



UNCORRECTED PROOF TRANSCRIPT
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DEBATES

OF THE

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

FOR THE

AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

HANSARD

Wednesday, 26 June 2024

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Ministerial arrangements

MR BARR (Kurrajong—Chief Minister, Treasurer, Minister for Climate Action, Minister for Tourism and Minister for Trade, Investment and Economic Development) (2.00): Madam Speaker, Minister Cheyne will be absent again from question time today. Minister Steel will assist in City Services and I will assist with the rest of Minister Cheyne’s portfolios. Minister Stephen-Smith will also need to exit question time early due to a ministerial council meeting. She will leave from 2.30 pm. From that point, Minister Steel will assist with questions in Minister Stephen-Smith’s portfolios, but of course the opposition could greatly assist by asking Minister Stephen-Smith questions in the first half hour of question time.

Ms Stephen-Smith: Or not at all!

MADAM SPEAKER: Trying to influence things there Ms Stephen-Smith!

Questions without notice Budget—taxation

MS LEE: My question is to the Treasurer. Treasurer, since you commenced your tax agenda over a decade ago, which increased rates to allegedly offset stamp duty, your government’s own figures show that residential rates have increased by a compound average growth of 6.8 per cent. Rates in Fadden have gone up by 125 per cent. Rates in Palmerston have gone up by 139 per cent. Rates in Bruce have gone up by 140 per cent. Rates in Turner have gone up by 164 per cent, and rates in Yarralumla have gone up by 197 per cent. Treasurer, given these massive increases in household rates, haven’t Canberran households now finished doing, as you call it, “the heavy lifting” of your tax agenda?

MR BARR: Over the period of tax reform the number of properties in the ACT has increased from 135,000 to 200,000, so there has been considerable growth across the city. The tax reform program is a 20-year program, and we are now more than halfway through. To the extent of the second part of Ms Lee’s question, yes, we are now past the halfway mark of tax reform. In this budget, we continued the 3.75 per cent average rates increase, which has been consistent through this third phase of tax reform.

MS LEE: Treasurer, how can Canberrans trust you with your tax reform agenda given that revenue from stamp duty is not decreasing over the forward estimates?

MR BARR: Revenue from stamp duty is decreasing as a share of the budget and as a share of own-source revenue. Revenue from stamp duty on individual properties continues to decrease. And through the initiatives in this year’s budget, particularly for first home buyers, for pensioners downsizing and for those buying off the plan, stamp duty is zero.

MR CAIN: Treasurer, when will these massive rates hikes ever stop?

MR BARR: In the history of Canberra, rates have increased every year from the formation of the city. Rate increases do occur each year. They are generally aligned

with the wage price index, with a component for tax reform. That extra component will conclude at the conclusion of tax reform.

Budget—taxation

MS LEE: My question is to the Treasurer. Treasurer, the latest ABS data shows that, yet again, employee households recorded the highest quarterly and annual rises in cost of living due to increases in mortgage interest charges. Your own budget has forecast that you will be increasing household rates by 3.75 per cent in 2024-25, and even more over the forward years. Treasurer, given ABS data shows that home owners in Canberra are being hit hardest by cost-of-living increases, why are you raising their rates even more when they are doing it so tough?

MR BARR: Rate increases are below the rate of inflation and have been for the last several years—

Ms Lee interjecting—

MADAM SPEAKER: Ms Lee.

Opposition members interjecting—

MADAM SPEAKER: Members, you asked the question; allow the answer.

MR BARR: 3.75, on average, across the system. Of course, there are variances in property values that do see some households with rate decreases this year. But I do not hear the Leader of the Opposition highlighting the suburbs and properties that are having a rate decrease this year.

MS LEE: Treasurer, how do you justify these rate hikes? Is it to cover up your total mismanagement of the ACT budget?

MR BARR: I reject the premise of the question. I think Canberrans understand, because we have had this discussion in 2012, 2016 and 2020, and now we are having it again in 2024, that public services do need to be paid for, and rates are one part of our revenue base. They are, I think, the third largest revenue stream behind the GST and payroll tax.

MR CAIN: Treasurer, are you working for Canberrans, or are Canberrans working for you?

MR BARR: I am working. I am, along with my team and the government, working very hard for Canberrans. We are into our 34th consecutive year of economic growth. We have seen record levels of employment growth. We have seen people moving to Canberra in great numbers.

Mr Cain interjecting—

MADAM SPEAKER: Mr Cain.

MR BARR: Our city has seen the number of businesses operating increase from 25,000

to 35,000 over the last 10 years, the fastest rate of business growth of any jurisdiction.

Budget—taxation

MS LEE: Madam Speaker, my question is to the Treasurer. Treasurer, in the weeks and months leading up to the budget, you spruiked that this was going to be a cost-of-living budget. Your own budget papers show that, rather than easing cost-of-living pressures on Canberrans, your government is slugging them with increased taxes and charges. These include public transport fees, up by three per cent; vehicle registration fees, up by four per cent; the fire and emergency levy increasing by an average of 5.2 per cent; drivers licence fees up by four per cent; road rescue fees up by four per cent; and the list goes on. Treasurer, why are you slugging households so much more in taxes and charges during a cost-of-living crisis?

MR BARR: A number of the charges that have increased—the fee increases that Ms Lee refers to—are the first such increase for five years. It is required to keep up with the cost of service delivery. We appear to be back in the fantasy world of Alastair Coe, where you can have increased services but lower taxes and somehow run a budget surplus. There is no magic pudding. It is clear that, in order to meet the increased salaries of our bus drivers, it is appropriate that there is the first fare increase in around five years. Increases have been kept as low as possible, reflecting the increased cost of services. I think the community does understand that wages and salaries and costs go up every year.

MS LEE: Treasurer, how is increasing all these taxes and charges for households going to ease the cost-of-living pressures?

MR BARR: The government have been very focused on ensuring that we provide the most support to those who need it most. We are cognisant of what else is happening in the economy and of the decisions of the federal government. We felt that, given that there is \$23 billion of tax cuts flowing from next week—

Ms Lee interjecting—

MADAM SPEAKER: Members, please.

MR BARR: and the commonwealth provided a universal \$300 utilities and energy rebate, we should focus our efforts on the 44,000 households who are doing it the toughest in our economy. They are the households that do not pay a lot of tax because their incomes are not high enough. That is why we have focused our cost-of-living measures on those cohorts, to support the people who need it the most.

MR CAIN: Treasurer, how much more real cost-of-living relief could have been provided to Canberrans if you had not totally mismanaged the budget over the last decade?

MR BARR: I reject the premise of the question. The government is providing more than \$140 million of concessions in this budget. Over 10 years we have contributed about a billion dollars of cost-of-living support through our various concession programs.

Budget—housing affordability

DR PATERSON: My question is to the Treasurer. Treasurer, what are some of the progressive and practical policies in the 2024 budget that will improve access to housing for Canberrans?

MR BARR: I thank Dr Paterson for the question. The government is working with industry partners and the community housing sector to deliver more housing and to help more people buy their home and more people rent a home—for more people to be able to move into housing that is appropriate to their needs. There are a number of significant commitments in the budget, including expanding the Affordable Housing Project Fund, \$108 million in additional funding for new public housing, and improving existing public housing. Housing ACT's capital works program will be over \$530 million over the next four years. There is also work to improve repairs and maintenance—a pilot program and a taskforce to improve repairs and maintenance within the public housing portfolio. The government is, of course, implementing a range of stamp duty reforms—which were the subject of some earlier questions in question time—providing much more support, with zero stamp duty for thousands of Canberrans looking to enter the housing market.

DR PATERSON: Treasurer, how will the budget's stamp duty reforms assist first home buyers in particular?

MR BARR: They will save tens of thousands of dollars in home purchases. They will bring forward the time frame in which first homebuyers can purchase a home by reducing the need to save for stamp duty. It is a massive barrier to home ownership. It is why, in 13 budgets in a row, this government has cut stamp duty. It hits first homebuyers, and it hits people at a time when they are just starting their careers. We have seen stamp duty cause a lot of difficulty for many people trying to get into the housing market, so the new and expanded stamp duty concessions and exemptions outlined in the budget will support more Canberrans to find a home that suits their needs. The savings are up to \$34,000.

MS ORR: Treasurer, where will the new homes under the Indicative Land Release Program be located?

MR BARR: The good news is that the 21,000 new dwelling sites, as part of the Indicative Land Release Program, are located right across our city, in new greenfield sites, new suburbs, and appropriate and sensitively designed redevelopments in existing suburbs.

Mr Parton: A bit of Tuggeranong action there, I reckon; a bit of south-side action.

MR BARR: We know that our population is set to reach 500,000 by the end of 2027, and there is indeed demand for new housing on the south side, Mr Parton, including in the Molonglo Valley, Whitlam—

Mr Parton: In Tuggeranong, down in the valley?

MR BARR: There is indeed some demand in Tuggeranong, and there has been some new housing supply in Tuggeranong. We are working towards delivering 70 per cent of our new housing within our city's existing urban footprint. Of course, there is need and demand for housing in new suburbs, so there must be a balance, and that is the balance the government is seeking to provide.

Mr Parton interjecting—

MADAM SPEAKER: If you could keep him quiet Ms Lee, you would be better than me!

Budget—taxation

MS LEE: My question is to the Treasurer. Latest ABS data shows that, yet again, employee households recorded the highest quarterly and annual rises in cost of living due to increases in mortgage interest charges. Treasurer, yesterday you told Canberrans that they should use their tax cuts to enjoy a little treat. Treasurer, what sort of treat would you suggest unit owners in Forde enjoy after their 9 per cent rate increase?

MR BARR: The point I was making was that, for many Canberrans, the tax cuts will provide a significant financial boost. I was encouraging those who could, to consider spending some of their money in our local economy. I would not have thought that that was a particularly controversial statement. I would have thought we all might be aligned in wanting to support local small businesses in Canberra, but it would appear that I have struck a raw nerve with the Canberra—

Ms Lee: Again, wilfully misleading.

MADAM SPEAKER: I ask Ms Lee to withdraw the word “misleading”.

Ms Lee: I withdraw.

MR BARR: The point I was making is that those of us who can—who feel they are able to—can support local businesses. That could come in many forms. It could come by buying a coffee in your local coffee shop, and maybe getting a piece of cake when you buy that coffee, if you want to. It could come in the form of some fish-and-chip takeaway or a pizza on a Friday night.

Opposition members interjecting—

MADAM SPEAKER: Members, I do not want to get harsh and start warning. We now have eight days left. Let us behave.

MR BARR: I think we may have reached peak juvenile, Madam Speaker.

The simple point that I was making was that I think there is an opportunity for some of us, who feel we are able, to support local businesses. I would hope that that is something that everyone could get behind.

MS LEE: I have a supplementary question. Treasurer, what sort of little treat would

you suggest people in Dunlop buy after a 7 per cent rate hike?

MR BARR: I draw Ms Lee's attention to the point I made earlier. That could involve support for a local hospitality business. It could involve support for a local retail business. People will make a range of individual choices. It is, of course, up to them, but I do not believe it is beyond the realm to ask those who can—who feel able—to support local businesses. That should be something that we are unified behind, rather than trying to make a cheap political point out of it.

MR PARTON: Treasurer, what sort of a treat would you suggest that the people in Theodore buy, after their 5 per cent rate hike?

MR BARR: I think we have definitely reached peak juvenile. I refer Mr Parton to my previous answers.

Light rail—stage 2B

MS LEE: My question is to the Treasurer. Treasurer, your own budget papers show that the only money allocated to light rail stage 2B is just over \$53 million in the 2024-2025 year, with no money in the budget for any other years, including 2028—the year you say construction will begin. Treasurer, given there is no money in the budget in 2028 for construction, what year will construction now commence for stage 2B?

MR BARR: There is no change in the government's plans in relation to that, but we are respecting the fact that there will be a vote of the community in October—

Opposition members interjecting—

MADAM SPEAKER: Members, members!

MR BARR: The stated position of the opposition is not to support the project. We will, of course, have a stated position to support the project, and we will make that clear in the course of the election campaign—if it is not already clear to the community.

MS LEE: It never ceases to amaze me! Treasurer, when will you release the full cost of stage 2B, given you have confirmed that, if you are re-elected, you will commence construction in 2028?

MR BARR: When the procurement is completed.

MR PARTON: Treasurer, why won't you release the cost of light rail stage 2B to allow Canberrans to make an informed decision prior to the election, or are you deliberately keeping them in the dark given the expected price tag is over \$4 billion?

MR BARR: I reject the premise of Mr Parton's question. It is a question that has been asked multiple times and I refer the member to the previous answers.

Opposition members interjecting—

MADAM SPEAKER: Members, members! I am going to give Ms Clay the call.

Planning—infill

MS CLAY: My question is to the Minister for Planning. After four years of reviewing the planning system and introducing a new Territory Plan, the government now wants to support “missing middle” housing in current residential areas. You have just begun consultation on a missing middle design guide. Meanwhile EPSDD has also just engaged a consultant to prepare a report on delivering the missing middle. How are these two pieces of work connected to one another?

MR STEEL: I thank the member for her question. As I have announced through the statement of planning priorities, the next stage of planning reform will be focused not only on more housing supply but also around more housing choices for Canberrans where they want to live. That will include development of a new missing middle design guide, with architects, planners and the community, which will be undertaken over the next year.

That has been funded in the budget released yesterday, and we have already gone out for procurement, as Ms Clay has noted, for the supporting work that is required, including some of the technical work and advice to progress the future planning reforms, consideration of the design guide and what potential changes may need to be considered to the Territory Plan, once that is completed and once consultation has been undertaken with the community. The two are very much intrinsically linked, and I look forward to updating the community as we progress that work and consultation.

MS CLAY: Why didn't the planning minister do this missing middle work during the four-year planning review?

MR STEEL: As I stated during the last question time, the foundations of the system have now been established through the planning system review, the new Planning Act and the new Territory Plan. As part of that, new mechanisms were established in that outcomes-based planning system which focus on design. That includes, for the first time, design guides which can be established, and some have already been established. There is a housing design guide and an urban design guide.

This next stage of planning reform will be focused on the missing middle, with a designed approach to allow us to properly consider and undertake the technical work to consider future changes to the Territory Plan to enable missing middle housing-type policies, like row houses, townhouses and duplexes. This is a substantial piece of work in its own right. It deserves proper scrutiny, consideration and consultation with the community.

If further changes to the Territory Plan come forward in relation to that which would enact the missing middle design guidance, that would be a major plan amendment. It would then trigger, of course, the need to have a committee process around that. I am strongly of the belief that we need to undertake that level of work before we make the changes. The planning system review never started as an exercise in missing middle reform. It started as an exercise in changing the planning system away from a rules-based system to an outcomes-based planning system. Those foundations are now there. This next stage will be focusing on delivering more housing and more housing choice.

We look forward to undertaking that work, as well as other tranches of work, to achieve that goal.

MR BRADDOCK: Minister, when will the consultant's report be made available to the community?

MR STEEL: I thank the member for his question. We will be, of course, consulting with the community as we undertake the development of the missing middle design guide, and the consultant will be supporting EPSDD, as we do that, along the way. At appropriate points in time, we will go out for consultation with the community.

I want to see that design guide provide a level of detail to the community that goes beyond the current design guidance that we currently provide so that through much broader, higher level design guides the community can clearly see how we are incorporating trees and having the space on blocks. I want them potentially to look out from a neighbour's window at an adjoining block and see where missing middle developments might be proposed and what that would look like. I want them to be able to see how their street may see incremental change over time.

That is a detailed piece of work, and that is why we are getting on with the job through the procurements, through the budget funding that was announced yesterday, and getting on with this important work to provide more housing choice for Canberrans.

Light rail—stage 2B

MS LEE: Madam Speaker, my question is to the Leader of the Greens. I note that the Parliamentary and Governing Agreement that you signed with the Chief Minister for the Tenth Assembly commits Labor and the ACT Greens to building light rail stage 2 to Woden. Mr Rattenbury, on ABC Radio this morning, when questioned about why there is no funding in the budget for stage 2B of light rail, you said:

I find those things very hard in public life as well, because as soon as you say something you're pinned to it, right? The opposition will start saying, "Well, you said it was going to be \$1 billion."

This statement by you finally admits that the government of which you are a member is deliberately hiding the cost estimates of light rail 2B to avoid being held accountable. Mr Rattenbury, given that you sit on the government's Expenditure Review Committee, are you complicit in covering up the costs of light rail stage 2B to avoid scrutiny by your political opponents and colleagues?

MR RATTENBURY: Ms Lee has decided to turn a moment of frankness into something political. I think it is a fair reflection that, in the way political life plays out, we will see the opposition try to twist anything like this so that it becomes a point of political debate, rather than a serious policy discussion. We have seen it today. Mr Parton walked into this place today and talked about \$4 billion in light rail costs. He made that up. It does not exist.

Ms Lee: We asked you for this; how many times?

Mr Parton: We didn't. Correct the record.

MADAM SPEAKER: Members! Mr Parton and Ms Lee, you have asked the question. Allow the answer.

MR RATTENBURY: It does not exist as a figure. I use it simply to illustrate the point, and this is the point that I was making this morning. The way political debate goes, it is very difficult to have sensible policy discussions. That is the observation that I was making.

Mr Cain: The community deserves to know.

MADAM SPEAKER: Mr Cain! You are becoming persistently an interjector.

MS LEE: Mr Rattenbury, as a member of the government's ERC, will you release the cost estimates of light rail stage 2B so that Canberrans are fully aware of how much this project will cost taxpayers, given that your Labor ministerial colleagues refuse to?

MR RATTENBURY: As I also observed on radio this morning, there are a range of reasons why the costs have not been released yet. As Minister Steel has made very clear in this place, there is still work being done to finalise the design, so it is obviously not possible at this point to release the fully estimated cost.

The point I was making also was that the ACT government has been incredibly transparent on these projects. It has been more transparent than any other government in Australia in releasing business cases and other planning and costing documents around these projects. What I said clearly on the radio was that the community can expect this continued level of transparency from the ACT government because we believe that it is right for the community to know this information. It is about releasing it at a time that gets the best value for money for the community as well. This government has no intention of preconditioning the market. We are out there to get the best possible price on this project for the citizens of Canberra.

MR PARTON: Attorney-General, are you comfortable with Canberrans not being told the truth about the cost of stage 2B of light rail? If \$4 billion is wrong, then you can correct the record here today.

MR RATTENBURY: As I outlined in my previous answer, Canberrans will know the full cost of this project. The government has been incredibly transparent. Minister Steel has initiated a consultation process at the moment that is inviting Canberrans to contribute on a range of factors related to this project. It is clear that the government is seeking to engage the community on this and keep the community well informed, as they should be.

Budget—infrastructure

MS LEE: My question is to the Treasurer. Treasurer, I refer to the Major Projects budget statement which shows that the physical completion date for Light Rail Stage 2B to Woden is "to be determined," the physical completion date for the Canberra Theatre precinct redevelopment is "to be determined," and the physical completion date

for the north-side hospital development, is—and you guessed it—“to be determined”. In addition, there is very little funding in the budget for any of these major infrastructure projects. Treasurer, when will these major infrastructure projects actually be completed?

MR BARR: We will announce expected completion dates once procurement is finalised for each of the projects.

MS LEE: Treasurer, why are there no completion dates for any of these major projects in your budget? And when will the procurement processes for these projects be completed?

MR BARR: We will commence the two-stage procurement process for the theatre next month. Procurement in relation to Light Rail Stage 2B will commence once the EPBC and other assessments are complete. And procurement for the north-side hospital will commence once we have completed the first phase of very early contractor engagement, which is now underway. We will make further announcements on each of these projects in due course.

Ms Lee: A point of order, Madam Speaker: I could tell that the Treasurer was wrapping up his answer, and I just want to confirm that the question that I asked was about—

Members interjecting—

MADAM SPEAKER: Members! Ms Lee is on the floor with a point of order. Allow me to hear her.

Ms Lee: The question was specifically about when the procurement processes will be completed, not when they will commence.

MADAM SPEAKER: The minister still has a minute left, so he might satisfy that. Mr Barr.

MR BARR: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Obviously, we will set time frames for the completion of procurement processes when they are publicly announced, leaving an appropriate amount of time for the market to respond.

MR PARTON: Treasurer, why do you continuously tell Canberrans that you are building these major infrastructure projects but fail to provide any concrete completion dates or funding estimates?

MR BARR: The nature of procurement, Mr Parton, is that one would not seek to precondition the market. We have made provisions. You will see that there are provisions in the forward infrastructure program. We have allocated money in the coming fiscal year for the commencement of the Canberra Theatre procurement process and, once that is completed, we will announce the project budget and the expected construction time frame.

Budget—health

MS ORR: My question is to the Treasurer. Chief Minister, what practical improvements is the government taking in the 2024 budget to expand health services for Canberrans?

MR BARR: I thank Ms Orr for the question. Through the budget, the government is investing more in health services and investing more in our health workforce. The total investment in health in the 2024-25 budget is \$2.6 billion. That is one-third of the territory budget. The additional funding will go, in part, to expanding paediatric health services. The budget is also investing in the nursing and midwifery workforce and supporting staff wellbeing and improving patient care.

More than \$86 million has been allocated to recruit more than 137 new full-time equivalent nurses and midwives. This will ensure that there are more nurses and midwives across front-line hospital services. Phase 2 of ratios will be implemented across our public hospitals and Clare Holland House, including maternity services, neonatal intensive care, critical care, intensive care units, emergency departments, cancer care and palliative care services.

MS ORR: I have a supplementary question. Chief Minister, how is the government meeting its commitment to deliver 60,000 elective surgeries despite the major disruptions caused by COVID?

MR BARR: We have committed an extra \$52.7 million to support the completion of that four-year 60,000 surgery plan. Increased operating theatre sessions during evenings and weekends and more surgical in-patient beds to support a growing emergency surgery demand are a critical part of the government's investment. Continuing to deliver a record number of important surgeries of course fundamentally improves wellbeing and broader health outcomes, and, in many instances, can prevent the need for further health interventions.

In making this announcement and this additional financial commitment we recognise the hard work of our teams in health facilities to contribute to the delivery of this record number of surgeries and, as Ms Orr identified, COVID did impact on our capacity to deliver surgeries during periods of lock-down, but we are pleased to be able to expand capacity to get to that 60,000 target.

MR PETTERSSON: I have a supplementary question. Chief Minister, why is it so important to provide free public health care in the community close to where people live?

MR BARR: I want to acknowledge the work of Minister Stephen-Smith in leading our government's commitment to deliver more health care closer to home. We have commenced the rollout of a series of additional healthcare centres. We have, of course, established, over an extended period of time, our nurse-led walk-in centre network that has been opposed, consistently, by the Canberra Liberals. We continue to invest in community health centres because we know that they are well utilised; having them located in the different regions of Canberra provides more and better health care closer to where people live.

Budget—infrastructure

MS LEE: My question is to the Treasurer. Treasurer, yesterday on ABC radio you were asked a question, following the post budget Master Builders Association release. The presenter said:

The Master Builders Association have said they're very disappointed by the budget. In fact, they say they're shocked. They say there has been an 87% reduction in new capital works. They cannot believe, Andrew Barr, that you haven't unveiled any big infrastructure projects.

Treasurer, you responded by saying that there is "\$1.2 billion per year each year for the next four years, So the Master Builders Association have misread the budget papers".

Yet, page 247 of the Budget Outlook clearly shows that new capital works are worth \$57 million over four years—exactly what the Master Builders Association said. Treasurer, can you confirm that "total new works" are worth \$57 million over the next four years, or are you not across the details of your own budget?

MR BARR: I would refer Ms Lee to page 80, table 3.2.2: the increase in capital expenditure over the forward estimates. I would also refer her to pages 241 to 246 and pages 295 to 299, which outline in detail all of the new capital works. The point I was making, which is very clear, on page 247, is that the total capital works program forecast sits around \$1.2 billion: \$1.178, \$1.258, \$1.282 and rising to \$1.687 billion over the forward estimates. There on page 247!

MS LEE: Treasurer, given that clearly you have not been upfront with Canberrans about this claim, will you ask ABC radio for the opportunity to apologise to its listeners, and to the MBA, who actually raised concerns about new works?

MR BARR: Well, again, a reading of the budget papers would outline that the asset renewal program, which in total is \$539 million over the budget period, is indeed new works, which, together with the other works in progress, leads to a total of \$6.37 billion across the general government sector. Of course, there is also the public trading enterprise area that includes Housing ACT and the Suburban Land Agency, so the totality of the works is just a little over \$8 billion. That is there in black and white in the budget papers. The new works provision relates to works that were not previously provisioned within the forward estimates. That is new money. If you go to page 80, table 3.2.2, you see that the net cost of services for new capital is outlined in that table, in the bottom third, and is certainly more than \$57 million. In fact, the total over the four years is \$787 million. But of course, you cannot look at this in isolation of a continuing program; works and projects continue over multiple years. The point I have been making is that we are able to deliver about \$1.2 billion of works each year, and that is what is programmed into each year of the forward estimates.

MS CASTLEY: Chief Minister, will Canberrans know the total cost and construction time lines for any of the projects you have previously said you would deliver, like the Canberra Theatre, the northside hospital, the new stadium, the new convention centre or the Canberra pavilion, before the election this year?

MR BARR: Each of those will go through project development, planning, precinct design and then procurement. At the time procurement is completed, we will then be able to announce—

Mr Parton: Point of order.

MADAM SPEAKER: Resume your seat Mr Barr.

Mr Parton: Point of order on relevance. It was a very clear yes/no question: will Canberrans know the total cost and construction time lines before the election—

MADAM SPEAKER: Thank you, Mr Parton. As you would know, I cannot direct the member. He is on a policy area—

Mr Parton: If only you could, Madam Speaker!

MADAM SPEAKER: If only I could get people not to interject Mr Parton!

MR BARR: On the individual projects as they go to procurement, and procurement is secured, we will then be able to announce project costs and time frames.

Roads—Athllon Drive

MISS NUTTALL: My question is to the Minister for Planning. Minister, I understand that the ACT government has committed to duplicating Athllon Drive. What is the expected time line for these upgrades, and can residents expect Sulwood Drive upgrades to be finished before the Athllon Drive work commences?

MR STEEL: I thank the member for her question. I am really delighted that, in the budget, the ACT government is funding the early works for the Athllon Drive project, which is an important project to support more housing, to support public transport, and to support active travel and the broader road network.

Those works will begin in the next few months in the southern section, and in the next few months in the northern section. The southern section will include active travel paths, as well as utility works to de-risk the project, to enable the main works package to then be started, following the detailed design, as quickly as possible. The works in the northern section will start in the next few months to support, initially, some works around Shea Street and the new bus depot which is being completed around the end of the year.

We are getting on with those works and the early works that are funded in the budget will enable us to complete those without delay.

MISS NUTTALL: Minister, how much time is this expected to save road users on their commute on average?

MR STEEL: I thank the member for her question. I am happy to come back on notice on behalf of the Minister for City Services with that information. Travel time is only

one benefit of the project. Safety is another. The public transport benefits of the project include providing, for the first time, access to rapid bus services through the creation of a new stop, in addition to the existing one, in the southern section between Sulwood Drive and Drakeford Drive. That would also enable people from Kambah and Wanniasa to access rapid transport services.

We are looking forward to those works continuing, in terms of the detailed design. Following that, of course, development applications will be lodged; then we will go into the procurement, as the Chief Minister mentioned, which is required to determine the final contracted time frames for the delivery of the main works packages.

I do feel at times that I am the only one defending transport projects on the south side. On the one hand the Greens are not supportive of Athllon Drive works; on the other hand the Liberals are not supportive of light rail coming down to the south side. Labor will always stand up for transport infrastructure on the south side of Canberra.

MS LAWDER: Minister, when will the actual road duplication part of this project be completed?

MR STEEL: Following the procurement, we will then be able to contract those works, and at that point we will be able to announce the exact contracted time frame. We are committed to the works. We have been going through a period, as the Chief Minister—

Members interjecting—

MADAM SPEAKER: Members!

MR STEEL: This is what you do with infrastructure projects, Madam Speaker. You go through a period of feasibility, concept planning; you go through design development. You go through the budget processes that are required to get money for the project, which we did this week. You then seek funding from the commonwealth; you get their engagement. They are, of course, contributing 50 per cent to the project. You go through a procurement; you contract a program, and you get underway. That is what we are doing. If those opposite were elected, they would not deliver these infrastructure projects at all.

Integrated Electricity Plan—electric vehicle charging

MR BRADDOCK: My question is to the Minister for Emissions Reduction.

Minister, I have had numerous conversations with apartment residents who wish to invest in an electric vehicle but have experienced challenges in getting charging infrastructure installed in their complexes. I note the Integrated Electricity Plan includes some actions to address these challenges. Can you please provide some more details?

MR RATTENBURY: Yes. As part of the Integrated Energy Plan, which seeks to electrify our city and help assist with the phase-out of the gas network, the government is very mindful of the particular role that apartment buildings, in their many guises, face. There are specific issues for residential apartments. The government will offer support for residential apartments to undertake EV-ready feasibility studies and

upgrade building infrastructure to allow for future EV charger installation. This is a specific area of support. It will be supported by a concessional load program that will be established later this year. Eligible developments will be able to access loans for the installation of EV-ready backbone infrastructure, and then the loan can be repaid over time by the strata.

EV ready means upgrades to electrical infrastructure and cabling to a parking bay per unit. This means that, when they are ready, residents will then be in a position to install their own smart EV charger at a time that suits them. Residents may choose to access the Sustainable Households Scheme to do this. So again, interest-free loans are available to assist residents to make these upgrades.

The government supports the approach of EV-ready apartments as it is the most equitable means of providing support and ensures that any solution that is put in place is future-proof. Further, load management and billing software will ensure that residents pay for the energy they use and that charging is done in a managed way so that the whole building remains in electrical balance. It minimises the impact on the network and reduces costs associated with electrical upgrades.

Advice to the public and developers on EV charging in multi-unit developments can be found on the government's Everyday Climate Choices website. Also there is further information available by calling the agency, if necessary.

MR BRADDOCK: How will the program manage potential concerns about the fire risk of EV charging in apartment complexes?

MR RATTENBURY: The government appreciates that there is concern amongst the public around EV fire safety and has taken these concerns very seriously. Data gathered globally and domestically by independent bodies such as EV Fire Safe show that electric vehicles are significantly less likely to spontaneously combust than petrol or diesel vehicles.

I would like to thank the Insurance Council of Australia for its paper, *Charging ahead: electric vehicles & insurance*. Clear, data-based guidance such as this is important in improving industry understanding and reducing public concern. The ACT government is also working with the commonwealth, state and territory governments to ensure emergency services have the correct training to deal with battery fires.

ACT Fire and Rescue will be engaged throughout delivery of the loan program to ensure that they are able to provide advice on the design of EV-ready developments to ensure safety. ACT Fire and Rescue have also issued the fire safety guideline *Electric vehicles(EV) & EV charging equipment in the built environment*. These guidelines make recommendations around retrofitting of EV charging into the built environment and suggest the Australian Building Codes Board recommendations to support safer EV charging should be followed.

MS CLAY: What else is the government doing to help apartment buildings phase out fossil fuels?

MR RATTENBURY: There is a range of things that are being offered to assist. If I go

back to the earlier conversation about EV charging, I am mindful that it is complex to get it rolled out in apartment buildings at times through all the reform processes. We are also working hard to ensure there is a good amount of public charging available so that apartment owners who would like to own an electric vehicle can have confidence that there is charging available for them.

The Solar for Apartments program is delivering \$3.6 million of support to apartments in the form of a grant plus interest-free loan for solar panel installation, which will deliver significant reductions in energy prices for residents. In the future, these savings would be utilised for future energy efficiency and electrification activities for the apartment building.

In addition, the Sustainable Households Scheme, which I mentioned earlier, provides those interest-free loans of up to \$15,000. Apartment residents are eligible, and that can be put towards the cost of an electric vehicle as well as electrical appliances such as induction cooktops.

The Integrated Energy Plan provides a number of other supports for apartment residents who may face extra challenges in electrification. There is a new Retrofit Readiness Program to be launched later this year, which will offer free advice and electrification planning for those living in multi-unit buildings such as apartments to help them get the technical information.

We are also mindful that we may need to make reform to strata law in the ACT to identify and resolve regulatory barriers to electrification upgrades in multi-unit buildings. We are well aware and have had clear feedback from the Owners Corporation Network and others that decision-making can be challenging in a building where there might be 150 different sets of owners, and so we need to think carefully about how we can maintain good democracy in those processes but enable efficient decision making.

Budget—animal rescue organisations

MR PETTERSSON: My question is to the minister responsible for city services. Minister, how is the ACT government supporting animal rescue organisations through the 2024-25 ACT budget?

MR STEEL: On behalf of the Minister for City Services, I am delighted to say that, through this year's budget, the ACT government will support approved animal rehoming organisations to assist with the costs of caring for the growing number of abandoned and unowned animals across the ACT. Sadly, due to a range of factors, including increased pet ownership during the pandemic and the cost-of-living pressures Canberrans are currently experiencing, we have seen a significant increase in the number of animals being surrendered or abandoned in the ACT. For roaming cats in particular—which can become pregnant from as young as four months and can produce as many as 24 kittens in an eight-month period—desexing is critical, but costs can be a significant barrier, with procedures typically costing around \$500. This is why we are also providing funding for a cooperative desexing program to deliver approximately 1,000 cat and dog desexing procedures for financially vulnerable pet owners.

MR PETTERSSON: Minister, what is the government doing to reduce the number of

pets being surrendered and abandoned in the ACT?

MR STEEL: We are committed to work on educating the community on what it means to be a responsible pet owner. The funding in this budget will help to treat the symptoms of irresponsible pet ownership. Domestic Animal Services continues to provide school based education on responsible pet ownership and the importance of desexing. Also, the ACT government maintains a close relationship with the RSPCA as a partner with shared aims for animal welfare in the territory and we have already committed \$40 million towards its new facility to be built in Pialligo. With cat containment being mandatory for all cats born after 1 July 2022, over time we will have fewer roaming cats and the most pressing challenges will likely change, so it is hoped that the design of the new RSPCA facility will be flexible and adaptable to meet the community's needs at a given time.

DR PATERSON: Minister, why is annual dog and cat registration so important?

MR STEEL: I thank Dr Paterson for her question. All cats and dogs must be registered in the ACT and have their details updated annually. Annual registration ensures that we have up-to-date contact details for pet owners so that we can reunite pets with their families quickly if they are lost. Keeping dog registration details up to date also ensures that Domestic Animal Services can follow up on reports of dangerous dogs or dog attacks. Dog and cat registration also provides us with information about where cats and dogs live so that we can plan for services like new dog parks and better target education and compliance activities. The ACT government is committed to improving animal welfare and promoting responsible pet ownership.

Mr Barr: Further questions can be placed on the notice paper.