel Paquette: Yes, since one is a variant of the other. It's just a little more elaborate. It will be easier to talk to them together.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Okay. We've covered both.

Please go ahead. It's for information's sake. There's nothing to approve there.

Mr. Daniel Paquette: Yes.

Mr. Blake Richards: We'll be talking about the temporary measures regarding COVID separately, then.

Mr. Daniel Paquette: Yes.

Mr. Blake Richards: Okay.

I guess the first question is that I don't know if there was maybe as much detail as I had hoped. Regarding the reassigned staff, I'm still a little unclear. I know that this was a question I asked previously. I think this is partly in response to that. I'm still a little unclear on those reassignments.

Can you give us a bit more of a breakdown on those? Are we talking about ongoing reassignments? Were these only temporary assignments? What sorts of reassignments did we see? I'm not asking for every bit of detail, but maybe you can give us some of the greatest in number in terms of the reassignments. What types of reassignments were they? What sorts of areas were people reassigned to and for what length of time?

Mr. Daniel Paquette: Given that most of the reassignments that have been taking place relate to our DSRP team, I'll ask Mr. Stéphan Aubé if he wants to elaborate a bit more on what they basically are not doing or doing less of and doing now.

Mr. Blake Richards: Okay.

Mr. Stéphan Aubé (Chief Information Officer, House of Commons): Thank you for the question, Mr. Richards.

There are about 120 people within the DSRP, which is our shop here, who had to be reassigned from a roles perspective. Some of their duties had to be reassigned towards the support of the virtual Parliament, and we basically took a lot of the technical people that we had in operational issues. We had to stop some of the services so that we could reassign them to the support of virtual committees and the virtual chamber, sir.

That number represents around 120 people within my organization, who we reassigned from their existing responsibilities to their new responsibilities, recognizing the need that was created by the virtual committees and the virtual chambers.

Mr. Blake Richards: Okay.

That would be the biggest bulk.

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: Yes.

Mr. Blake Richards: How much of that would be dedicated to other things? Obviously we're still making plans for other things such as a voting app and other ways to adapt. What sort of a percentage of these reassignments would be related to the development of future responses we're still working on?

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: I can give you a breakdown for them.

Mr. Blake Richards: Sure.

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: I've categorized in three buckets the resources that we've assigned to the virtual Parliament. There's the virtual chamber, and we have a group of around 30 people who have been reassigned and are dedicated to supporting the virtual chamber. There's a group of 77 that has been assigned to supporting the virtual committees. Also, then, there's currently a group of 13 that has been reassigned to the voting aspect.

For the voting aspect, there were different phases to it. At the beginning, from May to June, we had five people working on validating the concept. After that, it evolved, after the motion, from five to 13 in the fall, sir.

Specifically with the voting compared to the other one, I wouldn't say these are permanent resources assigned there. I'd say these are people who are working on that in addition to virtual chamber support and virtual committee support.

Mr. Blake Richards: That's understood. Okay.

Where have these people typically been reassigned from? In other words, what sorts of things are being left to the side or not being done that maybe the capacity we would have liked as a result of reassignments?

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: I'll give you an example that you probably know. The ambassador service that we offer to members in the committees and also for their offices is a group of fewer than 20 people. We took that group and had to reassign them to the onboarding for members for virtual committees and also for the virtual chamber. That's an example of the changes we've made.

We've also had to reassign some of our security force to work on specific items relating to ensuring the security for these virtual meetings. We did some changes there. We also looked at the support that we offered for some applications to people who were working in that area. We basically also reassigned them to specific operations roles related to the virtual chamber and virtual commit-

tees. That's the type of decision we had to make in order not to increase costs to the organization, because the incremental costs from our perspective for virtual Parliament, as of September, were really around \$1.2 million. We were able to maintain that incremental cost load because of the reassignments we've done.

• (1210)

Mr. Blake Richards: While we're on the topic of virtual Parliament, with regard to committees, we've obviously been told that with logistical issues and maintenance issues with the systems, the approach that we've been using, this hybrid approach for committee meetings, is going to have to stop for about a month during the upcoming winter adjournment. If I remember correctly—I might be off a little bit—but roughly from December 19, for about a month, we would see a shutdown. What we're told is that this would prevent committees and even Parliament, if it needed to be recalled, from being able to sit in any kind of a way, even if there is an emergency situation that develops.

We've seen that in the past this sometimes does happen while the House is in adjournment. Can we get a bit more of an explanation, especially for Canadians who might be following the proceedings today? What exactly is going on there? Why is it happening? What could be done to ensure that there is an ability for emergency situations to be dealt with? Could it be done in some kind of a staggered fashion so that even one committee could be accommodated where there might be an emergency? Obviously, there are reasons that needs to happen and we certainly wouldn't want to shut down our Parliament completely for a month if that was necessary.

Can we get some explanation on what's happening there and also an indication of what could be done to ensure that there is an ability to function in a limited capacity if an emergency situation arises?

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: Mr. Richards, I will just make one comment to start. I can guarantee you that if there would be an emergency, the House would be able to return. That's the first point that I want to make. We pride ourselves on ensuring that the House sits, and we will guarantee that this happens if ever there is such an emergency.

Mr. Blake Richards: Could I just add to that? In relation to committees, there are obviously times when an emergency committee meeting is required. Can we have the same assurance and guarantee that it would be possible, if needed?

Mr. Stéphan Aubé: If there would be an emergency and the Speaker would require us to make this happen, Mr. Richards, we'd certainly find a way to make this happen.

Having said that, what we're planning to do is maintenance that we usually do when the House is not sitting. This year has been an extraordinary year. We haven't had a chance to do the maintenance that is required to some of our core systems. When I'm speaking about maintenance, I'm not talking about general IT maintenance of a network and stuff like that. I'm talking about the broadcasting systems that support the chamber and the committees. We need to do the necessary maintenance in order to prevent failures to these systems this winter, sir.

The approach that we've taken in order to minimize risk is that we're going to focus on the core systems at the beginning, during the Christmas period. We're going to be working over the Christmas period from the 28th through to the fifth in order to update and maintain these systems and replace the systems that need to be replaced during that period. Then after that, our plan, sir, is to start focusing on committee rooms, one at a time, in order to start ramping up the systems as we can.

We are taking a staggered approach in order to minimize risk to the organization, but it does have an impact on our ability to offer services to all the committees, as I have just mentioned, due to the changes we need to make.

Mr. Blake Richards: I understand. I want to just make sure to make it clear that we appreciate that there's been a lot of change and adaptation required. You guys have done a really good job of trying to ensure that we're keeping pace with what's required under very difficult circumstances. I do understand that this can sometimes involve stuff that's far beyond my comprehension in terms of technical capabilities.

I appreciate the work that you're doing. I really do appreciate the assurances you've just given us that there would be some way found to ensure that, in those urgent and emergency type situations.... That was my big concern. I'm really glad to hear that there will be ways to accommodate that, if needed.

• (1215)

Hon. Anthony Rota: We'll now continue to Mr. Holland.

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

I'll just note that I'm noticing that these meetings are running a lot longer. The frequency of meetings is starting to increase significantly because we're taking a long time to get through the business.

I would encourage members to avail themselves of the opportunity before the meetings to try to go through as many of these questions as possible. We typically move through these agenda items a lot more rapidly. I'm just concerned that we're not getting through these items with how much time we have. I'm concerned about the frequency of meetings we're having with BOIE. We're going to start turning it into a weekly meeting here, Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Thank you for the comments.

We'll now go to Mr. Julian.

Mr. Peter Julian: I agree with Mr. Holland on this. We have some extremely important decisions to get to. I've found the staff are very good at providing answers on the financial records.

There are also questions that really are a matter for House leaders and whips to discuss in another forum. We need to focus on the work that we need to do as a board of internal economy. For example, today I can't go past one o'clock and we're not going to get to the end of the agenda, which means we'll have to meet again next week. We're meeting now on a weekly basis.

Mr. Holland's comments are very valid. We have to be concise and focused. We have to do the work we have and ask the important questions, but there are many ways of asking those questions beforehand and also of making sure that the issues that are a part of

another domain, like House leaders and the whips' meetings, are kept there.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Thank you to both of you.

I just want to encourage all members, on a granular level, to maybe take a step up and look at what pertains to the Board of Internal Economy. That might be some good advice to look at. I'll leave it at that.

We'll move on to item number seven, which is support for members' employees' telework arrangements and temporary measures in effect due to COVID-19.

This seems to be the Monsieur Paquette show today. I'll let him continue.

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

I'll let José Fernandez present this topic for me. He's my deputy CFO. He manages the team that reviews all these policies and has worked on it.

At this point here, since we're working remotely, I'll mention to him quickly that there's a lot of material in this next section. We'll abbreviate the presentation so that we can get to your questions as quickly as possible, given the time that we have going forward.

[*Translation*]

You have the floor, Mr. Fernandez.

[*English*]

Mr. José Fernandez (Deputy Chief Financial Officer, House of Commons): Thank you, Daniel.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

This presentation follows up on an analysis requested by the board at its meeting of October 8 in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. There are two parts to this presentation. The first part is the support of members' employees' telework arrangements. The second part is on the temporary measures in effect due to COVID-19.

For the first part, the House administration reviewed its application of current bylaws and policies related to equipment typically required by an employee to perform their duties and the flexibility provided to members in the use of House resources to be more responsive to this exceptional situation. Just to shorten it a bit for the time, I won't go into the specifics here, but it's talking about the mobile computing and the portable computing devices and those used for printing.

As well, from a mental health and well-being perspective, the House administration has reminded members and their employees of resources available on the source website through the different webinar series that were offered there.

Last May, the board also approved COVID-19 temporary measures in constituency offices to support the implementation of the necessary preventative measures in accordance with the guidelines issued by public health authorities. This provided support to reopen constituency offices and for their employees to return to the office.

This brings me to the second part of the presentation.

[*Translation*]

Now I will address the temporary measures in effect during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Despite the pandemic, members continued to serve their fellow citizens from their constituency offices, which are particularly important in these times of crisis. The Board of Internal Economy had approved several measures, the first being the purchase of consumable items up to a limit of \$1,500 per constituency office. That means non-medical masks, hand sanitizers and stickers to be applied to floors. These are items that we're now used to seeing when we enter establishments open to the public.

The second measure was the purchase and installation of plexiglass barriers to enforce physical distancing guidelines. Here the limit was \$2,000 per constituency office. Where the situation required, the limit could be raised to a maximum of \$3,500 with advance approval. These expenditures were charged to the House administration central budget. We note that the trend was the same for both measures: approximately 90% of members spent less than 75% of the maximum allocated amount.

Lastly, the third measure concerns the cost of professional emergency cleaning and disinfecting services that were to be used in the event a confirmed case of COVID-19 was reported in a member's constituency office. Here again, we have received no requests for reimbursement for these services as of November 23 last.

With respect to advertising to enable members to communicate with their fellow citizens, the Board of Internal Economy had approved a limit increase to 20% of their budget for the 2020-2021 fiscal year. Greater flexibility was also allowed with respect to advertising content. In particular, members were informed that they could distribute information about COVID-19 from certain organizations that might be of interest to their fellow citizens. As of November 23, nearly all members had used less than half that new limit, although there are slightly more than four months left in the fiscal year.

We have also assessed the impact of these measures on members' office budgets.

• (1220)

[*English*]

Finally, I will explain our assessment of the impacts of these temporary measures on members' office budgets for the current fiscal year.

We have compared the budget utilization with two previous fiscal years, given that the last fiscal year was an election year and its expenditure patterns are not typical. As of October 31, which is a little more than half a fiscal year, 99% of members used less than 60% of their office budget. We have seen here overall that the budget utilization is lower than in the last two fiscal years we compared it to. Restrictions on travel and gatherings imposed by governing bodies and public health authorities have contributed to a significant decrease in travel and hospitality expenditures.

In our review, we do not recommend any changes at this time to the temporary measures. As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to evolve, the House administration will continue to monitor members' overall expenses and the specific impacts of the temporary measures. We would like to come back to you in the winter with our recommendations for measures for the next fiscal year. At that point, we would have almost a full year's worth of data, so we'd be better positioned to provide our recommendations to the board for these or other measures.

That concludes my presentation. I will be available for questions or feedback from the board. Thank you.

Hon. Anthony Rota: That's very good.

Are there any questions or comments?

Mr. Richards.

Mr. Blake Richards: I have just one thing I want to touch on.

After the last presentation, my colleague Mr. Deltell was asking about printing and mailing. I've had certainly a number of complaints, for lack of a better way of putting it, from my caucus in terms of capacity constraints. There are longer periods of time required to get things completed, which is making it so that things aren't really being received by constituents in a timely enough fashion. It's almost, for lack of a better way of putting it, old news by the time they receive it.

I wonder if, in this context of the pandemic, you would be able to bring forward on a priority basis some type of proposal for our consideration to renew the temporary measure that allowed for external printing. I had a lot of very positive feedback about that, and I think many members were finding it very helpful in this context. We should be looking at renewing that.

Is there any way we could have a proposal brought to us on how that could be done?

• (1225)

Hon. Anthony Rota: We'll go to Mr. Patrice on that one.

Mr. Michel Patrice (Deputy Clerk, Administration, House of Commons): I have heard the same concerns as you have. I can guarantee you we'll look at quickly making a proposal that will allow us to address those concerns.

Mr. Blake Richards: Thank you. That's much appreciated.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Anthony Rota: Go ahead, Ms. Petitpas Taylor.

Hon. Ginette Petitpas Taylor (Deputy Government Whip): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

During the pandemic, we've all had to equip our home offices so we can perform our professional duties.

Mr. Paquette or Mr. Fernandez, can you say how many devices, such as laptops and telephones, were purchased to equip our home offices?

Mr. Daniel Paquette: We've seen an increase in overall office equipment expenditures. Computer equipment purchases are governed by a very restrictive policy, and those expenditures are closely monitored.

The upward trend isn't necessarily due to the COVID-19 pandemic. We often see this trend in office equipment and furniture purchases in the year following an election, as new members need to adapt their offices or change equipment to suit their new duties. We've noticed an upward trend, but there's nothing alarming about it.

We don't have the inventory figures. In any case, when expenses are allocated, we don't always track the number of units purchased, such as the number of chairs. For computer purchases, we're still within the limits prescribed by the Board of Internal Economy's policy.

Hon. Anthony Rota: You have the floor, Mr. Deltell.

Mr. Gérard Deltell: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for your presentations, gentlemen.

Have you done a comparative evaluation of the average cost per member for the production of householders by the House of Commons printing service and by local printers?

Mr. Daniel Paquette: An analysis is under way. I'll let Ms. Kletke tell you about that. I know that the evaluation should be forwarded to the members of the Board of Internal Economy in the coming weeks.

Ms. Rebekah Kletke (Chief Operations Officer, House of Commons): Thank you, Mr. Paquette.

We've just completed that analysis. As Mr. Paquette said, we'll send you the results of the evaluation as soon as possible next week.

With respect to the comparison of services used, the House printing service processed 87 householder requests, whereas outside suppliers handled 269.

Mr. Gérard Deltell: Thank you very much for your response in French, Ms. Kletke.

Ms. Rebekah Kletke: Thank you.

Hon. Anthony Rota: I would like to ask a question.

Will the analysis include information on turnaround times for both the private sector printers and government printing services?

Ms. Rebekah Kletke: Thank you very much for your question.

The analysis focuses on three points. We've included a comparison of costs and turnaround times, as well as other information on service levels across Canada. We observed that there were indeed different levels of service depending on the regions.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Thank you very much, Ms. Kletke.

Go ahead, Mr. Julian.

Mr. Peter Julian: I'd like to know the date when we'll receive the report.

We'll of course have to mail out other householders early next year. Since we're still in the second wave of the COVID-19 pan-

demic, knowing whether our offices can do business with local printers could make a difference.

If we don't receive the report within a few months, we'll lose that opportunity to mail householders to our fellow citizens.

• (1230)

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

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

We intend to send you the results of the analysis in the coming weeks.

As a result of the concerns expressed and Mr. Richards' question, we also intend, as soon as possible, to send the members of the board a written submission concerning the decision that must be taken with respect to access to external printing services.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Now we will turn the floor over to Mrs. DeBellefeuille.

Mrs. Claude DeBellefeuille: Mr. Chair, first I would like to congratulate printing service employees because they meet their standards. Every member's office is well informed of the entire process. From the start of that process to the mailing of their householders, standards are met, including those respecting the number of days or weeks.

I have exhausted my householder budget despite the pandemic, yet the printing service hasn't failed to meet its standards even once. It's important to know that. Part of the responsibility for meeting turnaround times falls to the teams that create householder content, both in the ridings and on the hill. These people have a deadline to meet, a period of three weeks from start of process to mailing. That may not be fast enough for some, but the fact remains that established standards are met. I want to emphasize that.

The advantage of using a local printer is, first, that it would support a local business. That's a positive. We would also have control of the process and the number of days involved. That varies locally, but it's true that it also varies across Quebec and, I imagine, across Canada. Back home, in less than five days, I can get 46,000 copies of a householder of the same quality as that of the House printing service, and turnaround times are shorter.

I'm eager to see the analysis. We're always somewhat reluctant when we discuss privatizing printing services. What will happen to employees if the work is farmed out to businesses in our constituencies? Using our printing service guarantees uniform quality. Formats must be used and graphic standards met, and there's the whole issue of householder standards. Because those standards are applied, all members are put on an equal footing. I care about the fact that 338 members can come and go through the same door, and all of them are treated equally.

The supply of services in the private sector is excellent in some regions and less so in others. In this case, are we going to create a two-tiered system? Some members from urban areas may have access to better services in the private than the public sector, and others may have less leeway and have to navigate the House printing service bottleneck.

I'm eager to read your analysis. These are matters that concern me. They require a fair and equitable decision, but they must especially take into consideration taxpayers' ability to pay. Ultimately, I'd like to know whether it will cost taxpayers more money to print our publications in the private sector or whether the price the House printing service charges is reasonable for all taxpayers.

I just wanted to set the tone for the debate we'll soon be having.

Hon. Anthony Rota: Thank you very much.

Mr. Deltell, you have the floor.

Mr. Gérard Deltell: It's entirely fair and relevant to recall that the work the printing service does here in the House of Commons

always meets all the requirements that Mrs. DeBellefeuille has rightly mentioned. Quality is never sacrificed. It is always there.

If many members wish to deal with local businesses, that will free up time for those who prefer to use the House service. We could thus save time. If you make this proposal, it might be good to know what percentage of members are involved—20% or 50%, for example. Could we estimate the production time that could be saved? Could we shorten it from three weeks to two weeks, one week or eight days? I'm asking a good question. It would be a good if your evaluation could answer it.

• (1235)

Hon. Anthony Rota: Thank you.

Are there any other questions or comments?

Since there are no comments or questions, we will break for three minutes and then continue the meeting in camera.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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