

ORAL QUESTION—JULIE GREEN, MLA YELLOWKNIFE CENTRE

Fire Department Issues

QUESTION 234-18(3): NORMAN WELLS FIRE DEPARTMENT

**QUESTION 236-18(3):
NORTHWEST TERRITORIES FIRE DEPARTMENT STANDARDS**

**QUESTION 238-18(3):
OFFICE OF THE AUDITOR GENERAL REPORT RECOMMENDATION ON
COMMUNITY FIRE DEPARTMENT RISK ASSESSMENTS**

March 9, 2018

MS. GREEN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, I am appointing myself the honorary Member for the Sahtu, and I have the following questions on the fire department in Norman Wells for the Minister of Municipal and Community Affairs. First of all, could she please update this House on the status of the fire department in Norman Wells? Thank you.

MR. SPEAKER: Masi. Minister of Municipal and Community Affairs.

HON. CAROLINE COCHRANE: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I must state that the Member looks very good today.

The fire department in Norman Wells is something that I will have to look into. I will get back to her with that answer. It is a municipal issue; it is not a territorial issue. We provide support to the community governments. They are responsible for actually developing and maintaining their fire departments. We provide training and support for fire departments, but we don't actually look after the day-to-day operations of them. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

MS. GREEN: I am aware that the municipality of Norman Wells run its own fire department, but clearly there is a problem there that has resulted in a "pause" in the operation of the fire department. My question is really: what kind of assistance can the Minister offer the municipality of Norman Wells to ensure that residents are protected from fire if one were to occur?

HON. CAROLINE COCHRANE: We try to support the community governments as best as possible. Some communities do have the funding, actually, tax income, market income, the money that we give to communities, that they can actually put it in their capital plans and have fire departments full-fledged with full-time fire chiefs. Some communities only have part-time fire chiefs. Some communities don't have any; they have volunteer fire departments.

Therefore, we provide a range of training for them. We specialize in our first responder training, actually, so we work with communities that don't have any fire departments to actually give them the skills. There is quite a bit of training that we provide regarding fire training, recognizing that there is a difference within each community on the needs for

training and the abilities of the communities.

The other thing that we do is we work within their capital planning on an annual basis. We work closely with them to determine what they see their needs are in the future, again recognizing that it is not our delegation. We work with the communities for them to determine what their needs are. If they decide that they want a fire department and they don't have the resources, we will work within their capital planning on an annual basis to see how much money they would need and how many years that they would need to be able to save for that, and then we will use that to actually apply for federal funding for capital assets.

MS. GREEN: I am failing to engage the Minister in any sense of urgency on this issue. My understanding is that this community is currently without fire protection. People are obviously worried about what would happen if there was a fire. They are also worried that their insurance may be invalid because there is no operating fire department. Can the Minister assure me that, when she leaves this Chamber, she will go and call the village of Norman Wells and find out how she can assist them to get their fire department back on track?

HON. CAROLINE COCHRANE: The questions that were asked of me did not say that I wasn't working. I don't believe that I am failing at addressing the issue. I do know that the Department of Municipal and Community Affairs is actually working diligently on this issue at this time. We are supporting the community. We are assessing their needs and their situations. That I do know. Our job is to support the communities. When we hear there is an issue, we are in there to see what we can do for support.

MR. SPEAKER: Masi. Oral questions. Member for Yellowknife Centre.

MS. GREEN: Mahsi, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the Minister has now provided a more clear and forceful response on this question, but my question still remains: what would happen if there was a fire in Norman Wells? God forbid, but if there was a fire in Norman Wells, how would the community respond if they put their fire department on hold? I know that the Minister is working at arm's length on this, but I would like to hear that there is a plan for response and that it's going to take effect immediately. Thank you.

HON. CAROLINE COCHRANE: As stated in my first answer, I don't know the status today. If I had gotten notice, I would have actually looked that up to see what we are doing and where the situation is of today.

I do want to emphasize, though, that community members care about their communities. If I see my neighbour's house burning, I am not going to stand around and sit there and watch and clap. I'm going to do what I can to be able to provide that service. In communities, we have community members who care as well. They will not allow that to happen. They will do whatever the best they can. We have various services. Some communities have trained firefighters who live in communities. We have airports in some communities that will actually respond to that. We will make sure we have an emergency response plan. We will provide the best services that we can to ensure that communities don't burn down. I am not going to let communities go without

any fire support services, even if they don't have a fire department.

As stated earlier, many of our communities do not have fire departments and yet those communities have community members of various abilities who come together in times and need and help their community. That's where they live. Those are their parents, their families, their elders. I have trust in our community members and the services that are provided through other resources that we will take care. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

**QUESTION 236-18(3):
NORTHWEST TERRITORIES FIRE DEPARTMENT STANDARDS**

MS. GREEN: Mahsi, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, I want to follow up those questions which I asked about the fire department in Norman Wells. My question is about whether the department is working on standards for fire departments across the Northwest Territories. I understand that that is not currently in place. Is the Minister taking steps to standardize fire department funding and operations across the Northwest Territories? Thank you.

MR. SPEAKER: Masi. Minister of Municipal and Community Affairs.

HON. CAROLINE COCHRANE: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. There are standards for fire provision within the Northwest Territories. Our Office of the Fire Marshal works closely with the communities to develop safety plans in that regard. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

MS. GREEN: I'm talking more about fire departments. As I think we're all aware, firefighting is a dangerous undertaking. I appreciate the Minister's response that community members are willing to pitch in. I think that having trained firefighters is a better solution.

It's my understanding there aren't trained firefighters in every Northwest Territories community, so I'm wondering whether the Minister is considering making changes to ensure that there are fire departments and trained firefighters up and running in every community?

HON. CAROLINE COCHRANE: As stated, the responsibility for fire departments is the municipalities', and we work closely with the communities to define what they see as their capital assets. Some communities are still working on water treatment plants. Some communities want recreation centres. Some communities want arenas. Some communities already want the fire department. So it would be inappropriate for me to go to every community in the Northwest Territories and say, "You need to put all your capital asset planning on hold because I'm telling you as the Minister of Municipal and Community Affairs that you're going to put in a fire department. That is your number one priority."

We work closely with them. We provide training to them. We provide assessments. The office of the fire marshal goes in to work with them to try to make them understand their safety, their needs, and then once they have done that and defined their needs, we work closely with them to support them in making sure that their community has the needs to ensure if a fire happens that they can be dealt with at the community level. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

The other thing I want to say, though, is that, if it comes to a territorial, if it gets out of hand, we watch closely. If a house is on fire, that might be something that I don't get told of right away, but if it's in danger of spreading, I am told right away, and then the territorial government has an obligation and we will go in there and make sure -- not only us. I mean, we work with other jurisdictions. We work with Canada to make sure that fires are addressed within the Northwest Territories.

MS. GREEN: I'm working from memory here about the Office of the Auditor General report that was produced last year. It looked at things like water plant operators and training. It looked at waste disposal, and it looked at fire departments. What it found is that the fire departments are very ad hoc, that there is a need to standardize the operation of fire departments across the NWT. I have not yet heard the Minister talk about whether she is willing to undertake that work.

HON. CAROLINE COCHRANE: All of the recommendations within the Auditor General's report are being implemented. We have said that many times through standing committee, in the House, whenever the questions have come up. We are committed to addressing all of the recommendations that were identified in that. We were actually working with the community of Norman Wells, prior to the Auditor General's report, on assessing their fire needs. Our Office of the Fire Marshal is working diligently at this time, going into the communities to assess their needs, to reassess their needs, to define what is needed, to support them in doing that. Once that is done, we will bring that information to the communities. Our job is to support the communities. We will put that information in front of the community municipal governments or designated authorities and help them to define what they need. Some communities do not have the infrastructure needed or the ability to have a full fire department, but we look at how we can support them in address their needs in case of fire. We do not let our communities go without support. I really want to emphasize that Municipal and Community Affairs, the department, the staff, are totally committed to supporting communities, and we do everything in our power to provide that support. I appreciate that department.

MR. SPEAKER: Masi. Oral questions. Member for Yellowknife Centre.

MS. GREEN: Mahsi, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, it's good news that the fire marshal is travelling the communities of the NWT to assess their needs. Could the Minister tell us when his report will be ready and whether the needs will be funded in the next business plan? Thank you.

HON. CAROLINE COCHRANE: The Office of the Fire Marshal is not doing a general report and saying, "This is what we need everywhere." He is working closely with the communities to actually bring it forward. When that is done, when he does his assessment, we, the regional staff for Municipal and Community Affairs, work with the community governments to bring that information forward on a community-by-community basis.

Safety is a priority over all other things, so we bring that forward to the community, and we work with the community to define what their needs are and how we can support them. Again, we provide training; we provide first responder training; through our school

of the community government, we provide training. We have other assets in a lot of the communities, such as people that have trained. Our forest firefighters, they are spread out throughout the Northwest Territories, those members, and I do give credit to them. They have an honourable job. Anyplace where there are airports, we have people who are trained in providing that service. So it's not like our communities are left with nothing, and, if the community has nothing, we will fly in, we will help that community. Safety is number one, Mr. Speaker.

**QUESTION 238-18(3):
OFFICE OF THE AUDITOR GENERAL REPORT RECOMMENDATION ON
COMMUNITY FIRE DEPARTMENT RISK ASSESSMENTS**

MS. GREEN: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, the Office of the Auditor General in paragraph 63 of its report said that the Department of Municipal and Community Affairs should take immediate action to reassess whether communities with fire departments meet the requirements under the Safety Act. Can the Minister report on progress under this recommendation? Thank you.

MR. SPEAKER: Masi. Minister of Municipal and Community Affairs.

HON. CAROLINE COCHRANE: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. At this immediate time, since the Auditor General report was submitted, our Office of the Fire Marshal has been going into communities, working with each community, with their fire departments, to assess their fire departments and their needs to address fires at this time, and will continue right through until every community is done. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

MS. GREEN: I appreciate that response. Can the Minister tell us in how many communities this assessment tool has been completed and whether that list includes Norman Wells?

HON. CAROLINE COCHRANE: If I had notice that that question would come up today, I would have that figure on how many are done. However, I did not get notice that that question would come up. We have 33 communities. I have a lot of work that we are doing. Right off of the top of my head, I cannot tell you how many are actually done.

What I can tell you, though, is that we have gone into Norman Wells itself. We have worked with them. I want to clarify one thing, as well. The media has stated that we had shut down the fire department, that the community had shut down their fire department there or suspended them. That is not true, actually. It is not true. The fire department has not been suspended in Norman Wells. It is still functioning. We are working with them. We have identified in Norman Wells that they need additional training with their assessment. We are working on providing that support, that training that is needed for their fire department.

MS. GREEN: One of the actions committed to in the response to the Office of the Auditor General's report was to develop a web-based fire training resource centre. Has that action been completed?

HON. CAROLINE COCHRANE: Again, I don't know exactly if that has been completed. We are working on developing web-based training for a lot of our courses within the

School of Community Government. We have 80 some courses in total.

I do know, however, that we provide face-to-face training. We provide tabletop exercises. We do have web-based training for some of the courses, and I am not exactly sure if that is one of them, but if it is one in the Auditor General's report, and if it is not done already, I can assure you that it will be. At this time, I do know that we do face-to-face training, and we also do tabletop exercises on a regular basis.

MR. SPEAKER: Masi. Oral questions. Member for Yellowknife Centre.

MS. GREEN: Mahsi, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, one of the commitments that the department made in its response to the Office of the Auditor General was to update the Fire Protection Act. Could the Minister tell us about the progress on updating that act? Thank you.

HON. CAROLINE COCHRANE: At this moment, we are working on updating the Fire Protection Act. We have identified five acts within this time that we will be working on: the Cities, Towns and Villages Act, the 911 Act, the Western Canada Lottery Act, the Fire Emergency Act, the Emergency Protection Act. It is one that we are actually working on at this moment.

Again, I didn't know that this question was going to come up. I do not know right now where we stand exactly with that, but I do know that we are working on it at this moment. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.