

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES*Friday, October 24, 2025***APPROPRIATION (FINANCIAL YEAR 2026) BILL, 2025**

[Second Day]

The Standing Finance Committee of the whole House resumed its deliberations on the Bill and Estimates.

[Chairman: Mr. Singh]

10.00 a.m.

Mr. Chairman: Good morning, everyone. This meeting of the Standing Finance Committee will resume. This morning we start the batting order with the Tobago House of Assembly. I am very grateful, and indeed appreciative, of the efforts the staff members of the Tobago House of Assembly would have made, the yeoman efforts to get here. We know this is a very important weekend for them.

So, I think all Members are aware of the peculiar nature of this weekend to Tobago. So, let us be mindful of that. Please, I appeal to everyone, let us be mindful of the fact that those who have travelled from the sister isle need to get back on a timely basis.

Mr. Gonzales: Chair, thank you for that reminder. But I think it is also very important to note that the Opposition did make some concessions—

Mr. Chairman: Did, absolutely.

Mr. Gonzales:—to have the THA team come today, as opposed to tomorrow—

Mr. Chairman: Yes, yes.

Mr. Gonzales:—for the very same reason.

Mr. Chairman: Yes, we are very grateful for that. So, let us assume that the graciousness will continue unabated.

Hon. Members: *[Interruption]*

UNREVISED

Mr. Chairman: And that is why I am saying, let us hope that the graciousness continues unabated this morning. Thank you all very much. So, let us, as they say in a test match, let us bowl the first ball.

Head 15: Tobago House of Assembly, \$2,943,574,800.

Mr. Chairman: I will now invite the Minister of Finance to make a brief opening statement with the usual five-minute caveat.

Hon. Tancoo: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Mr. Chairman, the Tobago House of Assembly is the constitutionally-established island government, charged under the Tobago House of Assembly Act of 1980 and the subsequent Act of 1996, with managing the island's affairs and advancing its development agenda.

The Assembly stands as the principal organ of governance and development administration in Tobago, entrusted with the stewardship of the island's economic, social and infrastructural advancement, and with ensuring that Tobago's development is pursued in a manner that reflects both the aspirations of its people and the broader objectives of national progress.

Mr. Chairman, the island's government seeks the strategic development agenda for Tobago via the policy decisions of its Executive Council, which includes any necessary reprioritization and reallocation of funds to the Assembly. To this end, it was designed and engineered to build a Strategic Development Planning Pathway, 2025—2045, for Tobago. This planning pathway is the architecture which will guide, manage, and monitor and evaluate the island's socio-economic and political transformation. It articulates 21 development agenda priorities, which directs and inform the island's development programmes, projects and associated capital investments.

Mr. Chairman, it is against this backdrop that development agenda priorities for Tobago for fiscal 2026, as submitted in the THA's budget, speak to

accelerating growth and anchoring fiscal stability. Therefore, Tobago 2026 fiscal programme is designed to foster job creation, entrepreneurship, GDP growth, improve and expand public infrastructure, elevate efficiency in public service delivery, enhance living standards and increase tax revenues.

Mr. Chairman, as the Assembly reaffirms its commitment to fiscal discipline, transparency and results-based management, it welcomes the Committee's scrutiny as a vital expression of public accountability and remains resolute in its mission to advance Tobago's sustainable development for the benefit of its residents, towards the greatest little island on the planet, child by child, family by family, village by village. Mr. Chairman, we now hold ourselves open to questions that may be proffered by the Members opposite.

Question proposed: That Head 15 stand part of the Schedule.

Mr. Chairman: This sum of \$2,943,574,800 for Head 15: Tobago House of Assembly is comprised of moneys proposed for expenditure under the following Sub-Heads and Items to be found in the *Draft Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure, the Draft Estimates of the Revenue and Expenditure of the Statutory Boards and Similar Bodies and of the Tobago House of Assembly*, and the *Draft Estimates of Development Programme*.

We shall now proceed to consider the *Draft Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure*. Sub-Head 06: Current Transfers to Statutory Boards & Similar Bodies. This is to be found 001: Tobago House of Assembly, page 69, which represents a summary. The specific line Items are to be found—I will identify the page numbers thereafter.

We now move on to the *Draft Estimates of the Revenue and Expenditure of the Statutory Boards and Similar Bodies of the Tobago House of Assembly*. So, we go now to page 23, Division 01 - Assembly Legislature. Sub-Head 01; Item 001:

Head 15: Tobago House of Assembly (cont'd)

General Administration at page 23. Sub-Head 02: Goods and Services; Item 001: General Administration. Sub-Head 03: Minor Equipment Purchases; Item 001: General Administration. Sub-Head 04: Current Transfers and Subsidies; Item 007: Households.

Division 02 - Office of the Chief Secretary. This is to be found between pages 25 to 26 inclusive. Sub-Head 01: Personnel Expenditure; Item 001: General Administration; Item 007: Public Administration; Item 011: Planning; Item 012: Land Management; Item 013: Labour; Item 016: Department of Environment, Climate Change and Energy. I am on page 26, Member.

So, we go now to pages 26 to 34 inclusive. Sub-Head 02: Goods and Services; Item 001: General Administration; Item 002: Information; Item 007: Public Administration; Item 008: Tobago Emergency Management Agency. Member for Diego Martin Central.

Mr. de Nobriga: Thank you, Chair. Just one brief question on Item 13, under 008, and the decrease of \$200,000 for the Maintenance of Vehicles, if there is any concern that this may impact—

Mr. Chairman: For the convenience of the Members, can you identify the page number you are on?

Mr. de Nobriga: Page 29, Chairman.

Mr. Chairman: Page 29, thank you.

Mr. de Nobriga: Sub-Head 008/13: Maintenance of Vehicles, a reduction of \$200,000 for the maintenance of vehicles.

Hon. Tancoo: Member, thank you for that question. If you look at the Actual for 2024, we have a \$257,000 figure. The Revised Estimate for 2025 is \$450,000. We believe that the Estimate for 2026 is sufficient. However, should there be additional needs, since Tobago does have an ageing fleet, we will be able to either

use the normal processes, either vire within the THA, or they can come back and ask for sufficient funds or additional funding in the mid-year review.

Mr. de Nobriga: Thank you, Minister.

Hon. Tancoo: Thank you.

10.10 a.m.

Mr. Chairman: San Fernando East.

Mr. Manning: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I am looking at line Item 61: Insurance. Can I ask what that is for? Easy question.

Hon. Tancoo: Member, I have been advised that this line Item covers the vehicle insurance for the THA.

Mr. Manning: May I ask, who is the third party insurer?

Hon. Tancoo: I am advised that they will provide that information to you, in writing.

Mr. Manning: Thank you, Sir.

Mr. Chairman: Arouca/Lopinot.

Mr. Gonzales: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. To the Minister, I am looking at Sub-Item 13: Maintenance of Vehicles. I observed that there is a 200,000 decrease in that allocation. Can you explain the reason for the decrease?

Hon. Tancoo: Member, that question was literally the first question that was asked by your colleague, and the answer has been provided already.

Mr. Gonzales: Sorry, Mr. Chairman, Sub-Item 16: Contract Employment. I observe that there is a 500,000 increase in the allocation. Can you provide information on what is the plan for this allocation?

Hon. Tancoo: Thank you for your question, Member. I am advised that the Tobago Emergency Management Agency, that is (TEMA), currently has 28 vacant positions. Of these 15 CERT technician positions, they are expected to be filled

during the new fiscal year. These new recruits will be assigned across the various CERT offices including the recently established CERT Speyside location. That will account for the increase in the allocation.

Mr. Gonzales: So, the intention is to fill 15 positions within TEMA?

Hon. Tancoo: There are 28 vacant positions, of these 15 are CERT technicians, and the intention is to pursue filling all of those vacancies.

Mr. Gonzales: What is the criteria by which the THA intends to follow to fill those positions? Are they going to be advertised internally or externally?

Hon. Tancoo: I am advised that employment under the THA, under this line Item, we will be following the numerous usual transparent mechanism of employment of officials by the THA.

Mr. Gonzales: Well, there are various forms of transparency, Minister. You can advertise for positions internally or you can advertise for positions externally all depending on, whether or not the competency resides, within the organization. That is the reason I am asking the question because I am sure the technocrats would have made that determination.

Hon. Tancoo: Yes, yes. Because these are specialized services that we see CERT qualified persons—they are advertising externally.

Mr. Gonzales: Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Okay. Item 010: Information Systems Department. I am sorry, I am on page 30 now. Item 011: Planning. San Fernando East.

Mr. Manning: Thank you, Mr. Chair. 04: Electricity. I see a \$50,000 increase here. Does that include the proposed new surcharge on electricity proposed by this Government?

Hon. Tancoo: Chair, this allocation will adequately meet the needs of Tobago for electricity, based on the proposed usage, and cost of electricity.

Mr. Manning: Sorry, Minister of Finance, that is not the question I asked. Does this line Item contain payments for the proposed increased electricity charges that were proposed by your Government?

Hon. Tancoo: Allow me to translate that. This line Item will sufficiently meet the needs of Tobago for electricity fees and charges under this line Item for fiscal 2026. That is clear.

Mr. Manning: Understood. Does it include the increased surcharge proposed by your Government and your Ministry, Sir?

Mr. Chairman: I think this is the third time you are asking the question—

Mr. Manning: I have not gotten an answer, Sir.

Hon. Tancoo: You got an answer that is very clear.

Mr. Chairman: I think the answer that you have gotten, whether the adequacy of it or not—

Hon. Tancoo: It is very adequate.

Mr. Chairman:—is for this committee to—

Mr. Manning: Mr. Chair, would determine that the answer was inadequate? The answer was inadequate.

Mr. Chairman: I do not have the power to determine the adequacy of answers. The question has been asked, it has been answered. The continuous repetition of it really does not serve any purpose at this point. It is an exercise in futility.

Mr. Manning: Thank you, Sir.

Mr. Chairman: Let us move on. Arouca/Lopinot.

Mr. Gonzales: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. Minister, it is no secret that a lot of government departments, they do owe T&TEC large sums of money, including the THA. My question on this line Item, is whether or not the allocation in this Sub-Item will allow the THA to settle its outstanding arrears for the

Trinidad and Tobago Electric Commission?

Hon. Tancoo: Thank you for your question. I am advised that the answer I just give will cover even this. But just for clarification going forward, the allocation, we believe to be sufficient to meet the needs of THA under Electricity. And should there be additional need for additional funding, THA has the authority within itself via the three various heads or they can approach the central Government for additional support.

Mr. Gonzales: Minister, can you state currently, how much THA is owing the Trinidad and Tobago Electricity Commission?

Hon. Tancoo: I am advised that there are various divisions of the THA, and they will have to collate that information, and sent to you subsequently.

Mr. Gonzales: I will appreciate that information to be provided, so we can move on in the interest of time, Chair.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. Should I move on? Laventille East/Morvant.

Mr. Birchwood: Chair. Thank you. Line Item 011/21: Repairs and Maintenance of Buildings. I am seeing a spike of \$100,000 there. Can the Minister clarify which buildings? What type of maintenance? And if these jobs will be contracted out?

Hon. Tancoo: Hold on please, we will get back to you, Sir. Member, I am advised that, this increase is required to effect the much needed repairs of the electrical and HVAC systems at the Planning, Research and Development Institute building.

Mr. Birchwood: Will these be carried out by external contractors, and are these contractors known to the public?

Hon. Tancoo: Member, I am advised that the THA usually does these kinds of remedial work, and there is a maintenance internally. However, if the resources

are not available at the THA they will go outside of the THA to source that. When they do that, it is usually following the requirements of the procurement regulations.

Mr. Birchwood: Thank you very much, Minister.

Hon. Tancoo: You are welcome.

10.20 a.m.

Mr. Chairman: Port of Spain South.

Mr. Scotland SC: Page 28, under the—

Mr. Chairman: Twenty eight? We have gone past that, Member.

Mr. Scotland SC: Sorry, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Chairman: We are at page 30, 30 to 31. So should I move on?

Mr. Scotland SC: Yes, please.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. We go now to Item 012: Land Management; Item: 013: Labour; Item 014: Occupational Safety and Health; Item 015: Urban and Regional Planning Development. I think Laventille West had his hand up first.

Mr. Marcelle: Deeply grateful, Mr. Chairman. Hon. Minister, line Item 015/27: Official Overseas Travel. I am seeing an increase of 195,000. Can the hon. Minister indicate what is intended or proposed official travel for this fiscal?

Hon. Tancoo: I am advised that this is a nominal sum that has been placed in the expectation that members of the Urban and Regional Planning Department, given their portfolio, may have requests, et cetera, to attend various conferences and training programs that will assist them in the operations of their duty.

Mr. Marcelle: Noted, Chair.

Mr. Chairman: San Fernando East.

Mr. Manning: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Line Item 61. Can you say what that is for?

Hon. Tancoo: Thank you. Mr. Chair, this Member seems to have a passion, and a direct interest in insurance. This line Item provides for vehicular insurance for this department.

Mr. Manning: Motor vehicular insurance?

Hon. Tancoo: Vehicular insurance.

Mr. Manning: Can you let us know what third party insurer has been paid here?

Hon. Tancoo: Member, we will get back with that information to you.

Mr. Manning: Thank you so much.

Mr. Chairman: Port of Spain South.

Mr. Scotland SC: Item 22: Short-term Employment, and there is an increase in that of \$50,000. It has increased from the last figure. Could you tell us on that Item what is the nature of the Short-term Employment?

Hon. Tancoo: Thank you, Member, for your question. Members, line Item 22: Short-term Employment. There was an Estimate by the former government of a \$200,000 provision, but only \$150,000 was used in fiscal 2025. The proposal for fiscal 2026 is \$200,000. This Head is used to hire interns on a short-term basis to graduate them in the operations of the THA. So that is what this line item is used for.

Mr. Scotland SC: Chairman, I see at 16, there is an almost 40 per cent increase in Contract Employment by \$346,500. Could you tell us, through you, Mr. Chair, what would be the nature of this Contract Employment and who are the targeted persons to be employed?

Hon. Tancoo: Thank you. Member, I am advised that the Urban and Regional Planning Department is a newly established unit.

Mr. Scotland SC: Yes.

Hon. Tancoo: And therefore, the Contract Employment figure that you see here is

for the purposes of continuing to staff that unit prior to formally bringing them on the establishment.

Mr. Scotland SC: Have these contract positions been advertised as yet? And, where can the public of Tobago find these advertisements if they are in existence already?

Hon. Tancoo: Member, I am advised that the establishment has now been created and that positions are being advertised publicly for these positions.

Mr. Scotland SC: And you give us the assurance, Chair, through you, that all Tobagonians will be eligible for these positions, not any particular party-linked position? Persons, all Tobagonians?

Hon. Tancoo: Member, this is not how this administration operates, I am proud to say.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Scotland SC: Which administration?

Hon. Tancoo: When we say publicly, and I have identified this before in another question, when we say publicly, the THA advertises publicly and best qualified and competent individuals, not just in Tobago, but throughout Trinidad and Tobago, can apply and be considered for positions under the THA, especially under this Contract Position. So there is no bias at all.

Mr. Scotland SC: Thank you. Item 23, I see there is an allocation for Fees. What would be the nature and nomenclature of those Fees, if it is a newly established entity?

Hon. Tancoo: Member, this line Item 23 is used to pay for software licences.

Mr. Chairman: Alright. I propose now to go to Sub-Head 03. For the avoidance of doubt, these Items are to be found at pages 34 to 37 inclusive. Item 001: General Administration; 002: Information; 007: Public Administration; 008—

Diego Martin Central.

Mr. de Nobriga: Thank you, Chair. 007/01: Vehicles. I am seeing that there has been no allocation in the 2026 estimation. Can I get some information as to why there is no allocation under this line Item?

Hon. Tancoo: Member, through you, Chair. I am advised that there is no allocation here because the THA is reprioritizing its operations, and should the need arise, they can vire via other Heads for this purpose.

Mr. Chairman: Item 008: Tobago Emergency Management Agency. Diego Martin Central.

Mr. de Nobriga: Minister, should I also assume that that answer holds for TEMA's need for vehicles as well?

Hon. Tancoo: Yes, Member.

Mr. Chairman: Item 010: Information Systems Department; Item 011: Planning; Item 012: Land Management; Item 013: Labour. Arouca/Lopinot.

10.30 a.m.

Mr. Gonzales: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. To the Minister, I observed in Sub-Item 01: Vehicles, that there has been a decrease in allocation by \$350,000. Can you explain the reason for the decrease in this Sub-Item?

Hon. Tancoo: Member, as I just explained, the THA is reevaluating its operations, and it has advised me that should additional resources be required after their reassessments are done, they will use the normal processes; either use virement or come back to the central Government for assistance.

Mr. Gonzales: Minister, can you say whether, based on the pattern that we are seeing, on the same line Item—the decrease, and in some areas, no allocation—that at this point in time, the fleet of vehicles attached to the THA might be sufficient to run its operation?

Hon. Tancoo: What I can say is that THA has an ageing fleet, but THA, mindful of the constraints of the central Government, is looking at more effective and efficient ways of accessing vehicular support. So, one of those ways that they are currently evaluating is the potential of leasing vehicles as a cost-saving measure over a period of time. That is why, when we indicated from on this side that they are reevaluating the options, those are the options that they are looking at, whether they should purchase or lease. And they can vire from the existing resources, like I said, or come to the central Government when they make a determination as to which way they want to go forward.

Mr. Gonzales: Okay, thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you.

Hon. Tancoo: Just for the reference, Mr. Chair, that would be true for all of the 01 Sub-Heads—

Mr. Gonzales: Dealing with vehicles.

Hon. Tancoo: Dealing with vehicles.

Mr. Gonzales: Because that is why I tried to conflate the question, because I observed that there is a trend in the allocations for vehicles throughout, that in some areas there is no allocation, and where there is an allocation compared to previous years, you have significant reduction. So, I think it is very important for the viewing and listening public to understand what is the thinking along that line.

Hon. Tancoo: And I am very glad to provide clarification and information.

Mr. Chairman: Okay, I now propose to move Item 014: Occupational Safety and Health; 015: Urban and Regional Planning Department; Item 016: Department of Environment, Climate Change and Energy; Sub-Head 04 at page 37, Current Transfers and Subsidies, Item 005: Non-Profit Institutions. Laventille West.

Mr. Marcelle: Mr. Chairman, my apologies. I am on 04/05. Line Item 05: Shaw Park Cultural Complex. I am seeing an increase of \$1 million in this fiscal year. Could the hon. Minister indicate what is the proposed increase to treat with?

Hon. Tancoo: Thank you very much, Member, for your question. Member, the line Item 05: Shaw Park Cultural Complex, the increase in the allocation is required to supplement the Vote for the following purposes: one, repairs to the HVAC system, currently, only eight out of 30 compressors are working and; two, repairs to the building generator; and three, repairs to the plumbing on all three floors of the buildings; and an external leak as well is going to be targeted under this figure.

Mr. Marcelle: I am deeply grateful.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. Laventille East/Morvant.

Mr. Birchwood: Thank you, Chair. Once again, hon. Minister, the contractors selected to carry out these works.

Hon. Tancoo: Thank you for your question and your query. Chair, through you again, I am advised that the relevant proper procurement processes in keeping with the procurement Regulations will be adopted in this process.

Mr. Birchwood: Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Malabar/Mausica.

Mr. Romain: Thank you, Chair. Line Item 03: Representation Office, I see an increase of \$100,000. Can the Minister indicate what is the function of this Representation Office?

Hon. Tancoo: Member, that information will be provided to you subsequently.

Mr. Romain: Thank you. Line Item 04: Partnership for Political and Economic Transformation, also an increase of \$100,000. Can the Minister indicate what is the function of that line Item?

Hon. Tancoo: Member, just for clarification, there was no allocation in the Revised Estimates, so therefore, this is not necessarily an increase, but just an allocation, but I will provide the information requested.

Mr. Romain: Deeply grateful. Thank you, Minister.

Mr. Chairman: Item 007: Households, and 009: Other Transfers. Arouca/Lopinot.

Mr. Gonzales: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. Minister, at Sub-Item 04, farm and development, I am seeing you have an allocation of \$5 million and significantly lower compared to the previous allocation. Can you just give us an idea as to what this project is all about and the status of it?

Hon. Tancoo: Member, I just want to be sure that we are both on the same page. Are you speaking of page 37, Other Transfers, 009, and 04: Farmland Development?

Mr. Gonzales: Farm and development.

Hon. Tancoo: Farmland Development.

Mr. Gonzales: That is what I am seeing. Farm and—

Mr. Chairman: No, I think it is typographical. It seems to be Farmland, otherwise it makes absolutely no sense.

Hon. Member: It is a typo.

Mr. Chairman: It is supposed to be F-A-R-M-L—

Mr. Gonzales: It is a typo in the yellow book so it is Farmland Development.

Mr. Chairman: So is it Farmland Development.

Hon. Tancoo: So Member, this is in fact, not a decrease but an increase. We are moving from a \$20 million Revised Estimate in fiscal 2025, to a \$25 million fiscal Estimate for 2026. So the THA has provided quite a bit of information here as well, so just for the listening audience—

Mr. Gonzales: You can probably summarize it.

Hon. Tancoo: For the listening audience, Farmland Development is a strategic initiative aimed at improving agricultural productivity, enhancing food security, and ensuring the sustainable use of land resources through proper planning, infrastructure, and land management. It involves activities such as land preparation, surveying, infrastructure works including roads, drainage, and utility connections and providing tenure security to farmers thorough lease arrangements.

The Land Management Department office of the Chief Secretary has successfully advanced works on the Lammy Road farmland development project which is now at the completion stage. The project involves surveys, roads and bridge construction, drainage, drilling of a well, a retention pond with adequate storage and provides suitable solar lighting for agricultural purposes.

At this point, the focus is on finalizing all outstanding payments related to the project's completion to ensure full closure. Additionally, attention is being directed towards the Belmont farm area, where the installation of key utilities, specifically water and electricity, remains a priority. Looking ahead, proposed new works have been planned for the Richmond farmland development area. This location has several farmers who have been allocated plots in the past but are currently without formal lease documents, limiting their ability to invest or access financing.

The next phase of work will therefore include surveying and cadastral mapping to formalize land tenure, as well as the development of infrastructure such as roads, water, and electrical utilities, to support active cultivation. Available lands within the Richmond Estate will be allocated to potential farmers through the Land Management Department agricultural application system and the oversight of the state land management and implementation committee.

These proposed initiatives are critical to advancing Tobago's agricultural agenda and will require this additional funding to ensure successful implementation. The additional funding will ensure project completion, enhanced food security, and generate a more structured and productive agricultural sector that contributes meaningfully to the island's economic resilience and sustainability.

This project is an agricultural development on a site—that is the farmland development project specified—of approximately 35 hectares. The site has 17 lots with areas that range from 0.2 hectares to 1.3 hectares for agricultural purposes.

Works are almost completed at the Lammy Road farm and development project in Argyle Tobago. The increase is required to complete payments on the Lammy Road project, to continue works at the Belmont farm area, and to plan activities at the Richmond farm development. Upon completion, 22 farmers and the nation of Trinidad and Tobago will benefit from this project.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

10.40 a.m.

Mr. Gonzales: Minister, how many projects are being executed under this Item?

Hon. Tancoo: There are multiple projects, as I have just listed, and I have also listed the specific areas that will benefit.

Mr. Gonzales: Are they all of the projects that are being executed at this point in time under this line Item?

Hon. Tancoo: Sir, I am advised that it includes several ongoing projects, and the new project that will come on board will be the Lammy Road project.

Mr. Gonzales: What is the overall cost estimate to implement this project?

Hon. Tancoo: The Lammy Road project, which is due to start in this fiscal—

Mr. Gonzales: Not the project, the entire programme.

Hon. Tancoo: We will have to get back to you in writing with that, Sir. The entire programme is a rolling programme.

Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]

Mr. Gonzales: Mr. Chair, the noise.

Mr. Chairman: I am getting a complaint about the noise emanating from the—

Mr. Gonzales: The lower Benches.

Mr. Chairman: Well, not my words, lest I be accused. It is the Chief Whip's words, the lower Benches.

Mr. Gonzales: That is what it is. It is very clear.

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Chairman: I did not realize you were that easily antagonized. All right, let us proceed.

Mr. Gonzales: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Minister, are you prepared to provide that information in writing?

Hon. Tancoo: What we could provide in writing, Sir, would be—because as projects are completed, the THA is moving on to additional projects to ensure that across the board, wherever it is required, additional support is being provided. So, we can provide you with an update as to where we are at today. I will provide that to you, Sir, in writing.

Mr. Gonzales: Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Malabar/Mausica.

Mr. Romain: Thank you, Chair. Line Item 009/01: Establishment of Comprehensive Economic Development (CED). Can the Minister inform us what that is about?

Hon. Tancoo: Member, more details of this will be provided to you in writing.

Mr. Romain: Thank you, Minister. Also, 03: Establishment of Public Service Academy. So, I am seeing there was an allocation in 2025 and then I am seeing the allocation in '26. Is it that the Academy has not yet been established?

Hon. Tancoo: Member, the project is at an early stage. So, in the last fiscal and an individual—an entity was brought on board for the purposes of planning and advising and reporting on the structure and the format, and so, on to be adopted. So, this is actually a work in progress before the actual physical establishment. So, these are preliminary works that are being undertaken now.

Mr. Romain: Thank you, Minister. Do we have an estimated budget for the complete rollout of this project?

Hon. Tancoo: Member, the process is literally just started. So, I think it will—we await the report of the individual who has been commissioned for this purpose.

Mr. Romain: Do we have a timeline on when that report would be delivered?

Hon. Tancoo: Member, I am advised that the report will be due by the end of fiscal 2026.

Mr. Romain: Duly noted. Thank you, Minister.

Hon. Tancoo: Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Diego Martin West.

Mr. Des Vignes: Thank you very much, Chair, to the Minister: Regarding the Buccoo Integrated Facility, 009/06, I am seeing an increase of \$1.5 million. What exactly can that \$1.5 million be attributed to?

Hon. Tancoo: Thank you for your question, Member. I am advised that line Item 04/009/06: the Buccoo Integrated Facility, in addition to the regular monthly expenditure for janitorial, sanitation and security services, the increase in allocation is required to supplement the Vote for the following activities: One, extension and repairs to the Buccoo Boardwalk; two, repairs to the fencing at the

Buccoo Integrated Facility; and three, general upgrading and landscaping, including repairs to the sprinkler system.

Mr. Des Vignes: Thank you very much, Minister, additional question. In terms of the janitorial services, are these provided internally or externally?

Hon. Tancoo: I am advised that the janitorial services are provided externally.

Mr. Des Vignes: Could the Minister advise of who is the company carrying out these services?

Hon. Tancoo: We will have to provide that to you at a later date, Sir.

Mr. Des Vignes: In writing?

Hon. Tancoo: Yes.

Mr. Des Vignes: Thank you very much, Minister.

Mr. Chairman: We go now to Division 03 - Finance, Trade and the Economy. These Items are to be found between pages 38 to 39, inclusive. We start with Sub-Head 01: Personnel Expenditure; Item 001: General Administration. Diego Martin Central.

Mr. de Nobriga: Thank you, Chair. Chairman, under 01/001/01, I note there is a decrease of just over \$1.4 million. Can I get an explanation as to why the decrease?

Hon. Tancoo: All right. Member, if you look at the Revised Estimate for fiscal 2025, I think you will see that the Revised Estimate under line Item 01: Salaries and Cost of Living Allowance for fiscal 2025 had moved from the Estimate of \$650,000 to a Revised Estimate of \$2.437 million, the reason being that these were to make payments for the SRC arrears that would have been incurred and therefore, there is no need for provision for SRC arrears. So, what you would have seen here would have been an actual increase over the average cost of Salaries and Cost of Living Allowance under this line Item.

Mr. de Nobriga: Thank you, Chair, if I could continue?

Mr. Chairman: Yes.

Mr. de Nobriga: Thank you, Minister. Minister, can we be told—I accept that we would have had those arrears. Can we be told if the Estimate in 2026 accounts for the increase in salaries for the employees under this Head?

Hon. Tancoo: Yes.

Mr. de Nobriga: Thank you. Minister, can I also get the number of employees covered under 01, and the number of vacancies?

Hon. Tancoo: So, Member, I am advised that there are 185 positions, of which there are 110 filled and 75 vacant public officers. There are 10 positions under the daily-rated workers, all are filled. There are 112 positions under contract officers, 100 are with bodies and 12 that are vacant at this point in time. In terms of short-term officers and employees, there are 13 positions, all of which have been filled.

Mr. Chairman: Malabar/Mausica.

10.50 a.m.

Mr. Romain: Thank you, Chair. Line Item 14: Remuneration to Members of Cabinet-Appointed Committees, there is a decrease of 750, is it that there was a reduction in the number of Cabinet-Appointed Committees?

Hon. D. Tancoo: Thank you, Member, for clarification the Tobago Development Fund, which was originally catered for under this line Item now has its own line Item and therefore remuneration would be done from another line Item.

Mr. Romain: Thank you, Minister.

Mr. Chairman: Item 002: Finance and Accounting. Diego Martin Central.

Mr. de Nobriga: Thank you, Chair. Minister can you tell me if under 002/01, are there employees there that are covered under the SRC report?

Hon. D. Tancoo: No.

Mr. de Nobriga: Okay. Can I get the number of employees and the number of vacancies? Or was that covered under your last—

Hon. D. Tancoo: It is covered under the information that—

Mr. de Nobriga:—under the numbers you gave me?

Hon. D. Tancoo: Yes.

Mr. de Nobriga: Can you then tell me the reason for the increase?

Hon. D. Tancoo: Yes, Member. The reason for the increase is that this is to cover the projected expenditure to fill vacant positions of Vault Attendant, Estate Constables, et cetera.

Mr. de Nobriga: Minister of Finance, I am happy to see the Tobago House of Assembly is doing projections and ensuring that the funding is in the budget. Thank you, Chair.

Hon. D. Tancoo: This Government continues to work with the people of Tobago and the Tobago House of Assembly.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Chairman: Okay.

Mr. de Nobriga: THA seems to be doing the job that other Ministries are not. Congratulations to them.

Mr. Chairman: We move now to Item 003: Customs. Item 004: Inland Revenue; Item 013: Co-operatives. We are now—Sub-Head 02, pages 39 to 45, Goods and Services; Item 001: General Administration. Arouca/Lopinot.

Mr. Gonzales: Thank you very much. Minister, this Sub- Item 36: Extraordinary Expenditure, I observed the previous year's allocation and a decrease of \$10.7 million in this fiscal '26. Can you explain the reason for this allocation and what is that Sub-Item utilized for?

Hon. D. Tancoo: Member, this figure does not reflect Actual expenditure. The Executive Council has the authority to relocate funds from the recurrent expenditure to the DP to address short falls in the DP funding. The DFTE therefore utilize extraordinary expenses line Item as a suspense account.

Mr. Gonzales: I am not hearing you clearly.

Hon. D. Tancoo: Should I start over?

Mr. Gonzales: I would appreciate that.

Hon. D. Tancoo: Sure. This figure does not reflect Actual expenditure. The Executive Council has the authority to reallocate funds from the recurrent expenditure to the *Development Programme* to address shortfalls in DP funding. The DFTE utilized the extraordinary expenses line Item as a suspense account to facilitate the pooling and transferring of funds to DP, after approval from the Budget's department of the Tobago House of Assembly.

Mr. Gonzales: Minister, you understand what you have just read? I am trying to understand—because I have seen it in other Ministries. I am just trying to get an understanding what this line Item utilized for is. It is not—I realize it is not only for the THA, it is across the board, but it is just for the viewing public to understand what this Sub-Item is utilized for by state agencies.

Hon. D. Tancoo: So, extraordinary expenditure by definition is unforeseen but in this instance, this line Item is being used as a suspense account—

Mr. Gonzales: Okay.

Hon. D. Tancoo:—so that we collect money moved from recurrent expenditure, stored and it is then passed on to DP to meet DP shortfalls. That is how the THA uses line Item 36.

Mr. Gonzales: Thank you, Minister.

Hon. D. Tancoo: You are welcome.

Mr. Chairman: Laventille West.

Mr. Marcelle: Thank you, Chairman. Hon. Minister, in fiscal 2025 could the hon. Minister indicate what the revised Estimate was under line Item 02/001: 36 used for, in fiscal 2025, please? I know it is a suspense account, but what exact works it was used for?

Hon. D. Tancoo: Member, which—Member that question has been asked and answered.

Mr. Marcelle: No. You indicated that it was a suspense account, in terms of whether it is from recurrent and so on.

Hon. D. Tancoo: In terms of recurrent and DP shortfalls.

Mr. Marcelle: So, I am asking if you have any details of what the—exactly what the \$10.8 million was used for, in terms of specific—any specific project or to pay salaries, overtime, et cetera.

Hon. D. Tancoo: Yes, Member, we would provide that detail for you in with writing.

Mr. Marcelle: Deeply grateful, please.

Hon. D. Tancoo: You are welcome.

Mr. Chairman: San Fernando East.

Mr. Manning: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I draw your attention to line Item 61. Can I ask what that is for?

Hon. D. Tancoo: Member, I appreciate your passion for insurance and therefore I want to—rather than us going through this over and over and over again, I have indicated in every single time you have asked the question on the THA for this particular the item that the insurance listed here is for the Item 61: Insurance, is for the provision of insurance for vehicles. This would be true for every line Item and that you would see for 61 and the THA.

Mr. Manning: And this third-party insurance?

Hon. D. Tancoo: This is fully comprehensive.

Mr. Manning: Sorry.

Hon. D. Tancoo: This is for fully comprehensive motor vehicle insurance.

Mr. Manning: Third-party insurance? Can I ask the provider of the insurance?

Hon. D. Tancoo: We would have to provide that to you in writing. And again Member, this is the same question—

Mr. Manning: Right.

Hon. D. Tancoo:—so this will be true.

Mr. Manning: Right.

Hon. D. Tancoo:—I know it will come up again, so this would be true—

Mr. Manning: Sure.

Mr. Tancoo:—for every line Item 61.

Mr. Manning: Minister of Finance, I know you are familiar with the law, so I am having a difficult time. I am reading here from the Motor Vehicles Insurance, (Third-Party Risks) law of Trinidad and Tobago and it says here—

Hon. D. Tancoo: Member, I am familiar with the legislation. Thank you so much.

Mr. Manning: You are familiar with it? Okay, good.

Hon. D. Tancoo: I am very familiar with the legislation.

Mr. Manning: Section 4:

“This section”—third party insurance—“does not apply to any person in the...”

(a) the Government;”

—or :

Head 15: Tobago House of Assembly (cont'd)

(b) a Municipal Corporation within the meaning of the Municipal Corporations Act (1990); or

(c) the Tobago House of Assembly,

who keeps or is allowed keep any vehicle or licensed trailer used and employed exclusively in the service of the Government, or the Municipal Corporation or the Tobago House of Assembly, as the case may be.”

And then we go to section 5, and it says,

“ (5) Nothing in this Act shall apply to any public service vehicle the property of the Corporation established under the Public Transport Service Act.” ,

“

Now, Mr. Minister, I am no lawyer, but that sounds to me as if state vehicles are exempt from third-party insurance, yet we have been hearing over and over and over for various Ministries, line items for exactly, third-party insurance. Mr. Minister of Finance, is there a motor vehicle insurance racket taking place in this Government right under your nose—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]:

Mr. Manning:—and being financed by yourself?

11.00 a.m.

Hon. Tancoo: Member, if I may respond. Well, you sort of premised your comment that you are not a lawyer. That is obviously true. But I assume that you were able to understand standard and basic English. I indicated at the start—now, I appreciate the need for the hoorah and the attempt to get the newspaper headlines, rackets, et cetera, et cetera. But this is not the PNM.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Tancoo: So, not everything is about racket. I am not—

Mr. Manning: I would appreciate an answer—

Hon. Tancoo:—not finished.

Mr. Manning:—Mr. Minister of Finance.

Hon. Tancoo: I am not finished.

Mr. Manning: I would appreciate an answer.

Hon. Tancoo: This is not the PNM. I am not finished. I indicated in my response, and maybe I should say it again just to be clear, before we descend into more unnecessary banter, but the Tobago House of Assembly provides fully comprehensive insurance for its vehicles. That is it. I said that clearly. Can I say it again?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Tancoo: Just in case—

Mr. Manning: Mr. Minister of Finance—

Hon. Tancoo:—a fridge door was being closed.

Mr. Manning:—we have seen the same line Item, as I brought up the other day, in the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government and other Ministries.

Hon. Tancoo: Member, this is the THA we are speaking about today.

Mr. Manning: Mr. Chairman—

Hon. Tancoo: This is the THA. Do not go backwards.

Mr. Manning:—as I read the law, it specifically indicated that the THA vehicles were exempt from third-party insurance.

Hon. Tancoo: Member, you are not a lawyer. Read it again or get a lawyer.

Mr. Manning: Mr. Chairman—

Hon. Tancoo: There are actually lawyers down the street. Get a lawyer to read it for you.

Mr. Manning:—I would like to request a list, from the Ministry of Finance, of

every state vehicle that is insured by a third-party, and the quantum, and which—

Mr. Chairman: Alright.

Mr. Manning:—insurance agencies—

Mr. Chairman: I do not—

Mr. Manning:—support—

Mr. Chairman:—Member. Alright. Whilst that may be a legitimate enquiry you may have, I do not think this is the forum to—

Mr. Manning: Mr. Chairman, I have not completed my request. But before—

Mr. Chairman:—but what I am telling you—

Mr. Manning:—you can deny it, you have to at least hear it first, before you can deny it.

Mr. Chairman: Well the way you put—

Mr. Manning: Mr. Chairman, I have not completed my request. What I am asking for from the Minister of Finance is a list of all third-party insurance being provided for motor vehicles to this Government, and the quanta, and which insurance companies—

Mr. Chairman: Alright.

Mr. Manning:—are providing such coverage.

Mr. Chairman: Now that I have heard you, first of all—

Mr. Manning: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Chairman:—the first problem with that request is that this is not the forum to make that request, first of all. Secondly, today we are discussing the THA. Should you—and let me make give you some—make a gentle suggestion to you. Should you think that this is a line of enquiry you wish to pursue, the Standing Orders are plain and obvious as to which line of enquiry is a legitimate one to pursue and the timing of the same. Okay?

Mr. Manning: Mr. Chairman, this line Item deals with motor vehicle insurance for the THA.

Mr. Chairman: For the THA.

Mr. Manning: So I would like a—

Mr. Chairman: So you may confine your request—

Mr. Manning:—request a list of all third-party insurance for motor vehicles assigned to the THA—

Mr. Chairman: Alright.

Mr. Manning:—and the providers of such third-party insurance.

Mr. Chairman: That is an enquiry you may wish to make. The Minister may choose to entertain it or not.

Hon. Tancoo: Member, I think you are not even listening to yourself. Every time this line Item was raised, you made the same request. And again, you are repeating yourself. For the benefit of your good self and the listening audience, on every occasion before you have asked for the providers, on every occasion. Is that not so, Member? And on every such occasion, I am advised by the THA that the same will be provided. Are you trying to create the impression that something else is amiss—

Mr. Manning: Well, I do not know Minister of Finance.

Hon. Tancoo:—in your desperation to create a headline?

Mr. Manning: You seem to be refusing to answer the question.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Manning: I have not one time asked for a list of third-party insurance for all motor vehicles of the THA. I am doing that now. I would like a list of every single motor vehicle and the third-party insurer of such, and the provider of such insurance, and the quantum in premiums being paid to the THA. Thank you so much, Ministry of Finance.

Hon. Tancoo: Just for your clarification, Sir, since again, as a non-lawyer, apparently you did not learn much in the Chamber, no premiums are paid to the THA.

Mr. Manning: But, Sir that is not what you are saying. That is not what you— every time I ask the question you are saying—

Hon. Tancoo: Premiums are paid by the THA.

Mr. Manning: [*Laughter*] Now you are really playing lawyer.

Hon. Tancoo: English is a funny language but very straightforward.

Mr. Manning: Mr. Minister of Finance, you know exactly what I am asking for. The line Item is right here.

Hon. Tancoo: I am responding to your query. You asked for the premiums being paid to the THA. I have corrected you, Sir.

Mr. Chairman: Alright. This exchange is now getting pointless.

Mr. Manning: Mr. Chair, the line Item here says Insurance.

Mr. Chairman: Yes. I understand that. I think you have made—

Mr. Manning: Mr. Chairman, I am allowed to ask a question.

Mr. Chairman: Right.

Mr. Manning: That is what this is for.

Mr. Chairman: Yes. I—

Mr. Manning: I have asked what is it for, the Minister of Finance said it is for third-party insurance. I am asking for a list of all third-party insurers for every motor vehicle at the THA. That is my request.

Mr. Chairman: Okay.

Mr. Manning: Will the Minister of Finance satisfy that request or no?

Hon. Tancoo: Asked and answered on a multiplicity of occasions.

Mr. Chairman: Alright. I think we have exhausted this line of enquiry. Diego

Martin Central.

Mr. de Nobriga: Thank you Mr. Chair. Mr. Chair, just for a point of clarity, the Minister of Finance prior to this division and this Head being discussed, did indicate that it is—Minister of Finance if you would let me; trust me it is going where you want it to go—previous to this line Item that the insurance was third-party. So, I could understand my colleague's request. However, under this Head, he did specifically say fully comprehensive. Can I ask the Minister of Finance if in the previous Heads, because he has said that the THA insures all it vehicles at fully comprehensive. So is it that the previous Heads, where he would have stated that it was third-party, that those are not third-party and that they are fully comprehensive?

Hon. Tancoo: Member, we are dealing with the Tobago House of Assembly.

Mr. de Nobriga: So am I.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. de Nobriga: Minister of Finance, so am I.

Hon. Tancoo: Kindly confine your questions to the THA.

Mr. de Nobriga: Member, so am I. My colleague from San Fernando East, Chairman, through you, asked this in various divisions under the THA for Insurance. Previous to this Head, you specifically said third-party and I am asking if it is that you want to correct your statement that it was not third-party under the THA and it was fully comprehensive as you have now stated for this division that we are dealing with here.

Hon. Tancoo: Member, the Head is the THA. The Head is the THA that we are seeing about. It is not—so, if you are asking me if I have made comments under other Heads, the Head that we are—

Mr. de Nobriga: Under the THA.

Hon. Tancoo:—talking about today is Head 15/06.

Mr. Chairman: Minister, if I could interject. I think the Member is confining this enquiry to the answers with regard to THA alone. It has to be.

Hon. Tancoo: Let me help the Member in case—so that—I think I know where you want to go without you having been able to express clearly. So, the answer for you that may help both you and your colleague next to you, who is a non-lawyer, which I would not hold against you, is that all THA vehicles are insured fully comprehensive.

Mr. Manning: Mr. Chair, that is not the answer he gave previously. He said it was third-party insurance.

Mr. Chairman: No. No. No. No

Mr. Manning: I would like the record to state it.

Hon. Tancoo: Question asked and answered.

Mr. Chairman: No. No. No. No. No. The confusion is created in the way you framed the question. All insurance is third-party risk as well. It is how insurance companies classify it, whether they are going to pay you for third-party risk and the replacement cost of your item, which you have insured or simply, whether they are going to pay the third-party injury. That is what it is.

Mr. Manning: Mr. Chairman, what I am asking, again—

Mr. Chairman: Yes. I think—

Mr. Manning:—and I want to be clear, because clearly they are lost.

Mr. Chairman: But I think the answer was just given. All THA vehicles—

Mr. Manning: Alright.

Mr. Chairman:—are insured fully comprehensive.

Mr. Manning: Mr. Chairman, I would like a list of all private insurers that are insuring motor vehicles at the THA.

Mr. Chairman: Alright.

Mr. Manning: That is what I would like.

Mr. Chairman: You can make that request—

Mr. Manning: Whether it is fully comprehensive, or third-party or whatever.

Mr. Chairman: Whether they choose to entertain it or not is another matter.

Mr. Manning: Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: We are moving on. Malabar/Mausica.

Mr. Romain: Thank you, Chair. Line Item 19: Official Entertainment. We see an increase of 50,000. We note that there was a spend in 2024 of 7,599. To which department does this apply exactly? And is there anticipation to spend an additional 50,000 on entertainment in the upcoming fiscal?

11.10 a.m.

Hon. Tancoo: Alright. So Member, Official Entertainment under this line Item is for the purposes of official entertainment. So when the Secretary of Finance, Trade and the Economy has to engage with international agencies, international bodies, the Tobago development of finance, et cetera, that is what will fall under this line Item, Official Entertainment.

Mr. Romain: Thank you, Minister.

Hon. Tancoo: Member, just for clarification, I think you will be happy to know that this is not an abused process, unlike other entities under the PNM.

Mr. Chairman: Alright. I propose to move to Item 002: Finance and Accounting; 003: Customs; 004: Inland Revenue; 008: Budget Division; 012: Consumer Affairs; 013: Co-operatives; 015: Financial Literacy Secretariat; 018: Communication Unit; 019: Economic Management and Research Unit; 021: Strategic Sector Support Unit; Item 022: Business Development Unit.

Sub-Head 03; Minor Equipment Purchases to be found at pages 45 to 48

Head 15: Tobago House of Assembly (cont'd)

inclusive. Item 001: General Administration; 002: Finance and Accounting; 003: Customs; 004: Inland Revenue; 008: Budget Division; 012: Consumer Affairs; 013: Co-operatives; 015: Financial Literacy Secretariat; 018: Communication Unit; 019: Economic Management and Research Unit; 021: Strategic Sector Support Unit; 022: Business Development Unit.

We go now to Sub-Head 004: Current Transfers and Subsidies. Item 005, for the avoidance of doubt, pages 48 to 49 inclusive. Member for Arima.

Ms. Beckles: Yes, please, thank you, 04: Non-Profit Institution, an increase of 32.6million. Can the hon. Minister, can you give us a list of the institutions that are benefiting and what is the criteria, please, and you can provide it later.

Hon. Tancoo: Member, I just need some clarification. Are you speaking about 04 as the Sub-Item or are you speaking about the entire 04: Current Transfers and Subsidies?

Ms. Beckles: Okay, so let me ask a question. As it relates to that particular Item, what exactly is that fund used for?

Hon. Tancoo: Oh, okay.

Ms. Beckles: I mean, I know you say non-profit, but any particular activity?

Hon. Tancoo: So this is really for contributions to NGOs, to non-profit organizations that are involved in the upliftment and the development of the people of Tobago.

Ms. Beckles: Yes, okay. Okay, so can you provide, is there any particular criteria that is used for the application of that particular fund?

Hon. Tancoo: Yes, Ma'am, they must be a non-profit organization.

Ms. Beckles: Okay, that is the only criteria?

Hon. Tancoo: Yeah. That is the only criteria but the process, there is a policy developed by the THA that is used to determine the beneficiaries under this Head.

Ms. Beckles: Okay, so can I ask for the submission of a copy of the policy and as I said, I do not have to get it today, you can—

Hon. Tancoo: Member, we can probably supply you with the list of beneficiaries. Would that suffice, the list of beneficiaries?

Ms. Beckles: The list of beneficiaries? Yes, but if I can also get a copy of the policy as well. Since you said that policy exists, and a criteria.

Hon. Tancoo: I am advised, Ma'am, that we will have to get approval because the policy is still in a preliminary stage, well, not a preliminary, but a draft stage. So because it is not yet finalised, although it has been utilised generally, we will have to get approval from the council before it could be submitted. However, the THA has advised that they will be able to supply you with a list of the beneficiaries—

Ms. Beckles: Okay. So can I get—

Hon. Tancoo:—who would have received a benefit under the last fiscal.

Ms. Beckles: Okay, so can I get the list of beneficiaries and the quantum then?

Hon. Tancoo: Yes.

Ms. Beckles: Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Item 007: Households. Malabar/Mausica.

Mr. Romain: Chair, just confirming that we are on page 48?

Mr. Chairman: I am sorry?

Mr. Romain: Just confirming that we are on page 48, right?

Mr. Chairman: This starts at page 48, yes.

Mr. Romain: Under Retirement, Severance Benefits and Compensation to Injured Workmen. Can the Minister indicate, is it that the THA does not have a workmen's compensation public liability insurance?

Hon. Tancoo: Member, I will have to get back to you in writing with regard to that question.

Mr. Romain: Thank you so much, Minister.

Mr. Chairman: 009: Other Transfers. Malabar/Mausica.

Mr. Romain: Thank you, Chair. Line Item 19: Milford Road, Esplanade. I see 2 million, '24, '25, '26. Could the Minister indicate what that expense is for?

Hon. Tancoo: Member, I am advised that this is to cover infrastructural works that are currently ongoing at the Milford Road, Esplanade.

Mr. Romain: Thank you, Minister.

Mr. Chairman: Okay. Division 04: Food Security, Natural Resources, The Environment—

Ms. Beckles: Chair. Sorry. Chairman, my hand was up, my apologies.

Mr. Chairman: Okay. My apologies, I did not see you.

Ms. Beckles: Thank you. Mr. Chairman, as it relates to Item 21 which is the Eco Industrial Company of Tobago, I see there is an increase of 5 million. Hon. Minister, could you indicate what that money is expected to do?

11.20 a.m.

Hon. Tancoo: Yes, Ma'am. Thanks for your question. I am anxious to clarify or to provide clarity. This increase or this allocation is programmed to meet the increased operational cost generated by the expanded mandate of the company to be the procurement and project management entity of the first choice of the THA, occasioned by UDeCOTT, disengaging from the THA projects in fiscal February, 2023. Provision is also made for the construction of factory shelves for the expansion of the manufacturing at the establishment at the park.

Ms. Beckles: At the park.

Hon. Tancoo: Yes, Ma'am. So, hon. Minister, would you be in a position to provide us with the list of beneficiaries? You can send the list.

Hon. Tancoo: Sure. We will provide that to you in writing.

Ms. Beckles: Thank you kindly. Mr. Chairman, as it relates to the Project Financing Repayments, could we also get a list of exactly what projects and the payments? That is at line Item 26.

Hon. Tancoo: Yes, Member, I may not need to provide it in writing.

Ms. Beckles: If it is a long list—

Hon. Tancoo: It is not. It is not. In fact, it is a bit of an explanation rather than—

Ms. Beckles: Sure. Thanks.

Hon. Tancoo: So, this allocation has been provided for the establishment of a sinking fund to meet the bullet payment of the \$165 million bond financing issued by the THA in 2021 for six years, and which becomes due in July 2027. So, it is for the payment of bullet payments for the sinking fund.

Ms. Beckles: Okay. So, this is the start of partial payments, up until the period that it is due?

Hon. Tancoo: It is partial payment until July 2027.

Ms. Beckles: Thank you. Mr. Chairman, if you could just bear with me for a little more. Just for the interest of the public, the Establishment of an Intelligent Island, 28, what exactly is that?

Hon. Tancoo: Item 28: The Establishment of an Intelligent Island. This project was repurposed to the Tobago online project and will roll out MYTHA, the first e-government ecosystem for the Tobago House of Assembly. With this, the e-tender, e-PSIP, digitization of the Executive Council's operations constitute some of the ongoing projects under the MYTHA component.

Ms. Beckles: Okay. Hon. Minister, could you indicate whether that project has started? What is the time frame?

Hon. Tancoo: Yes. Member for Arima, I am advised that the project has started. It was started in 2024, and the project has continued. It is rolling out various

aspects of the proposed plan that we have discussed before. So, there are several parts already in progress and more to come.

Ms. Beckles: Thank you kindly, hon. Minister. Just the last Item 30, which is the Loan Guarantee Programme, with an increase of \$4.9 million. Hon. Minister, could you give us some details on that, please?

Hon. Tancoo: Sure, Member. Thank you very much for your question. Member, I am proud to advise that under the Loan Guarantee Programme, line Item 30 under this Sub-Head of Other Transfers, a \$10 million has been allocated in fiscal 2026, an increase of \$4.9 million, as you are aware. This is provided for the expansion of the THA's Loan Guarantee Programme, which was established for businesses in Tobago to have access to much-needed working capital from commercial banks to enhance and grow their operations. This support was designed to address the significant cash flow challenge occasioned by COVID-19 and other stressors. The strategy is to stimulate growth in the SME sector in Tobago.

Ms. Beckles: Thank you, hon. Minister. Can I then kindly ask you for a list of the beneficiaries? As I indicated, you do not have to provide it today, but if you can send the list of beneficiaries and the sums given to those businesses?

Hon. Tancoo: I am advised that no payments have been issued. There are seven applications currently being reviewed. Member, until they are finalized, we will not be able to provide any more information on them. It is expected though that this will have a significant attraction going forward and therefore, there may be more persons applying during fiscal 2026.

Ms. Beckles: Okay. Hon. Minister, can I enquire whether this was advertised to the public?

Hon. Tancoo: Yes. I am advised there is a public advertisement. Yes.

Ms. Beckles: Okay. Well, can I kindly ask that I be provided with a copy of the

advertisement, please? It can be submitted in the interest of time, Mr. Chairman.

Hon. Tancoo: Sure. Sure.

Ms. Beckles: Thank you.

Hon. Tancoo: I believe it may have been online as well.

Mr. Chairman: Arouca/Lopinot.

Mr. Gonzales: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. Hon. Minister, can you indicate what is the criteria to access this particular loan programme?

Hon. Tancoo: Member, I am advised that the programme is being administered by the FCB, the First Citizens Bank of Trinidad and Tobago, and we can provide that detail with regard to criteria, et cetera, to you in writing.

Mr. Gonzales: Thank you, Minister. Minister, can you also state when this programme was launched?

Hon. Tancoo: Member, we will provide that information to you subsequently.

Mr. Gonzales: So, the information will be provided in writing as well, subsequently?

Hon. Tancoo: Yes, that is for the start date of the project?

Mr. Gonzales: Thank you very much. So, the start date of the programme, as well as the criteria—

Hon. Tancoo: Yes.

Mr. Gonzales:—for potential beneficiaries who might be interested in applying for support?

Hon. Tancoo: And a copy of the advertisement for the Member for Arima.

Mr. Gonzales: Thank you.

Hon. Tancoo: You are welcome.

Mr. Chairman: Laventille East/Morvant.

Mr. Romain: Thanks, Chair. But the political leader already addressed by line

Item 30.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. All right. We will go to Division 04 - Food Security, Natural Resources, The Environment and Sustainable Development.

Sub-Head 01: Personnel Expenditure, these are to be found on pages 50 to 52, inclusive; Item 001: General Administration; Item 002: Agriculture; 003; Marketing; 004: Natural Resources and Forestry; 005: Marine Resources and Fisheries; 006: The Environment.

Sub-Head 02: Goods and Services; Item 001: General Administration; Item 002: Agriculture; Item 003: Marketing; 004: Natural Resources and Forestry; 005: Marine Resources and Fisheries; 006: The Environment.

Sub-Head 03: Minor Equipment Purchases, pages 57 to 58, inclusive; Item 001: General Administration; 002: Agriculture; 003: Marketing; 004: Natural Resources and Forestry; 005: Marine Resources and Fisheries; 006: The Environment. Hon. Member for Arima.

Ms. Beckles: Thank you kindly. Hon. Minister, under Extraordinary Expenditure, I see an increase of \$1.9 million. Could you tell us—

Hon. Tancoo: Member, we are at 006: The Environment.

Ms. Beckles: Yes.

Hon. Tancoo: I am not seeing any Extraordinary Expenditure—

Ms. Beckles: Okay. That is probably just remunerations—

Hon. Tancoo:—under 006. We are at page 58.

Ms. Beckles: Okay. All right. I was a little ahead. Thanks.

Hon. Tancoo: Sure.

11.30 a.m.

Mr. Chairman: Okay, we get to Sub-Head 04: Current Transfers and Subsidies, these are 58 to 59 inclusive. Item 005: Non-Profit Institutions; 007: Households,

008: Subsidies, 009: Other Transfers. Division 05 - Tourism, Culture, Antiquities and Transportation, Sub-Head 01, pages 60 to 61. Item 001: General Administration. Member for Laventille East/Morvant.

Mr. Birchwood: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I have noticed a decrease. Line Item 001/01: Salaries and Cost of Living Allowance, a decrease, could the Minister elaborate a bit?

Hon. Tancoo: So, Member if you look at the Estimate for fiscal 2025, it was \$2.8 million, and we had a bump up to \$5.82 million in the Revised Estimate that would have been based on the payment of arrears for the SRC.

Mr. Birchwood: Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: May we go to Item—

Hon. Tancoo: Mr. Chairman, if I may, it is very likely that we will see this repeating as well. So, can I suggest that Item 01, where Members will look and see that there has been an increase in the Revised Estimate, that in all of those instances the same can be referred to, so we do not end up with the same question repeated, by the Member.

Mr. Chairman: I supposed Members will exercise their discretion having been told.

Hon. Tancoo: Acknowledged.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. Alright, we are going now to 002: Tourism, 007: Culture. Sub-Head 02: Goods and Services, pages 61 to 64. Item 001: General Administration. Laventille West.

Mr. Marcelle: Thank you very kindly, Mr. Chairman. To the hon. Minister, line Item 02/001/16. I am seeing an increase of \$300,000 for Contract Employment. Can the hon. Minister indicate, which are the additional Contract Employment Services to be rendered?

Hon. Tancoo: Thank you for your question, Member. The increase in contract projection for the fiscal year 2025/2026 is due to the need to have the following critical positions filled, Cybersecurity Specialist, and a Quantity Surveyor professional.

Mr. Marcelle: Deeply grateful. Could the hon. Minister indicate how many vacant outside of the additional employment, the existing—well the previous of \$7.5 million, what are the amount of vacancies in this Division?

Hon. Tancoo: Thank you for your question Member. Member there are projected, well, there are 70 positions of which 51 are filled, 19 are vacant under public officers; for daily-rated there 287 positions, 200 filled, 104 vacant; under contracted officers there is 103 positions, 98 are filled, five are vacant; in terms of short-term officers or employees there are 15, all are filled.

Mr. Marcelle: Deeply grateful. Hon. Minister, line Item 02/001/27, I am seeing an increase in the Official Overseas Travel for this Division of an increase of \$300,000. Can the hon. Minister indicate if there any particular proposed Official Overseas Travel for this fiscal year? What is the proposed Official Overseas Travel?

Hon. Tancoo: I just want to make sure Member that we are on the same page. Page 61?

Mr. Marcelle: Yes, it is 02.

Hon. Tancoo: Zero, zero, zero.

Mr. Marcelle: 01/27: Official Overseas Travel, there is an increase of \$300,000 additional. So, it moved from \$200,000 in 2025, to \$500,000 this fiscal.

Hon. Tancoo: Yes.

Mr. Marcelle: I am asking what is the proposed Official Overseas Travel for this Division, in this fiscal?

Hon. Tancoo: Right. So, Member if you look at fiscal 2024 the Actual spent then under Official Overseas Travel is \$1.7 million. The proposed for fiscal 2026 now is \$500,000. I am unable at this point to provide any detail because this is based on the discretion of the Head.

Mr. Marcelle: Deeply grateful, please, Mr. Chairman.

Hon. Tancoo: Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: 002: Tourism, 007: Culture. Member for Arima.

Ms. Beckles: Thank you kindly, Mr. Chairman. Hon. Minister on Head 007/89, I see there is an increase of \$1.3 million, is there any particular activity or anything that you could share with us as it relates to that increase please?

Hon. Tancoo: Member, there are several items that are going to be considered under this Head for Cultural Programmes. They include: the fireside, coal pot, and dirt oven competitions or sessions; the traditional dance folk festival showcase; rhythm, rhyme and riddles; Know Your Museum exhibition showcase, Bamboo Bamboo video series; ask for the ageing Spiritual Baptist Liberation, Emancipation celebrations; Independence Day cultural aspect; Patriotism Month; Republic Day; Diwali celebrations; World Travel Market; cruise ship season, Mas on the Move; Out Ah We Carnival; Ready, Set, Go. Several initiatives that are under this Head which will require the funding. Member this is an expansive list, I can read it out for you now—

Ms. Beckles: No, you can submit the list. That is fine.

Hon. Tancoo: Sure.

Ms. Beckles: The only thing I wanted to ask: Are those new initiatives or is that additional funding to previous cultural items?

Hon. Tancoo: Some are new and some are repeats from the previous [*Inaudible*].

Ms. Beckles: So the list is fine.

Hon. Tancoo: Sure, will provide that in writing.

Mr. Chairman: Sub-Head 03: Minor Equipment Purchases, pages 64 to 65. Item 001: General Administration, 002: Tourism, 006: Transport, 007: Culture. Sub-Head 04, page 65, Current Transfers and Subsidies. Item 005: Non - Profit Institutions. Member for Arima.

Ms. Beckles: Just to simply request the list of beneficiaries from the last fiscal year, thank you. And it can be submitted in writing.

Hon. Tancoo: Of which Sub, Ma'am?

Ms. Beckles: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. Tancoo: Okay, Non Profits.

Mr. Chairman: Item 005, which is at page 65?

Hon. Tancoo: Sure.

Mr. Chairman: Item 007: Households, Item 009: Other Transfers. Member for Arima.

Ms. Beckles: Thank you kindly. Hon. Minister, I see under the Tobago Tourism Agency Limited, an increase of \$8 million, can you provide any assistance as it relates to that increase?

Hon. Tancoo: What assistance would—[*Inaudible*]

Ms. Beckles: Exactly what would that be for? That \$8 million?

11.40 a.m.

Hon. Tancoo: So Member, this allocation of \$50 million is to be spent on marketing and promotion, \$14 million; product and destination development, \$1 million; air lift and cruise support, \$26.6 million; research, data and digital transformation, \$200,000; training in capacity development, \$200,000; corporate operations, administration and governance \$8 million. For a projected total financial expenditure in fiscal 2026, \$50 million.

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Ms. Beckles: Thank you kindly. Hon. Minister, can I also enquire as it relates to the next Item, which is 21, where there is an increase of \$4 million, to provide similar information as to what that money would be spent on. Thank you.

Hon. Tancoo: Member I can provide you with this breakdown now—

Ms. Beckles: No. I am seeing the list as you know—

Hon. Tancoo: It is very extensive.

Ms. Beckles: Yeah. No, no. As you know, I have not objected to the provision of the list. So that is fine.

Hon. Tancoo: Okay. So I will provide that to you in writing.

Ms. Beckles: Sure. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Member for Malabar/Mausica.

Mr. Romain: Thank you, Chair. Again, line Item 20: Tobago Tourism Agency Limited. Could the Minister just elaborate a little bit on the allocation of \$26 million that he mentioned for cruise ship and air lift support?

Hon. Tancoo: This is line Item 20?

Mr. Romain: Yes. You would have called out a list of items that—the allocations for and you mentioned, I think, \$26 million for cruise ship and air lift support. Just asking if you could just elaborate a little bit on that.

Hon. Tancoo: Thank you Member. I am glad to provide some assistance for you. With regard to the cruise ship season I am assuming that is the reference you are making, right? So there are a total of 41 ports of call for the 2025 cruise ship season at Scarborough, Castara, Charlotteville, and Englishman's Bay, including four maiden calls. The cultural showcases are aimed at enhancing visitor experiences, promoting Tobago's unique cultural identity and cultural tourism through the use of cultural performance in groups.

Mr. Romain: Thank you Minister.

Head 15: Tobago House of Assembly (cont'd)

Mr. Chairman: Division 06 - Education, Research and Technology. Sub-Head 01: Personnel Expenditure, pages 66 to 67, Item 001: General Administration; 002: Primary, Secondary and Vocational Education; 003: Library Services; 004: School Feeding Programme; 007: Tobago Council for Handicapped Children – Happy Haven School; 008: Tobago School for the Deaf, Speech and Language Impaired.

Sub-Head 02, pages 68 to 71, Goods and Services; Item 001: General Administration; 002: Primary, Secondary and Vocational Education; 003: Library Services; 007: Tobago Council for Handicapped Children - Happy Haven School; Item 008: Tobago School for the Deaf, Speech and Language Impaired.

Sub-Head 03, pages 71 to 72, Minor Equipment Purchases, Item 001: General Administration; 002: Primary, Secondary and Vocational Education; Item 003: Library Services; 007: Tobago Council for Handicapped Children - Happy Haven School; 008: Tobago School for the Deaf, Speech and Language Impaired.

Sub-Head 04: Current Transfers and Subsidies, pages 73 to 74, Item 005: Non-Profit Institutions; 006: Educational Institutions—Member for Arouca/Lopinot.

Mr. Gonzales: Thank you very much, Chair. Minister at Sub-Item 03: Trade Centres., I am seeing an increase by \$3 million Minister. Can you explain the reason for that increase in that allocation?

Hon. Tancoo: Sure, Member. Member there were three Trade Centres. This increase is necessary to purchase and upgrade all machinery and equipment at the Roxborough Trade Centre. Payment of wages and stipends to daily-rated staff and students is also sourced from this Vote. The curriculum has been expanded to include automated and technologically enhanced courses. That will explain the increase and the allocation of \$20 million in total.

Mr. Gonzales: How many Trade Centres do you have in Tobago?

Hon. Tancoo: There are two Trade Centres in Tobago.

Mr. Gonzales: And where are they located?

Hon. Tancoo: One at Roxborough and one at Bon Accord.

Mr. Gonzales: So the increase allocation of \$3 million is to be spent on which Trade Centre?

Hon. Tancoo: Both.

Mr. Gonzales: You say you have two Trade Centres?

Hon. Tancoo: Yes.

Mr. Gonzales: So the increase in allocation is to be spent on both Trade Centres?

Hon. Tancoo: Yes, Sir.

Mr. Gonzales: Okay.

Mr. Chairman: 007: Households. Member for Arouca/Lopinot.

Mr. Gonzales: Thank you very much, Chair. Minister, I am at Sub-Item 01: School Feeding Programme. I am seeing an increase of \$5.4 million, Minister. Can you explain the reason for the increase in the allocation?

Hon. Tancoo: Sure, thank you. This increase is necessary to cover outstanding bills to school feeding caterers. The allocation has proven inadequate over the years and has had to be supported by virements and transfers. The allocation is still inadequate to cover the expenditure, which is approximately \$4.1 million per month, but the THA has indicated previously that they have various ways of meeting the obligations including: Virement, transfers and coming back to the Central Government.

Mr. Gonzales: Just to be clear. So the \$5.4 increase in allocation is to help clear outstanding liabilities?

Hon. Tancoo: Correct.

Mr. Gonzales: And it will not be enough to settle the overall liabilities under this Sub-Item?

Hon. Tancoo: It may not be enough and if required we would come back for more or seek virements within the THA as has happened before.

Mr. Gonzales: Do you have a list of the service providers under this Sub-Item?

Hon. Tancoo: No, but that can be provided in writing.

Mr. Gonzales: Thank you very much, Minister.

Mr. Chairman: Member for Arima.

Ms. Beckles: For the next one. I am just putting up my hand in advance.

Mr. Chairman: “Oh”, I see. Item 009: Other Transfers.

Ms. Beckles: Thank you kindly. Hon. Minister just for my benefit, what is a basic grant? And, I see there is an increase of \$2 million as well so.

11.50 a.m.

Hon. Tancoo: Member for Arima, I am advised that basic grants under this context, line Item 01, are grants that are being paid to government assisted schools.

Ms. Beckles: Okay, thank you kindly, and can you provide the list? In writing is fine.

Hon. Tancoo: Member, there are only three schools that fall under this category, would you still want that in writing or can I provide that to you now?

Ms. Beckles: Yeah you can—I mean—just in the interest of time. If there is—
[Inaudible]

Hon. Tancoo: In the interest of time, I will provide that to you in writing.

Ms. Beckles: Sure.

Hon. Tancoo: Okay. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Division 07 - Community Development, Youth Development and Sport, pages 75 to 76: Sub-Head 01: Personnel Expenditure. Item 001: General

Head 15: Tobago House of Assembly (cont'd)

Administration; 002: Community Development; 008: Sport; 009: Youth Affairs.

Sub-Head 002: Goods and Services, pages 76 to 79. Item 001: General Administration; Item 002: Community Development; Item 007: Youth Energised for Success; 008: Sports; 009: Youth Affairs.

Sub-Head 03: Minor Equipment Purchases, pages 79 to 80. Item 001: General Administration; Item 002: Community Development; Item 007: Youth Energised for Success; 008: Sports; 009: Youth Affairs.

Sub-Head 04: Current Transfers and Subsidies; Item 005: Non-Profit Institutions; 007: Households; 009 Other Transfers.

Division 08 - Infrastructure, Quarries and Urban Development. Sub-Head 01: Personnel Expenditure, pages 82 to 83. Item 001: General Administration; 002: Maintenance of Roads; 003: Maintenance of Buildings; 004: Transport; 007: Mechanical Workshop.

Sub-Head 02: Goods and Services, pages, 83 to 86. Item 001: General Administration, 002: Maintenance of Roads. Member for Arouca/Lopinot.

Mr. Gonzales: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. Just to ensure that we are on the same page, I am at page 84, 002—

Mr. Chairman: Pages 84-85.

Mr. Gonzales: Thank you. 002: Maintenance, Sub-Item 09, Minister, Rent/Lease - Vehicles and Equipment. I observed that there is an increase in the allocation of \$4.4 million, can you indicate the reason for the increase in the allocation?

Hon. Tancoo: Sure. This increase in the allocation is to support expanded infrastructure works and to compensate for limited in-house machinery. Rental of vehicles and equipment is necessary to transport materials and workers to job sites for the maintenance of roadways, including patching, cleaning of drains, et cetera,

and also this increase will also cater for outstanding payments to contractors.

The THA anticipates approximately 100 service providers will be engaged and some of the projects include: the Guy street drainage programme; retaining walls at Les Coteaux, Adelphi Road, Ottley and Belmont Roads; soil stabilization at Smithfield and Lammy Roads; road and drainage works at Top Hill Road, Glamorgan, Philadelphia Road; and maintenance of roads throughout the four districts on the island including patching.

11.55 p.m.

Mr. Gonzales: Minister, thank you very much for your response. I observed under this Sub-Item, there is a lease—it also provides for the lease of vehicles and is that also being utilized to rent or lease vehicles for this exercise?

Hon. Tancoo: Yes.

Mr. Gonzales: So, I am asking the question, Minister, because under previous Items, there is a consistent reduction in the allocations for Maintenance of Vehicles. I would have raised the issue earlier on. But it is a bit curious that under this Item, you are seeing an increase in the allocation for the rental of vehicles. I am asking the question because perhaps it might be the THA—and you can clarify whether I am correct. Is it that the THA is looking to rent more vehicles, as opposed to maintaining their current fleet?

Hon. Tancoo: Member, I will respond to it just because you have asked it. I have indicated before that the THA intends to reevaluate its method of operation, including looking at the rental of vehicles. In this particular Item under the Maintenance of Roads, yes, they are already renting vehicles under this line Item. Vehicles and equipment are being rented by this line Item.

Mr. Gonzales: Minister, also, at Item 12: Materials and Supplies, another increase by \$3 million. Can you explain the reason for the increase in the

allocation under this Item?

Hon. Tancoo: Sure. Continuous maintenance and repair work across all districts, that is what this increase is for: To treat with the escalation of material cost, including PPE; a greater demand for infrastructural support for all communities, including drainage works at Guy Street; retaining wall construction at Les Coteaux, Adelphi Road, Ottley and Belmont Road; soil stabilization/works at Smithfield and Lammy Road; road and drainage works, Top Hill Road, Glamorgan, Philadelphia Road; and again, maintenance of roads throughout the districts of the island.

Mr. Gonzales: Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: 003: Maintenance of Buildings; 004: Transport Division; 007: Mechanical Workshop. Sub-Head 03: Minor Equipment Purchases, pages 86 to 87; Item 001: General Administration; 002: Maintenance of Roads; 003: Maintenance of Buildings; 004: Transport; 007: Mechanical Workshop; Sub-Head 04: Current Transfers and Subsidies, page 88; Item 005: Non-Profit Institutions; Item 006: Households; 009: Other Transfers.

Division 10 - Health, Wellness and Social Protection, pages 89 to 90.
Personnel Expenditure.

Ms. Beckles: Chair?

Mr. Chairman: Yes.

Ms. Beckles: Under Personnel Expenditure—we are at 89, yes?

Mr. Chairman: Yes.

Ms. Beckles: Okay, hon. Minister, I see a decrease in \$3 million at 08 for Vacant Posts. Yes?

Hon. Tancoo: Member, just to confirm this is—you are referring to line Item 08: Vacant Posts- Salaries & COLA (without incumbents)?

Ms. Beckles: Yes, thank you.

Hon. Tancoo: Member, we will provide that information to you in writing.

Mr. Chairman: Item 002: Hospitals; 003: Health Centres; 004: Public Health and the Environment; 005: Social Services. Sub-Head 002: Goods and Services, pages 90 to 95; Item 001: General Administration; 002: Hospital; 003: Health Centres; 004: Public Health and the Environment.

Mr. Gonzales: Chairman?

Mr. Chairman: Yes, Member for Arouca/Lopinot.

Mr. Gonzales: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. Minister, Item 28: Other Contracted Services, I observed that there is an increase by \$6.2 million. Can you state the specific reason for the increase in the allocation under this Item?

Hon. Tancoo: Sure. Member, the present allocation is inadequate to meet the payments for the existing scavenging contracts and therefore, a supplemental amount would have had to be covered or added to cover the outstanding arrears.

Mr. Gonzales: Minister, do you have debt being carried over from the previous financial year?

Hon. Tancoo: Yes, there are some arrears.

Mr. Gonzales: Can you state the extent of the liabilities?

Hon. Tancoo: You will have to provide that you in writing.

Mr. Gonzales: So, just to confirm, Minister, that even with the increased allocation of \$6.2 million, it will not allow the THA to settle outstanding arrears under the Item?

Hon. Tancoo: No, no, this figure will help with the arrears and should be sufficient for the purposes of the THA. However, as indicated before, should more be required, the Tobago House of Assembly can vire within various Heads and/or approach the central government.

Mr. Gonzales: Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: 005: Social Services; 007: Probation Services; 008: Litter Eradication Programme; 009 Gender Affairs; 010 Emergency Social and Medical Assistance Unit. Sub-Head 03, pages 95 to 96, Minor Equipment Purchases; Item 001: General Administration; 003: Health Centres; 004: Public Health and the Environment; 005: Social Services; 008: Litter Eradication Programme; 009: Gender Affairs; 010: Emergency Social and Medical Assistance Unit.

Sub-Head 04: Current Transfers and Subsidies, pages 96 to 97, inclusive; Item 005: Non-Profit Institutions; 007: Households; 009: Other Transfers.

Division 11 - Settlement, Public Utilities and Rural Development. Sub-Head 01, page 98, Personnel Expenditure; Item 001: General Administration, Arouca/Lopinot.

Mr. Gonzales: Thank you very, Mr. Chair. Minister, I observed under 001, as well as Item 04, there are decreases to the tune of, perhaps, \$4 million. Under 001: General Administration, \$2.6 million decreased, as well as Allowances - Monthly Paid Officers, a further decrease—Salaries and Cost of Living Allowance by \$2.1 million. Can you explain the reasons?

Hon. Tancoo: Member, the decrease that you refer to you is not \$4-point-whatever million you have referenced, but just for the clarification, I had indicated earlier on in the session, in response to a query, I believe, by one of your colleagues lower down the Bench, that in a lot of these instances where there were increases in the Revised Estimate and then a subsequent drop, it would have been because of the payment of the SRC arrears. That currently holds as the same answer for this as well.

Mr. Gonzales: I see. Thank you.

12.05 p.m.

Mr. Chairman: 002: Settlements; 004: Electrical Inspectorate.

Sub-Head 02: Goods and Services, pages 99 to 101 inclusive. Item 001: General Administration; 002: Settlements; 004: Electrical Inspectorate; 005: Rural Development.

Sub-Head 03, pages 101 to 102. Item 001: General Administration; 002: Settlements; 004: Electrical Inspectorate; 005: Rural Development.

Sub-Head 04: Current Transfers and Subsidies. Item 007: Households at page 102. Item 009: Other Transfers.

Division 14 - Office of the Deputy Chief Secretary. Sub-Head 02: Goods and Services. Item 001: General Administration; 002: Diaspora Relations; 004: Foreign Direct Investment.

Sub-Head 04: Current Transfers and Subsidies. Page 104. Item 005: Current Subsidies and Transfers; Item 007: Households.

Hon. Members, we will now move on to the *Draft Estimates of Development Programme*, Consolidated Fund, pages 28 to 29, whilst I give Members a chance to open their books and the public servants to take their relevant seats. I propose to start now. A. Administrative Services; Item 002: Productive Sectors; I. Production and Marketing.

Hon. Members, Item 003: Economic Infrastructure spans seven pages, therefore, I will also announce the project groups. Item 003: Economic Infrastructure, B. Extension Services; D. Fishing; E. Forestry; F. Land Management Services; H. Research and Development; A. Electricity; A. Drainage and Irrigation; D. Tourism; G. Business Services. D. Road and Bridges; H. Sea Transport.

Item 004: Social Infrastructure, page 37. Hon. Members, Item 004: Social

Head 15: Tobago House of Assembly (cont'd)

Infrastructure spans 12 pages, therefore I will also announce the project groups. B. Primary, pages 37 to 38; C. Secondary, 38 to 39; E. Special Education, page 39; G. Educational Services, 39 to 41.

A. Hospitals, 42; B. Medical and Dental Centres, 42; C. Public Health Services, 42 to 43. B. Land Development, 44. A. Culture, 45; C. Sports, 45 to 46. A. Community Development, 47; C. Welfare Services, 47 to 48; D. Youth Development, 48 to 49. Item 005: Multi-Sectoral and Other Services, page 50. Hon. Members, Item 005: Multi-Sectoral and Other Services spans four pages therefore I will announce the project groups. A. Administrative Services, page 50; F. Public Buildings, pages 50 to 53; G. Equipment and Vehicles, page 53. Alright, I propose to put the question to the Committee.

Question put and agreed to.

Head 15 ordered to stand part of the Schedule.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Chairman: Minister of Finance, thank you very much to the public servants of Tobago and the Tobago offices of the Tobago House of Assembly. Thank you all very much and we are deeply sorry to have inconvenienced you and moved you up but we wish you goodbye and thank you very, very much for your outstanding efforts.

Head 16: Central Administrative Services Tobago, \$28,505,890.

Mr. Chairman: I will now invite the Minister of State in the Office of the Prime Minister to make a brief opening statement with the usual five-minute caveat.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Allahar: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and good afternoon to hon. Members. The Office of the Prime Minister, Central Administrative Services Tobago, commonly called OPM CAST, serves as a nexus for the delivery of Government

services to the people of Tobago, bridging national ministries and agencies with the island's communities through the provision of essential, administrative and meteorological services. It plays a vital role in ensuring that the policies, programmes and initiatives of the Government of Trinidad and Tobago are effectively implemented in Tobago.

One of these is, Mr. Chairman, the MET service, the Meteorological Services Division, which provides real-time accurate and reliable weather and climate data for the public i.e. tourism, health, agriculture and civil aviation, and private sector stakeholders such as hotels, dive shops and tour operators.

12.15 p.m.

With regard to the period 2025 to 2026, three new aspects of existing projects will be added to the current list of ICT PSIP projects. These are as follows: Application server development to provide resources for in-house development of information systems applications, intranet inventory management system to provide a digital platform to manage all OPM-CAST assets; and cyber-security training to ensure all ICT staff are exposed to modern cyber-security procedures and practices. Mr. Chairman, we shall be very happy to assist the Committee with any questions.

Question proposed: That Head 16 stand part of the Schedule.

Mr. Chairman: This sum of \$28,505,890 for Head 16: Central Administrative Services, Tobago, is comprised of moneys proposed for expenditure under the following Sub-Heads and Items to be found in the *Draft Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure*, and the *Draft Estimates of Development Programme*.

We will now proceed to the *Draft Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure*, which is to be found in that volume between pages 71 to 72. Sub-Head 01:

Personnel Expenditure; Item 001: General Administration; Item 002: Trade and Industry; Item 005: Meteorological Services; Item 007: Registrar General. Sub-Head 02: Goods and Services; Item 001: General Administration; Item 002: Trade and Industry; Item 005: Meteorological Services; Item 007: Registrar General. Sub-Head 03: Minor Equipment Purchases—pages 76 to 77. Item 001: General Administration; Item 005: Meteorological Services; Item 007: Registrar General. Sub-Head 04: Current Transfer and Subsidies; Item 005: Non-Profit Institutions; Item 007: Households.

Hon. Members, we will now move on to the *Draft Estimates of Development Programme*, Consolidated Fund. Item 005: Multi-Sectoral and Other Services, page 55. A. Administrative Services; F. Public Buildings; G. Equipment and Vehicles.

Question put and agreed to.

Head 16 ordered to stand part of the Schedule.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much, Minister, and thank you very much to the public officers who accompanied you.

Hon. Allahar: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Chairman: Members, we are ahead of time. I think we have made up, thankfully. I am very grateful to the Members. So, there is an indication that some time will be spent on this Head, so I propose to take the lunch break at this time, and we will return at 1.20 p.m. So we will suspend the Sitting now, and we will return at 1.20 p.m. Thank you very much.

12.20 p.m.: *Standing Finance Committee suspended.*

1.20p.m.: *Standing Finance Committee resumed.*

Mr. Chairman: Good afternoon. I trust everyone is well-rested and received

your sustenance. We resume this meeting of the Standing Finance Committee, and we proceed now to Head 61: Ministry of Housing.

Head 61: Ministry of Housing, \$637,044,000.

Mr. Chairman: I will now invite the Minister of Housing to make a brief opening statement.

Hon. Lee: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and hon. Members of this Committee. Today, we stand before you, not merely as the Ministers of Housing—and I want to introduce my line Minister, Minister Phillip Alexander, who is with me today—but as a servant of the people charged with the sacred responsibility of restoring dignity to thousands of citizens who for too long have lived without a place to truly call home.

Housing is not static. It is the heartbeat of family life. It is a foundation upon which dreams are built and generations find stability. When we fix housing, we fix communities, and when we fix communities, we fix a nation. This fiscal year, our Ministry has been allocated \$662 million, let me be clear, every cent of that allocation will be mobilized with purpose, accountability, and transparency. The days of empty promises, inflated contracts, and political patronage masquerading as housing delivery are over.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Lee: We are building, not only structures of concrete and steel, but foundations of hope, integrity, and opportunity. Mr. Chairman, our citizens have endured years of waiting lists and bureaucratic silence. They have been told to wait their turn while seeing corruption and inefficiency take precedent over fairness, and that era must end now.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Lee: Our Government is determined to deliver 20,000 new affordable homes

through public-private partnerships and innovative financing mechanisms, a bold targeted goal that is not wishful thinking but of a strategic costed plan embedded in the *Public Sector Investment Programme*. We will prioritize the most vulnerable, young families struggling to get their start, single mothers striving for independence, and senior citizens seeking security in their later years.

Mr. Chairman, the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development is not only rebuilding, but we are reinventing the model. We are integrating climate-resilient building designs, green technology, and local construction innovation to meet both environmental and economic imperatives. Every home we construct will carry the spirit of sustainability because our duty is not only to today's home owners, but tomorrow's children who will inherit the earth they live on.

For every house we build, there is a story of a family that will sleep peacefully for the first time in years. For every contract we clean up, there is a message that corruption will no longer rob the poor of their future. For every loan we approve, there is a citizen empowered to build, to dream, to belong. This is what Budget 2025/2026 stands for: Restoration, reform, and resilience, and that is what this PSIP reinforces, a new era of governance built on efficiency, equity, and execution.

Mr. Chairman, hon. Members, the Ministry of Housing stands ready, not only to account for the \$662 million allocation, but to account to the people for its results. We will not measure success by press releases or photo ops, but by keys handed over, lives transformed, and communities reborn. The era of talking about housing is over. The era of delivering houses has begun. I thank you, Mr. Chairman.

1:25 p.m.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Question proposed: That Head 61 stand part of the Schedule.

Mr. Chairman: This sum of \$637,044,000, for Head 61 Ministry of Housing is comprised of moneys proposed for expenditure under the following Sub-Heads and Items to be found in the *Draft Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure*, the *Draft Estimates of the Revenue and Expenditure of the Statutory Boards and Similar Bodies and of the Tobago House of Assembly*, and the *Draft Estimates of the Development Programme*. We shall now consider the *Draft Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure*, which is to be found in the relevant volume at page 344. We start with Sub-Head 01: Personnel Expenditure, Item 001: General Administration. Diego Martin North/East.

Mr. Imbert: Could the Minister indicate the total number of positions in the Ministry and how many are vacant?

Hon. Lee: Thank you, Member. We have 92 positions in the Ministry, 50 are filled, and there are 38 vacant, 28 with bodies and 10 without bodies.

Mr. Imbert: Do you intend to fill any vacancies in 2026?

Hon. Lee: Yes, Member, we have been working closely with the service commission in filling those bodies.

Mr. Imbert: All right. Your allocation has been reduced by \$1.8 million. How are you filling a single vacancy?

Hon. Lee: We realize that the allocation has been less this year, Member, and if required, we will vire where necessary.

Mr. Imbert: If required?

Hon. Lee: If required based on if—

Mr. Imbert: It is required.

Hon. Lee:—we get the bodies from the service commission, we will vire where necessary or at mid-year review, we will make the necessary request.

Mr. Imbert: So, currently, you do not have an allocation to fill a single vacancy?

Hon. Lee: Say that again?

Mr. Imbert: Under this line Item 01/001/01, there are insufficient funds, and you will not be able to fill a single vacancy with this allocation here under 01.

Hon. Lee: Well, that is your premonition.

Mr. Imbert: Mine? It is less than last year.

Hon. Lee: That is your strategic understanding.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Mr. Imbert: Look, do not talk like National Security for me, please. Okay, fine.

Mr. Chairman: St. Ann's East.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. On the same line Item, which is 01, if the expenditure for 2025 was \$11 million, how come it is only \$9 million for this year? Is it that people have gone home and not been replaced? Why are you spending less this year?

Hon. Lee: Well, as I said, Member, we have 50 presently employed in— [*Inaudible*] We have 38 vacant, 28 with bodies, and I will repeat again, if there is funding that will be required, we will get it via virement from different line Items. And if not, we will approach the Minister of Finance where necessary.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: I understand the answer that you gave. I am just asking, is it that some persons have left the Ministry at the time? Because if you spent \$11 million in the last fiscal, and you are spending almost \$2 million less, is it that persons have left and have not been replaced by the service commission?

Hon. Lee: Well, no one has left since we have been in charge. So it is the same amount of employees that are there.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: But Minister, if you have the same number of employees, how are you going to spend less on salaries?

Hon. Lee: Well, as I said, Member, we realized that there might be a shortfall, right, but there were some SRC—

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: Well, there definitely will be a shortfall.

Hon. Lee: Wait, wait, wait, wait. There might be a shortfall, but they have some SRC arrears that were paid in the last fiscal. So that is why you might see a reduction there.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: So, how many SRC employees do you have paid out of this line Item?

Hon. Lee: Four, Member. Four staff members.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: Four out of the 120-something?

Hon. Lee: Four out of the—?

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: Okay, thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Diego Martin North/East.

Mr. Imbert: Same line Item. Minister, you may or may not be aware that a virement is a movement of funds from within your own allocation. Your total allocation has been cut by almost \$100 million in 2026, from 684 to 588. Where, therefore, could you possibly vire any money since you have \$100 million less?

Hon. Lee: I made a general statement.

Mr. Imbert: But you said you are going to vire to hire people, but where are you viring from? All your allocations are cut.

Hon. Lee: We do magic.

Mr. Imbert: Magic, okay, thank you. Good answer, good answer. [*Laughter*]

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Imbert: Good answer, good answer. [*Laughter*]

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping and laughter*]

Mr. Chairman: Laventille West.

Mr. Marcelle: Asked and answered, Chair.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. Goods and Services, Item 001: General Administration. San Fernando East, first.

Mr. Manning: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Looking at line Item 16: Contract Employment. I see there has been an increase of \$900,000 here. Exactly what is that employment meant for?

Hon. Lee: Yes, Member, there is an increase of \$900,000. What was the question again?

Mr. Manning: Repeat? Sorry, yes, line Item 16: Contract Employment, I see there is an increase of about \$900,000. The estimate in 2026 is \$5 million. What exactly is that employment for?

Hon. Lee: Under Contract Employment, we have positions for 61 employees, contract positions. We have 19 filled and 42 vacant.

Mr. Manning: There are 42 vacant? In what areas?

Hon. Lee: The 42 vacant: We have 18 in the Housing Programme Facilitation and Implementation Unit; 11 in the Corporate Communications Unit; Procurement Unit, two; PMCEU, one; Legal Services Unit, one; Information Technology Services Division, four.

Mr. Manning: And you intend to fill all of these positions in this fiscal year?

Hon. Lee: Yeah, we are hoping to fill all of the positions. Thank you, Member.

Mr. Chairman: Laventille West.

Mr. Marcelle: Deeply grateful, Chairman. To the hon. Minister, line Item, about 16 first, 02/001/16: Contract Employment, can the hon. Minister indicate whether the three Ministers' Secretariats are included in this line Item?

Hon. Lee: Yes, it is.

Mr. Marcelle: How many positions were increased specifically as it relates to the

Ministers' Secretariat?

Hon. Lee: It is 16; 11 have been filled and five are vacant out of the 16.

Mr. Marcelle: Alright. So, in the last fiscal, how many vacancies were there concerning the Ministers' Secretariat, not only your Secretariat but your other two junior Ministers?

Hon. Lee: Repeat what you just asked.

Mr. Marcelle: In fiscal 2025, there were less Ministers in the Ministry and therefore the vacancies would not have been the same as compared to this year. So I am asking what the difference is, in terms of the quantum, what the amount of the vacant or available positions in 2025 is, as compared to now, in 2026, please.

Hon. Lee: I will have to get it in writing for you, but in the last fiscal, you would have had three Ministers joining from August 28th approximately, and in the last administration, they would have had at least two that I recall.

Hon. Lee: So, I will accept the same in writing, please. Line Item 02/001/04: Electricity, I am seeing a decrease of \$353,000, but I am seeing in the Revised Estimate last year, there was an allocation of \$803,000. Could the hon. Minister, indicate the rationale for this decrease in the Electricity allocation?

1.35 p.m.

Hon. Lee: Yes, Member. Based on the information I have here, there were some arrears outstanding that was paid off in the last fiscal, and that is why there is a decrease in the allocation this year.

Mr. Marcelle: Deeply grateful. Line Item 02/001/08: Rent/Lease - Office Accommodation and Storage, I am seeing a decrease of \$1.3 million. Can the hon. Minister indicate, given the decrease in allocation, whether the Ministry intends to reduce its rent or lease of office accommodation and storage in fiscal 2026, please?

Hon. Lee: No, no, no, Member. We are based there on South Quay. That is the

Ministry's location.

Mr. Marcelle: What would have accounted for the \$5 million allocation in 2020?

Hon. Lee: Fiscals. They had some arrears owing.

Mr. Marcelle: Arrears owing? Deeply grateful, please, Minister.

Mr. Chairman: Port of Spain South.

Mr. Scotland SC: The question was asked and answered.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much. Malabar/Mausica.

Mr. Romain: Thank you, Chair. To the Minister, the discontinuance of the three special purpose companies under the HDC, will that impact on rent?

Hon. Lee: Just repeat that question, Member.

Mr. Romain: The three special purpose companies under the HDC—

Hon. Lee: The three special—what line Item is that?

Mr. Romain: Under Rent/Lease - Office Accommodation and Storage—

Hon. Lee: Under Rent/Lease - Office Accommodation and Storage.

Mr. Romain:—08.

Hon. Lee: No, this rent is just for the Ministry of Housing.

Mr. Romain: Okay. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Member for Diego Martin Central.

Mr. de Nobriga: Thank you, Chair. To the line Minister, Minister: You previously informed my colleague, with regard to Contract Employment, that the increase in \$900,000, you were hoping to fill your 42 vacant positions utilizing that \$900,000. Minister, I am sure you will recognize that if you try to do that, it would be impossible to do so with only \$900,000. Where are you going to be able to find the additional funds to fill those 42 vacant positions?

Hon. Lee: Well, Member, as you are aware, we have allocated in this line Item Contract Employment, \$5 million, an increase of \$900,000. While we have on the

establishment 61 positions available, depending on if we can fill all those positions, the 42 that are vacant, also we would have to look at, if we cannot fill those positions, either vire money from different line Items, or we hire to fit the funding that we have received.

Mr. de Nobriga: Chair, if I could continue? So, have you all established a priority listing in your Ministry for those positions you hope to fill first?

Hon. Lee: So, for example, Member, out of the 61 contract employment positions, there was an implementation unit called the Housing Programme Facilitation and Implementation Unit of 18 vacant positions. That unit has been transferred to the Office of the Prime Minister. So, again, when you remove those 18 positions from the original 61 that was identified, that funding that we have received will be very sufficient to fill the remaining vacant positions.

Mr. Romain: So, Minister, just to clarify, when you said you had 42 vacant, you included those 18, but you no longer have those 18?

Hon. Lee: Correct. Because at the time when this budget was done, the Housing Programme Facilitation and Implementation Unit was part of the budget intake. And so, since then, there has been a realignment, and that unit is now placed under the Office of the Prime Minister.

Mr. de Nobriga: So, Minister, given what you said, you now have—what is that?—24?

Hon. Lee: If you minus 18 from 42. If you minus the 18 from the 42 vacant.

Mr. de Nobriga: Yes, Minister. So, having done that—

Hon. Lee: So, the 24 that is vacant, we feel confident that the funding that we have received will cater for all the vacant positions.

Mr. de Nobriga: So, your now 24 vacant, you expect would be covered by \$900,000 for these?

Hon. Lee: Yes, Member.

Mr. de Nobriga: Minister, just one last question, Chair, if you do not mind. That implementation unit, was that connected to the HVIP, the Housing Village Improvement Programme?

Hon. Lee: No. No, Member. From what I have been told, no.

Mr. de Nobriga: So, what exactly did that unit do?

Hon. Lee: Housing grants.

Mr. de Nobriga: The housing grants. Thank you, Minister.

Mr. Chairman: Sub-Head 03: Minor Equipment Purchases; Item 001: General Administration. Member for Laventille West.

Mr. Marcelle: Deeply grateful, Chairman. Hon. Minister, line Item 03/001/01: Vehicles. I am seeing an allocation of \$30,000 allocated only for this fiscal year. Can the hon. Minister indicate what is the purpose of this \$30,000 allocation for Vehicles?

Hon. Lee: I did not hear that, Member.

Mr. Marcelle: 03/001/01.

Hon. Lee: I have been told it is to purchase a tray. I am assuming a tray for one of the pick-ups—for one of the housing vehicles, the pick-up, the tray.

Mr. Marcelle: Deeply grateful.

Mr. Chairman: Sub-Head 04: Current Transfers and Subsidies; Item 007: Households; Item 009: Other Transfers. Member for Diego Martin North/East.

Mr. Imbert: Minister, I notice the allocation for the HDC has been cut by almost \$30 million. How are you going to manage with that reduction?

Hon. Lee: Well, Member, I think you would be aware that this allocation of \$488 million—let me just back up a bit. The 2024 allocation was \$791 million; 2025, Revised figure, \$518 million; and the 2026 Estimate is \$488,916,000. The bulk of

that allocation, as you would be aware, is to pay loans for HDC. Out of that \$488.9 million, all that is given for operational expenses for HDC is \$32.4 million. Out of that \$488.9 million, the balance is really, as you would be aware, to pay back loans on the HDC side.

Mr. Imbert: Okay. What is that \$32 million for, the balance?

Hon. Lee: The \$32.4 million?

Mr. Imbert: Yes.

Hon. Lee: Well, it is to assist with operational—HDC, pay salaries, et cetera.

Mr. Imbert: Salaries?

Hon. Lee: Which do not meet all the salaries, but it is a subvention within the HDC organization to meet some of their operational expenses.

Mr. Imbert: So that \$32 million is consumed dealing with operational expenses of the HDC?

Hon. Lee: Correct.

Mr. Imbert: None of it is left over to build a single house?

Hon. Lee: None of it?

Mr. Imbert: None of it is left over to build a single house. It is a yes or no question.**Hon. Lee:** What do you mean by that?

Mr. Imbert: All right. You said of the \$488 million, most of it, a real most, not the other “kinda” of most, is for—

Hon. Lee: What kind of most?

Mr. Imbert: A real most. A real most.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping and laughter*]

Mr. Imbert: Not a half of the most, majority.

Hon. Lee: I did not move any hands. I did not move any hands.

Mr. Imbert: So, you said most of the \$488 million is for debt service.

Hon. Lee: Correct.

Mr. Imbert: Correct?

Hon. Lee: Correct.

Mr. Imbert: And what remains is approximately \$32 million. You said \$32.4 million.

Hon. Lee: Correct.

Mr. Imbert: Right. And I am asking you—well, I asked you, and you answered, that that \$32.4 million is spent assisting with the operational expenses of the Housing Development Corporation. You said, yes, right?

Hon. Lee: Yes.

Mr. Imbert: And therefore, not \$1 of this \$488 million will be used to build a single house.

Hon. Lee: No, that is not true.

Mr. Imbert: Okay. Well then, which one of the dollars?

Hon. Lee: You know HDC is a company.

Mr. Imbert: “Uh-huh”.

Hon. Lee: It is mostly self-sufficient.

Mr. Imbert: Self-sufficient?

Hon. Lee: Yeah.

Mr. Imbert: You really mean that?

Hon. Lee: Yes.

Mr. Imbert: Seriously?

Hon. Lee: You know that HDC builds houses, rents houses—

Mr. Imbert: You are running a deficit every month and you are saying that?

Hon. Lee: What is that?

Mr. Imbert: You are running a deficit every month and you are saying that?

Anyhow, let me crystalize—

Hon. Lee: How are you aware—

Mr. Imbert: Let me crystalize my question.

Hon. Lee: Why are you aware—

Mr. Imbert: Before the Minister of Finance tries to divert, let me crystalize my question.

Hon. Lee: Crystalize it.

Mr. Imbert: How much of the balance of \$32 million will be spent paying contractors to build houses for the HDC?

Hon. Lee: Well, HDC is a company that builds houses and sells houses. And it is a cycle, Member. You are well aware that we sell—

Mr. Imbert: But out of the \$32 million, how much will go to contractors?

Hon. Lee: We are building houses and selling houses, and the profit that we sell it at goes back into HDC to—

Mr. Imbert: Profit?

Hon. Lee: Yes.

Mr. Imbert: You do not make any profit.

Hon. Lee: You see, you did not make a profit before.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Imbert: You do not make any profit.

Mr. Imbert: Minister—

Hon. Lee: We are going to turn HDC—

Mr. Imbert: Minister, stop dodging the question.

Hon. Lee: We are going to turn HDC—

1.45 p.m.

Mr. Imbert: Could you confirm that of the 488 million, none of this will be used

to pay a contractor to build a single house?

Mr. Lee: I am not confirming that.

Mr. Imbert: That is what you just said.

Mr. Lee: Alright. No problem. I did not say that.

Mr. Imbert: It is alright. It is okay. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Port of Spain South.

Mr. Scotland SC: Mr. Chairman, I am taking a little time of my five minutes run-up, because I have a theme, as it relates to the next line Item 009/11: Port of Spain Shopping Complex. Hon. Minister, I have looked at your entire budgetary allocations, and Mr. Chairman, I have seen a theme running through that Port of Spain either is cut completely or reduced. Could you confirm, to start, that for the Port of Spain Shopping Complex, the allocation has been decreased by almost 40 per cent from 5 million to 2 million? Could you confirm if that is in fact what it is?

Dr. Lee: From seven to five.

Mr. Scotland SC: From seven to five? Pardon me?

Dr. Lee: Yes. There is a decrease of \$2 million.

Mr. Scotland SC: Almost 40 per cent. What services will be affected by this massive decrease?

Dr. Lee: As you will be aware that this is a Port of Spain Complex—some malls that are presently been under that purview. Specifically, two existing malls.

Mr. Scotland SC: I know.

Dr. Lee: One mall is under construction. You have the old Charlotte Street Mall, and then one is on Independence Square. Alright.

Mr. Scotland SC: Yes.

Mr. Lee: The other one is under construction.

Mr. Scotland SC: Yes. I am coming to that under the relevant Item.

Mr. Lee: So, presently, Member, under this new administration, we have taken the way forward, is to review that whole entire Port of Spain Shopping Complex to see how—we know that there are some issues there. We are looking at it, and identifying—we are doing an audit in those particular areas, we feel that we are not getting value for money, and it needs to be restructured, and that is what we are presently doing.

So, if there is a need for any further funding, we will do the necessary thing, and approach the Minister of Finance, to see how best we can get that increased funding. If there is a need for it.

Mr. Scotland SC: I am grateful for that long answer, but my discrete question to you is, bearing in mind that there is an actual cut now, you must have of course, interrogated this cut to see what you are cutting. What is accounted for, in this \$2 million shortfall? What services, what area, what aspect is accounted for with this?

Mr. Lee: Well, in one particular area without getting too much into the details, was the security aspect of the malls that the security firms that were in place, we had some issues there. There is an investigation taking place on the contracts of those securities, and that along with other contracts, so that is why we feel that the funding that we are receiving presently, is sufficient at this point in time.

Mr. Scotland SC: Is it that you are going to cut the provision of security services?

Mr. Lee: No. I will just give you a case in point, Member. One of the security firms that were hired, was charging the mall for armed guards, and that security firm was not licensed to carrying firearms.

Mr. Scotland SC: Alright. So, and therefore, and tell me, is it then that you have accounted. That is one aspect. What is the other? So, is this 2 million just for security? What are the other aspects that would have accounted for, an almost 40 per cent reduction?

Mr. Lee: Member, there are other areas, I do not think it would be wise for me to go into, at this point in time.

Mr. Scotland SC: So, you are saying, this \$2 million cut from the Port of Spain Shopping Complex, and these are the two existing ones. This has nothing to do with the new one that is being built. Correct?

Mr. Lee: Member, the \$5 million that we have received, will assist. The Port of Spain Shopping Complex malls will not suffer. Presently, and if after the review is completed, and there is more funding that is required, I am sure I have a very generous Minister of Finance, and a people's Minister of Finance.

Mr. Scotland SC: Well, he is not generous.

Dr. Lee: So, we do not foresee that problem.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Scotland SC: Chairman, I am not taking that the answer to the only specific item has been identified, is security somebody say, "Dey have gun, and dey are not licensed to carry gun". We will come around to the other items when we— [*Inaudible*] those are my questions for this line Item, please, Chairman.

Mr. Chairman: Laventille West.

Mr. Marcelle: Deeply grateful, Chairman. Hon. Minister, line Item 009/11: Port of Spain Shopping Complex. Could the hon. Minister indicate, in last fiscal whether any staff members as compared to the reduction of the 2 million, whether any staff in particular would be affected?

Mr. Lee: The same staffing when we came on board, and we met they are presently still there, we do not have any plans at this point in time to reduce staff.

Mr. Chairman: Malabar/Mausica.

Mr. Romain: Thank you, Chair. Under line Item 009/11: Port of Spain Shopping Complex. Could the Minister indicate if this allocation includes, funds for

property and casualty insurance as well as Workman's Compensation, and Public Liability for the two malls?

Mr. Lee: Yes, Member. I have been advised.

Mr. Romain: Could the Minister indicate, whether or not that liability has been satisfied for the last fiscal? Or is it still in arrears?

Mr. Lee: Member, we have to check that, and I will get back to you in writing.

Mr. Romain: Thank you. Minister.

Mr. Chairman: Laventille East/Morvant. San Fernando—is it that you are conceding your question to San Fernando East?

Mr. Birchwood: Yes.

Mr. Chairman: San Fernando East.

Mr. Manning: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Minister of Housing, did you realize that every HDC unit constructed are subsidized by the state to some degree? Can you tell us the degree of that subsidy?

Mr. Chairman: I think I am going to intervene there. What line Item is that?

Mr. Manning: That is 009/01: Trinidad and Tobago Housing Development.

Mr. Chairman: Member, that question does not arise on this line Item. I broke down how the line Item expands. The Member for Diego Martin North/East knows this. He is smiling. Alright. Let us move on. Port of Spain South. Do you have other question?

Mr. Manning: Yes, please.

Mr. Chairman: Yes. Go ahead.

Mr. Manning: Is any of this line Item under HDC, dedicated to the repair of existing HDC units? For example, we have challenges in Tarodale, Corinth close in San Fernando East. Is any of these line Items indicated to the repair—

Mr. Chairman: Member, let me help you. As you go along, you might see a line

Item that you might want to pose that question under, but this does not apply under this one.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Manning: Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Port of Spain South.

Mr. Scotland SC: You indicated, hon. Minister, in answer to me just a while ago that, the issue of the Port of Spain Shopping Complex is under review. Could you tell us, is there a team that has been set up to do this review? You do not know?

Dr. Lee: Member, there is a team set up with the PS' guidance from the Ministry of Housing.

Mr. Scotland SC: Any of the actual stakeholders, like the owners or the concessionaires, will they be part of that team or will you all be doing that without their input?

Dr. Lee: I am sure we will seek—you know there is a rental association law, tenants association, and the head of that, I am sure, will be part of that committee.

Mr. Scotland SC: Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Laventille West.

Mr. Marcelle: Deeply grateful, Mr. Chair. Hon. Minister, you indicated a short while ago relative to line Item 009/11. When I asked the question whether any employees from last fiscal, and this fiscal would have been reduced, but no employees were in fact affected. There have been public reports of some 11 workers under the Port of Spain Shopping Complex, more specifically the East Side Plaza.

1.55 p.m.

Are you able to confirm whether these employees, one, were in fact terminated or not? And two, if not, whether the provisions for their employment

was derived from this line Item?

Hon. Lee: Member, I have been told that if certain contracts, employee contracts, had ended—but let me get back to you on that. But I am not aware that under our tenureship in six months that anyone has been terminated. But I will get back to you and confirm that in writing.

Mr. Marcelle: Deeply grateful.

Mr. Chairman: Malabar/Mausica.

Mr. Birchwood: Thank you, Chair. Final question on 11, Port of Spain Shopping Complex, is there a new board in place yet for this facility?

Hon. Lee: We are still awaiting to put a board in place.

Mr. Birchwood: Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Item 011: Transfers to State Enterprises. Laventille West.

Mr. Marcelle: Deeply grateful, please, Chairman. Hon. Minister, line Item 011/16: East Port of Spain Development Limited. Can the hon. Minister indicate whether under this line Item, a remuneration for board members is paid through this line Item?

Hon. Lee: Yes, Member.

Mr. Marcelle: Can the hon. Minister indicate whether there is a board in place for the East Port of Spain Development Company?

Hon. Lee: No, that board has not been put in place as yet.

Mr. Marcelle: Can the hon. Minister indicate, in terms of this fiscal year, how the East Port of Spain Development Company would be able to operate in terms of providing the goods and services under the company without a board? Or whether it would impede it.

Hon. Lee: Member, a board will be put in place very shortly.

Mr. Marcelle: Deeply grateful. Deeply grateful, please.

Mr. Chairman: San Fernando East.

Mr. Manning: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Under this same line Item, East Port of Spain Development Company, what is planned for this expenditure for the next fiscal year?

Hon. Lee: Member, just repeat your question, I just want to make sure—

Mr. Manning: For the same line Item, East Port of Spain Development Company Limited, I see you have an Estimate of 14.4 million. How is that intended to be spent?

Hon. Lee: That is for operational expenses.

Mr. Chairman: Sub-Head 06: Current Transfers to Statutory Boards and Similar Bodies, page 347. Item 004: Statutory Boards. Hon. Members —San Fernando East.

Mr. Manning: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I see here—

Mr. Chairman: [*Inaudible*] I am going on to the—that is just a summary, so I am going on to call the line Items now, so. Hon. Members, we shall now move to the *Draft Estimates of Revenue and Expenditure of the Statutory Boards and Similar Bodies and of the Tobago House of Assembly*. 18: Sugar Industries Labour Welfare Fund Administration; Sub-Head 01, page 431. Personnel Expenditure: Item 001: General Administration, to be found at page 431. Sub-Head 02: Goods and Services; Item 001: General Administration; Sub-Head 03: Minor Equipment Purchases. We flip the page now to page 432, Item 001: General Administration.

Hon. Members, we will now move on to the *Draft Estimates of Development Programme*, Consolidated Fund at page 153. The Item is 004, the heading is Social Infrastructure. And we are now on to D. Housing Estates at page 153. Diego Martin North/East.

Mr. Imbert: Minister, I see your allocation under the Consolidated Fund

Development Programme for 2026 has been slashed by 23 per cent. I note that under D. 075: Rehabilitation and Maintenance of HDC Rental Apartments and Housing Units, your allocation has been chopped by 50 per cent. Now, these are ageing units, some of them very old, some of them from back around the Second World War. How are you going to maintain the stock of HDC rental apartments and housing units with \$30 million less in 2026 than in 2025? And, please do not tell me magic.

Hon. Lee: Thank you, Member. Let me just put it in respect to—the HDC has a rental database of approximately 8,500—

Mr. Imbert: How many?

Hon. Lee: Eighty five hundred.

Mr. Imbert: Eight thousand five hundred?

Hon. Lee: Yeah, 8,500—

Mr. Imbert: “Mm-hmm.”

Hon. Lee:—and as you rightly know, some dating back to World War II.

Mr. Imbert: “Mm-hmm.”

Hon. Lee: Right. Yes, the allocations have been reduced considerably, but I just want to state for the record, Chairman, HDC will continue to meet the obligations to its clients. Over the past 10 years, Member for Diego Martin North/East, maintenance contracts were given out to friends, families and financiers without proper tendering process—

Hon. Member: [*Interruption*]

Hon. Lee:—and in flagrant disregard for the OPR rules—let me just finish. All contracts will now be subject to competitive tendering and will use the savings to supplement the allocation.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Lee: So while you see—according to your words, a drastic cut.

Mr. Imbert: 50 per cent is not drastic?

Hon. Lee: 50 per cent—

Mr. Imbert: Okay. I guess that is an opinion—

Hon. Lee:—we feel that the corruption—

Mr. Imbert:—not a fact.

Hon. Lee:—in the maintenance contracts and how they were being awarded, Member, we feel very strongly that this amount that we have received will make the maintenance be able to supplement it or do the maintenance as required.

Now, within the rental agreement and rental units, Member, I want to say to you that we have identified certain of those rental units, their roofs need to be repaired, which we consider a high priority item, and we will be tackling those areas, those roofs of those rental units as a priority for HDC. But again, I want to say that we feel strongly based on what we have found and how the awarding of maintenance contracts over the last 10 years leaves much to be desired for the taxpayers of this country.

Mr. Imbert: Well, I have a supplemental. Under the period 2010 to 2015, the cost of an HDC house, the construction costs moved from 400,000 to 1.3 million under the last UNC incarnation. So you have a record of quadrupling costs, not reducing them.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Imbert:—but be that as it may, be that as it may, based on your answer, based on your answer, that you intend to engage in capital—

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Imbert: Would you all stop it? You all intend to engage in capital maintenance. That is what replacement of a roof is. Capital maintenance, yeah,

capital maintenance, that is what replacement of a roof is. What part of this \$30 million will be spent on that type of maintenance, capital maintenance?

Hon. Lee: [*Inaudible*]—prioritize as high priority those capital expenditure with the roof repairs.

Mr. Imbert: Yeah, how much of the \$30 million?

Hon. Lee: How much?

Mr. Imbert: Yeah.

Hon. Lee: I cannot tell you at this point in time—

Mr. Imbert: “Yuh doh know.”

Hon. Lee:—right, because we do proper OPR, we do proper contract awards, and that has to be put in place—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Imbert: Okay.

Hon. Lee:—for awards, awarding of contracts are given out—

Mr. Imbert: Based on you answer I have another supplemental.

Hon. Lee:—so it would be remiss of me to be able to give you that figure at this point in time.

2.05 p.m.

Mr. Imbert: That is okay, that is okay. Based on your answer, and assuming that it is half of the most, and you are using 15 million for that, are you aware that the amount you will have left over to maintain each unit will be just over \$1,000? What can you do with \$1,000?

Hon. Lee: The other aspect, Member, as you will be aware, a lot of the HDC sites have not been properly handed over, and vested in a homeowner’s association.

Mr. Imbert: So you do not have maintenance responsibilities in those instances?

Mr. Hosein: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. Lee: “How yuh mean in de instances?”

Mr. Imbert: Mr. Chairman, I am talking to the Minister. I am trying to have a serious conversation, and despite the little banter, the Minister is trying to be serious. Could you ask Barataria/San Juan to stop interrupting with frivolity? Let us just move on, Minister.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Imbert: Let us move on. I am just asking a question.

Hon. Lee: Yes.

Mr. Imbert: If half of the 30 billion is for capital maintenance, the amount left over per unit, using your figures, will be just over \$1,000. And now you are talking about problems with the homeowner associations and so on. Are you saying that you are not going to maintain units that are not part of a proper homeowner association?

Hon. Lee: No, no, no, I never said that, Member.

Mr. Imbert: Okay, I am just trying to understand what you are saying.

Hon. Lee: We know that the maintenance of HDC housing areas, some of which are very difficult with respect to maintenance. We inherited that, alright? So, with the new board that we have in place, the chairman and the board are working very—[*Inaudible*—]with the management of HDC to put together a strategic—not mostly—strategic policy decision to ensure that maintenance in those HDC sites that they have been having difficulty with, that we inherited, is done on a more timely and speedy intervention to ensure that those HDC sites are given the responsibility and given the urgency that is required. Yes, we all agree that we have problems in those HDC sites that we inherited, and we can get into the reasons for it, but I do not think that is what we are here to do.

Mr. Imbert: Well, I am interested to learn that you are doing all these wonderful

things with half “de” money from last year, but okay, we will see.

Hon. Member: No corruption—[*Inaudible*]

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Imbert: “Hahaha.” No corruption under the UNC? You lost two elections because of corruption.

Mr. Chairman: “Ahhh.” Come on. All right, all right.

Hon. Lee: Member—

Mr. Chairman: We have been, you know—

Hon. Lee: Chairman, I just want to interject that to the Member for Diego Martin North/East, just to give him some comfort. I will just give him one area. A wastewater plant in an HDC contract went from \$3 million to \$32 million, Member. And if you cut out that waste of \$29 million, there is a big, tremendous saving, and you are well aware of that also.

Hon. Member: Money cut by half.

Mr. Chairman: Okay, let us get on with it. You know, we got along very fine this morning in the absence of certain people. [*Laughter*]

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Chairman: If I may draw “de” inference.

Hon. Member: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Scotland SC:—on both sides—[*Inaudible*]

Mr. Chairman: Yes, on both sides, on both sides. [*Laughter*]

Mr. Imbert: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Chairman: Member for Arima.

Mr. Imbert: I do not appreciate it.

Ms. Beckles: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. Hon. Minister, can you just provide—and you can send it in writing, because you made reference to several

areas where you are going to do the roof repair. So if you can submit it, that will be fine. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Arouca/Lopinot.

Mr. Gonzales: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. To the Minister of Housing, on the same line Item, D. 075, and having regard to the fact that the \$30 million allocation when compared to the previous year, one can simply state that this allocation represents a violent nuke of your allocation for the previous year.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Gonzales: And Minister, it is also very pleasing to hear coming from you, your good self, giving a commitment to propriety and transparency in the conduct of your public affairs in the Ministry of Housing. Have you done an assessment on the needs of the HDC insofar as it relates to what is required for the maintenance of all housing complexes around the country? And what are the needs of the HDC in terms of a budget to ensure that?

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Gonzales: I spoke about the line Item. I am speaking to the Minister, and he is following. Did you conduct an audit, or did you conduct an assessment as to what is needed on an annual basis to meet the requirements of maintenance in the HDC?

Hon. Lee: Thank you, Member, for that question. “I doh kno about de first part of yuh run-up, but”—

Mr. Gonzales: Which part? The two parts?

Hon. Lee: The context of your question. And Member—

Mr. Gonzales: The nuking of the allocation?

Hon. Lee: What I want to say is that we have a new board in place. And that new board has taken a very proactive approach to HDC, and they have started an

investigation in several areas of HDC, especially the maintenance aspect of the different HDC sites, and in a short time, that report will be ready. So that right now, we do not have that report. It is ongoing, and I am sure that when that report is completed, it can be laid in Parliament, and maybe it can, at least, go to one of the JSCs for you to analyze it.

Mr. Gonzales: Thank you, Minister. Minister, so therefore, the \$30 million allocation, in the absence of that assessment, you are not too sure whether it is going to be sufficient to meet the requirements of maintenance in all of the HDC buildings around the country?

Hon. Lee: I do not think that is a fair statement at this point in time. Yes, I said we have challenges of maintaining what we inherited, and there are several factors. I do not want to go into those factors, but once that report is done, given the hands-on approach by the board in ensuring that—because we get complaints on a daily basis of maintenance issues throughout all HDC sites.

Mr. Gonzales: Of course—[*Inaudible*]

Hon. Lee: We all do. I think you all as Members also get. So that we understand it is a high priority for us.

Mr. Gonzales: It is why we are asking, yeah.

Hon. Lee: High priority, but as I said that, while the funding appears to be cut, in reality, we feel that we can make things happen. Given the sale of housing shortly, the turnaround on that would be able to assist in the maintenance aspect of certain HDC sites. So, we feel confident that it will take us some time, but we will get it done.

Mr. Gonzales: Thank you, Minister.

Mr. Chairman: Anyone? Port of Spain South?

Mr. Scotland SC: [*Inaudible*]—

Mr. Chairman: Sorry.

Mr. Scotland SC:—and then I will go after Dr. Gadsby-Dolly.

Mr. Chairman: St. Ann's East. It seems as though they will be going in order of seniority, so St. Ann's East.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: Thank you. Have you recognized me, Chairman?

Mr. Chairman: I have, actually.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: Okay, thank you. With regard to the same line Item, the question is: what, if any, arrears exist in terms of payments for work done or paid through this line Item?

Hon. Lee: Member, we have several million dollars in arrears owed for maintenance for HDC.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: In this line Item?

Hon. Lee: Pardon?

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: In this line Item?

Hon. Lee: Which line Item is that?

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: The same one; 075. You have several million in arrears owed?

Hon. Lee: Which one is that we are talking about?

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: Did we move? I do not think we moved.

Hon. Lee: Oh, the HDC rentals? Yes, of course.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: D. 075.

Hon. Lee: There are several million dollars we would have inherited that was owed to contractors.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: So, do you have—

Hon. Lee: That is a given.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly:—a figure for the arrears that is—

Hon. Lee: We are not hiding that fact. It is a given.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: I am not asking if you are hiding. I am asking do you know the actual figure.

Hon. Lee: If we know the actual figure of arrears?

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: Yes.

2.15 p.m.

Hon. Lee: You sure you want to hear this figure?

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: Yes.

Hon. Lee: It is about half a billion dollars in total, and we are auditing that financially, Member, because we feel there is a lot of—I do not want to use the word, “corruption”, in it, but that is the reality of it.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: So, you have over half a billion dollars, you say in arrears? Half a billion right in this line Item?

Hon. Lee: Not particularly this line Item, we are talking about.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: Well, I am asking in this line Item. Do you have a figure?

Hon. Lee: Well, this line Item is a line Item that goes towards maintenance of rentals, Member.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: Chairman—

Hon. Lee: So, if you understand.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: I am just really asking a very simple and specific question. I am asking, do you have arrears based on the payments that are made out of this line Item? Do you have arrears? And I am asking—you said, you have arrears. I am asking, how much?

Hon. Lee: I understand your question, but I really do not understand your question. I mean—

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: You understand my question, but you really do not understand my question?

Hon. Lee: This allocation goes towards certain aspects of maintenance. Right? This allocation is not sufficient to meet all the arrears that we met.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: Mr. Chairman, all I am asking is, if there are arrears, how much? That is a simple, simple question.

Hon. Lee: I just told you, half a billion; half a billion.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: So, you have half a billion dollars in arrears?

Hon. Lee: Correct.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: And you have invoices to the tune of half a billion dollars in this line Item?

Hon. Lee: No.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: Mr. Chairman, I am asking a very simple question.

Mr. Chairman: I think, perhaps, you could ask the Minister—

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: I am simply asking—

Mr. Chairman: Might I respectfully suggest you ask the Minister if he is able to disaggregate a separate figure for this line Item in particular, or whether—

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: Well, I feel that is what I have been asking for a while—that is all I have been asking.

Mr. Chairman: I am just simply trying to assist you.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: Can you assist the Minister in—

Mr. Chairman: Or whether or not the—

Hon. Lee: Member, we do not have it disaggregated like how you are asking the question.

Mr. Chairman: Well, that is the simple—

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: Well, that is the answer—if you do not know how much arrears you have, then say, you do not know, Minister, but I am asking a simple question.

Mr. Chairman: I do not think that is a fair assessment to the answer.

Hon. Lee: No, no, I know what arrears we have, Member.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: That is not a fair assessment if I am asking how much arrears?

Hon. Lee: We know the quantum of the arrears, we know who are owed—

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: I am simply asking—

Hon. Lee:—but if you want me to disaggregate how much of this \$30 million—

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: You allocated \$30 million in this line Item—

Hon. Lee: It does not work like that—

Mr. Chairman: I think this back and forth is unproductive now, because I think—

Hon. Lee:—and the Member for Diego Martin North/East knows that.

Mr. Chairman:—hang on a second. I think the answer is what the answer is. The Minister has further said, we are not able to disaggregate it into separate, discrete compartments. It is one compendious figure. Can we move to another question?

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: No, Mr. Chairman, with the greatest of respect, if the Minister—there is a discrete line Item—

Mr. Chairman: Yes, and I think that is the point—

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly:—and bills are paid out of this line Item.

Mr. Chairman: I was trying to assist to move the process along. It is one compendious figure that they have not been able to disaggregate into discrete compartments that could tie itself to separate line Items just yet. I think that is the point. If we understand that—

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: Sorry, sorry.

Mr. Chairman:—we could move along.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: No, Mr. Chairman, I do not understand that, because that is not how budgeting in a Ministry works. In a Ministry, Items are paid out of particular Votes, which correspond to line Items. So, it is a little incredible to believe that in an entire Ministry—Chairman—

Mr. Chairman: All right, go ahead, ask your question.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: So, if the Minister is indicating that this line Item has been cut by 50 per cent, there is no particular rationale for the allocation of \$30 million to this line Item and in addition to that, there are many invoices that are yet unpaid and several millions in arrears, the question is: How much do you actually have available in this line Item for any work to be done on the rehabilitation and maintenance of HDC apartments?

Hon. Lee: Well, Member, right now, certain maintenance and rehabilitation is ongoing. Right? This subvention that we are getting here goes towards offsetting those maintenance contracts. Okay? It will never be sufficient to pay off at this rate, based on this subvention, all the arrears that are owed.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: So, a Vote that is entirely committed is being used, or will be used, to enter into new contracts without money being available?

Hon. Lee: [*Inaudible*]—\$30 million is given to us—this is the figure that is given to us to support the maintenance aspect on HDC activities. Agreed? All right? That is what is given to us, that \$30 million. The remainder of the arrears or the maintenance contracts comes from the sales of HDC homes. So, you will never get sufficient funding from the State, from the Government, to pay off all the maintenance that is owed on these HDC sites. That is the reality of the situation, and that is why I had said at the beginning, HDC is a problem of what transpired over the last 10 years.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Lee: Over the last 10 years, under the last administration, contracts, maintenance contracts, were given out to friends, willy-nilly—friends and financiers without proper procurement.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: Mr. Chairman—

Hon. Lee: So, it is—I agree with you, St. Ann’s East, it is a nightmare that we have—

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: That you have to do what?

Hon. Lee:—inherited.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: Because you are describing a similar nightmare to me, you know, that you do not know how much money you have to use. You do not know how much arrears you have. You do not know what houses you are going to fix and you have assigned a figure here that seems entirely inadequate and arbitrary.

Mr. Tancoo: Chairman, with the greatest of respect, there was no question asked by the Member—

Mr. Chairman: Yes.

Mr. Tancoo:—for St. Ann’s East.

Mr. Chairman: All right, we are going to move along now.

Mr. Tancoo: Whatever questions she has asked has been answered already.

Mr. Chairman: We are going to go to Port of Spain South.

Mr. Scotland SC: Hon. Minister, I am reading from your *Public Sector Investment Programme* mandate and under this rubric, it is said that:

“The HDC will be provided”—with—“the sum of \$30.0 million for the continuation of Rehabilitation and Maintenance of HDC Rental Apartments and Housing Units...This Programme entails the upgrade of housing infrastructure, built over 60 years...that have significantly deteriorated. The

rehabilitation and ongoing maintenance of these rental apartments and housing units are essential to ensuring safe and habitable living conditions for tenants. Many units currently face structural degradation, outdated systems (plumbing, electrical, HVAC), and cosmetic degradation.”

Based on this—so, this is not just roofing. This is what you have said in your PSIP document. Having, previously under a PNM regime, accounted for all, put/allocated over \$50,000,060 for this, do you think it is fair, reasonable, to allocate a sum of just \$30 million and say that you are concentrating on roofs alone, where in your PSIP statement, you spoke about plumbing, electrical and other structural work, including maintenance?

Hon. Lee: Member—[*Inaudible*]*—question by St Ann’s East.*

Mr. Scotland SC: No, it is not.

Hon. Lee: Because I think you all are not—I know the Member for the Diego Martin North/East understands this. This is an organization. HDC is an organization. All right? So, for example, when we when you want to talk about the rental, the lack of collection of revenue over the last 10 years by the last administration in collecting revenue—

Mr. Scotland SC: Yes.

Hon. Lee:—on rental—and I will just give it out to you, because I have to let you know that what is owed in rental to HDC is approximately \$181 million. So, from commercial rental, to licence to occupy, rent-to-own, residential rental, that is what we inherited, Member. We inherited an organization that was not doing its job.

Mr. Scotland SC: Sir.

Hon. Lee: The boards that were in place did not do their work.

Mr. Scotland SC: Sir, but my question to you is—

Hon. Lee: So, we are now—

Mr. Scotland SC: Sir, sir, the long diatribe. My question to you—

Mr. Chairman: All right, Port of Spain South.

Hon. Lee: No, I am just giving you—no, I have five minutes, Member.

Mr. Chairman: Everyone allowed you to read your run-up.

Mr. Scotland SC: Mr. Chairman, you are too uncharitable.

Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]

Mr. Chairman: Well, that is the point.

Mr. Scotland SC: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Chairman: Okay, I am speaking Port of Spain South. I allowed you to read your run-up from the PSIP document.

Mr. Scotland SC: Yes.

Mr. Chairman: Right. So, the answer which the Minister is giving can be considered to be quite condign in the circumstances.

Hon. Lee: So, for example, Member, so we have on the revenue side, a shortfall that has not been collected, and on the expense side, in the maintenance, you have over \$150 million that was given out of friends financiers. You want me to call some names? I will call names. I will call names. I will call names.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Lee: I did not want to go down this road. I did not want to go down this road. Foster Cummings' companies have been getting \$29—

Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]

Mr. Chairman: Okay, let us get some silence, an objection is being made.

Hon. Lee:—million dollars a year in maintenance contracts. I did not want to go down this road. Foster Cummings' companies.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Chairman: Okay, let us get some silence.

Hon. Lee: Andrew Gabriel's companies, over \$8 million a year.

Hon. Member: Shame, shame.

Hon. Lee: I did not want to go down this road. I did not want to go down this road. Right? So, the kind of contracts, maintenance contracts, that were given out to Foster Cummings and his companies, over \$29 million—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Lee:—Andrew Gabriel, \$8 million. Joel Edwards—you know that name—

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: Chairman, what is going on? Has this meeting just lost all order? What is going on?

Hon. Lee: Mr. Barry—Member—

Mr. Chairman: Okay.

Hon. Lee: Joel Edwards, over \$1 million a year in contracts.

2.25 p.m.

Mr. Chairman: Okay let us—

Mr. Imbert: Chairman, what line Item is this?

Mr. Chairman: Well the problem with that is when you ask an open—

Hon. Members: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Chairman: Not you, but generally—no I am not identifying you, but the problem with that and why this exercise should be a narrowly constructed exercise in reference to line Items, is the Member chose to read an expansive document from the PSIP, which seems to cast some doubt on the ability of the Minister to utilize the \$30 million allocated sums to do a slew of items and then seems to say, is it reasonable to use only \$30 million to do all of these things which you have identified—hang on a second—in your PSIP document, so that is why I said, the Minister's response can be seen to be a quite condign one in the circumstances—

hang on a second—given the expansive run-up that you took to lend context to the ultimate question you asked.

Hon. Lee: Mr. Chairman, I do not want to do this anymore, as long as—

Mr. Chairman: But—but—

Hon. Lee: They have another company called JNCO, I wonder if the Member for Arima knows what this company—who this company—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. Beckles: Leave me out of this because—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Chairman: Alright, alright. Okay.

Hon. Lee: “Member I doh want to go down this road”.

Ms. Beckles:—you would have to go out in the public—

Hon. Lee: “Ah doh want to go down this road”.

Ms. Beckles:—“Anytime yuh want to be calling my name, yuh have to come out in the public”.

Mr. Chairman: Alright. I think we have had enough of this.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. Beckles: “Doh come here and talk foolishness about the Member for Arima—out ah place”

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Chairman: Alright—I think—and that is—

Ms. Beckles: “Long time yuh want to do that, but come out in the public. “No, doh call my name”.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Chairman: And that is the danger you have from asking open-ended questions like that. “That is the danger yuh run.”

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Chairman: Alright, let us get some silence. Let us get some silence. I understand your question. The problem with that, is that if you take the ultimate question without considering the expansive run-up you had—“this is not ah Holding run-up, yuh know, this is not ah Shoaib Akhtar run-up” from the boundary line to the wicket, in cricket terms. Right. So you have to understand this is a narrowly constructed exercise. If you want to keep the answers crisp and concise, ask crisp and concise and narrow questions. Alright, so I think we have exhausted this now. We could—

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Hon. Member: Chairman call another question.

Mr. Chairman: Alright.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Tancoo: What the line Item, sir?

Mr. Scotland SC: I am still on the line Item that the Minister—

Mr. Chairman: Okay, okay.

Mr. Tancoo: Okay, can you just allow the Minister to respond to your first question.

Mr. Chairman: I think I have heard you on that. “Ent” we can move along. Right. I think I have heard you on that Diego Martin Central.

Mr. de Nobriga: No, Chairman my question was asked and answered. Thanks.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. Shall we go now, San Fernando East?

Mr. Manning: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. To the Minister of Housing, you spoke about outstanding rents. Will the HDC engage in an initiative of collecting outstanding rents in next fiscal year?

Hon. Lee: Of course, we will be engaging a policy to collect outstanding rent but we will do it, in a humane compassionate way.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Manning: Mr. Chair, line Item: 075, San Fernando East may have some of the largest HDC communities in Trinidad and Tobago and the one in Corinth Close is the single largest and the units they are dire needs of repair. Is Corinth Close part of this maintenance line Item here, Mr. Minister?

Hon. Lee: Corinth Close.

Mr. Manning: I know you did not hear me because Barataria/San Juan is making so much noise, probably difficult to hear. So, I can ask it again, if you like.

Hon. Lee: Member, I understand what you are saying there—Corinth Hill, you are talking about?

Mr. Manning: Correct.

Hon. Lee: “Eh”

Mr. Manning: Yes. Correct.

Hon. Lee: I want to say it openly again, based on the analysis and the investigation by the HDC new board, all HDC sites will be taken care of.

Mr. Manning: Mr. Minister, I find that difficult to believe with an allocation of only \$30 million.

Hon. Lee: For Corinth Close.

Mr. Manning: The Corinth Hills area—that is not just roofing.

Hon. Lee: I just want to ask Member, Corinth—

Mr. Chairman: San Fernando East, this is not an argument—

Hon. Lee: Corinth Close—

Mr. Chairman: We can move now to Malabar/Mausica.

Mr. Manning: The Minister asked me a question. But Mr. Chairman—

Mr. Chairman: No, no, you are rendering an opinion to the fairness of it—this

Mr. Manning: The Minister of Housing is still answering my question. He is answering.

Hon. Lee: Member.

Mr. Chairman: Hold on a second, whether the Minister wishes to answer or not this is just merely an argument of opinion. If you have a question to ask, ask it or I am going to move to Malabar/Mausica.

Mr. Manning: So specific question which the Minister is answering.

Hon. Lee: Chairman, I can answer it. In respect to what the Member is asking for Corinth Close, San Fernando, we have identified 240 roof repairs and that will be part of it.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Manning: Greatly appreciated Minister of Housing. Thank you. It does require more than that, but we appreciate this assistance. Thank you so much. Thank you.

Mr. Lee: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Chairman: Malabar/Mausica.

Mr. Romain: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Romain: You all mind? Please. Chair, Chaguanas East, please.

Mr. Chairman: Question—

Mr. Romain: Thank you, Chair. Same line Item 0—

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Romain: Chair, Chaguanas East, is making it difficult for me to ask my question. Please.

Mr. Chairman: Yes, I am appealing to everyone—allow the questions to be asked in some silence.

Mr. Romain: Thank you, Chair. Same line Item: D. 075, can the Minister indicate if any of this allocation would be used for the erection of the gates at any of the HDC developments?

Hon. Members: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Romain: Gates. Yes. There are a few HDC developments in my constituency where I was told by the residents that they were advised that some of these facilities were supposed to be gated communities.

Hon. Lee: Are you trying to say—are you referring to gated communities?

Mr. Romain: Yes, the erection of gates at some of these HDC developments.

Hon. Lee: No, not at this time.

Mr. Romain: Would you be able to provide us with the cost of the gates that were recently erected at the Rosewood HDC development in Malabar/Mausica?

Hon. Lee: Member, what I have informed may be the management company might have done that.

Mr. Romain: The management company?

Hon. Lee: Not HDC.

Mr. Romain: Okay.

Hon. Lee: The management company of that particular site.

Mr. Romain: “Yuh sure of that Minister?”

Hon. Lee: That is what I have been told.

Mr. Romain: Alright.

Hon. Lee: But I will clarify that.

Mr. Romain: Please, because—alright, please check on that for me. Thank you.
Yes.

Mr. Chairman: Diego Martin North/East.

Mr. Imbert: F, Sir, but on 14, can we go to the other ones or you are going D, E, G and so on? I have a question on page 154.

Mr. Chairman: [*Inaudible*].

Mr. Imbert: No problem.

Mr. Chairman: So we are going now to E. Settlements. St. Ann's East.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: Mr. Chairman, I am just drawing something, I know that they said that some of these were transferred, but I am asking specifically about line Item 235, that is supposed to be transferred. I have not seen it where it supposed to be, so I just want to ask the Minister is this programme still in existence, that housing and village improvement programme? Because I have not seen it in the place where it supposed to be transferred, which is the OPM.

Hon. Lee: One minute, Member. Member, based on our information it has been transferred to OPM.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: Okay, well OPM is tomorrow, we will check it there, thank you.

Hon. Lee: Maybe when OPM comes before you—

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: We will check it there.

Hon. Lee: But it is on the explanation on the far right. I know that, but—

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: I saw it, but I did not see it in OPM, so I am just—that is why I ask to clarify—there are two programme there that I saw transferred and they are not in the corresponding Ministries, so I will check again and OPM is tomorrow, so—

2.35 p.m.

Mr. Chairman: Alright. Shall we move along? E. Settlements. I am advised by the Clerk that we have gone to G: Other Services. St. Ann's East. Sorry.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: Thank you, Chairman. Line Item 292: Emergency Shelter Relief Fund (Head Office), I notice that there is no 2026 allocation. Has this programme been removed?

Hon. Lee: Member, while you see no allocation there, what we had realized is that this same kind of line Item is done under the Self-Help organization. So, we felt to reduce duplication, and sometimes individuals sort of double dip, as they say, so that is why we felt that there should be no allocation there. So we took a decision on that.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: So, you have moved this, and those who need assistance can apply under Self-Help?

Hon. Lee: So, that same sort of grant could be gotten from the Self-Help company.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: So, could I ask what the situation is with all of the persons that would have applied?

Hon. Lee: What I have been told is that the information of the individuals who would have applied to the Ministry would be sent to the Self-Help company.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: Okay. So if constituents are asking about that, tell them check with Self-Help. Thank you.

Hon. Lee: I am sure the Member for Diego Martin North/East is a man that does not have a thing for double dipping.

Mr. Imbert: I seriously doubt that.

Mr. Chairman: Arouca/Lopinot.

Mr. Imbert: Mr. Chairman, on that point there, you are telling me that people who

applied for a grant—

Mr. Chairman: Are you jumping ahead of Arouca/Lopinot?

Mr. Imbert: Oh. No. No.

Mr. Gonzales: So, Chair, just to follow up on the response by the Minister to my colleague from St. Ann's East, Mr. Chair, to the Minister, on the same grant, what was the size of that grant?

Hon. Lee: Which grant?

Mr. Gonzales: The same grant that my colleague referred to.

Hon. Lee: What was the maximum amount—

Mr. Gonzales: The maximum for the grant.

Hon. Lee:—that someone can get?

Mr. Gonzales: Yes.

Hon. Lee: Member, 25,000, I am being told.

Mr. Gonzales: And the one under Self-Help, what is the maximum they can get?

Hon. Lee: I think it is about the same.

Mr. Gonzales: No. It is not. It is significantly lower. So, cancelling this grant, Minister—I am assuming it is a policy decision on the part of your Government—and referring it to the Self-Help commission, it means then that citizens will be significantly disadvantaged. Because the idea of the Self-Help aided grant under housing is to assist persons to do repairs and upgrades to their homes, et cetera. But doing it under the Self-Help commission will significantly disadvantage potential beneficiaries of the grant, because the maximum under the Self-Help commission is not \$25,000. It is significantly less. I think it is about \$15,000.

Hon. Lee: Well, Member, you as someone, and the position you held as a Minister, you will be, you know, an individual that would agree that, you know, what we are trying to do as a country is to avoid the double dipping by certain

individuals applying for a grant in a particular Ministry and applying for the same grant in another organization. So, we are really trying to—the limited funds that might be allocated—spread that limited amount of funds to a bigger group of individuals in Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Lee: And I am sure a man of your kind of accountability and integrity can see what we are trying to do.

Mr. Gonzales: Minister, I hear what—

Mr. Tancoo: [*Interruption*]

Mr. Gonzales:—Minister of Finance just cool it. The Minister is competent, and he is responding sufficiently. But, I am just telling the Minister that removal of that grant under the Ministry of Housing, to refer it to the Self-Help commission is going to significantly—

Hon. Lee: Well, Member, as I said—

Mr. Gonzales:—disadvantage citizens of this country.

Hon. Lee:—we are—

Mr. Chairman: I think we need to ask questions instead of giving gratuitous advice. So, Diego Martin North/East.

Mr. Imbert: I am assuming we are dealing with 292 under G.? Is this what we have been talking about? Because you said, Mr. Chairman, we move to G.

Mr. Chairman: G., yes. I did.

Mr. Imbert: And we are dealing with 292?

Mr. Chairman: Well, I would imagine so.

Mr. Imbert: Okay. I see the Minister looking at me in surprise.

Hon. Member: What?

Mr. Imbert: The Emergency Shelter Relief Fund (Head Office), the funding for

that has been moved to the Self-Help commission? That is what you are saying?

Hon. Lee: No. I did not say that.

Mr. Imbert: So what are you saying?

Hon. Lee: I did not “saaay” that. I said to you that we have received no allocation, because when analyses were done, the Housing Ministry found that there were some people that would have applied for the grant in the history, and they would have also applied for a similar grant in the Self-Help organization that has a similar type of grant. So we have received no funding this year for that grant.

Mr. Imbert: Okay. Fine. And you also said—

Hon. Lee: And a man who was a former finance Minister—

Mr. Imbert: Minister—

Hon. Lee:—would be aware of this.

Mr. Imbert:—I got your point. What you have said is that there is no funding for emergency shelter under your Ministry.

Hon. Lee: Correct.

Mr. Imbert: And you are telling people that they must go apply to Self-Help for emergency shelter. And you are alleging that the applications made to the Ministry of Housing will be sent to the Self-Help commission. Is that what you said?

Hon. Lee: Well, what I am saying is that, whatever applications we would have received at the Ministry of Housing with respect to that type of grant, the Permanent Secretary and her team would refer those individuals to the Self-Help organization.

Mr. Imbert: What about their applications? Do they have to start over from scratch? That is what I am driving at.

Hon. Lee: Oh. Well, we will assist them in the application process.

Mr. Imbert: So they have to start over from scratch. Thank you. Okay.

Mr. Chairman: Okay. We go now to A. Community Development, page 154. Laventille West.

Mr. Marcelle: Thank you very kindly, Mr. Chairman. To the hon. Minister, line Item 14/A./004: Regeneration of Communities - East Port of Spain Region, I am seeing that 2 million in the Revised Estimate was spent in the last fiscal, and I am seeing no moneys allocated this fiscal to the East Port of Spain Region. Could the hon. Minister indicate what the rationale is for the complete removal of allocation of funding for this line Item, please?

Hon. Lee: Member, I just want to say to you that a board will be put in place shortly, as I had mentioned earlier in a different line Item that you would have posed. And we feel at this point in time that once a new board is in place, a re-evaluation would be done on that particular line Item. And, if there is need for funding, that new board, through the Ministry of Housing, would approach the Minister of Finance, if there is a need for funding.

Mr. Marcelle: Hon. Minister, what the 2 million in 2025 was used for?

Hon. Lee: What \$2 million—

Mr. Marcelle: What the 2 million—the Revised—

Hon. Lee: What they used the—

Mr. Marcelle:—spent in fiscal 2025—

Hon. Lee:—in 2025. What it was utilized for?

Mr. Marcelle: Yeah. What it was utilized for.

Hon. Lee: Member, I can list it out for you. Or you want it—

Mr. Marcelle: You could generalize in terms of construction, other [*Inaudible*]—

Hon. Lee: It was some infrastructural work in St. Joseph Road, Upper St. Barb's Road, small minor infrastructure.

Mr. Marcelle: Yes.

Hon. Lee: It was for steps and handrails. That sort of infrastructure work.

Mr. Marcelle: Yeah.

Hon. Lee: In the particular areas of St. Joseph Road, Upper St. Barb's and upper Belle Eau Road, Belmont. Those three areas.

Mr. Marcelle: Thank you very kindly. Could the hon. Minister indicate whether all outstanding fees owed to the small contractors in East Port of Spain were paid? What I have been told is that those payments are on hold at the moment—

Mr. Marcelle: So—

Hon. Lee:—pending proper approval and investigation of the works.

2.45 p.m.

Mr. Marcelle: But even with proper approval and looking at it, there is no allocation allocated in this fiscal. I know that you said that you may have to approach the hon. Minister. In light of the indication by the hon. Minister, that one, there are arrears on this line Item, and even with a new board in place, these minor projects and impactful projects in my constituency, again, is it that within the mid-year review, on or before the mid-year review that we might see a revised?

Hon. Lee: Well, let me put it this way, I understand the question you asked. The 2 million was allocated in the last fiscal, the payments for the particular works have been identified and allocated out of that \$2 million.

Mr. Marcelle: Out of that. Deeply grateful.

Hon. Lee: So once proper approval is done, those contractors—

Mr. Marcelle: Will be paid.

Hon. Lee:—will be paid.

Mr. Marcelle: Alright. Thank you very kindly, hon. Minister.

Hon. Lee: So it is not an issue.

Mr. Marcelle: Yeah.

Mr. Imbert: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Chairman: You know, I am actually looking at Port of Spain South.

Mr. Scotland SC: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Chairman: Very generous. So, Diego Martin North/East.

Mr. Imbert: Mr. Chairman, on that same Item, Social and Community Services; Community Development; 002, 4 million was allocated in 2025, but the current Government only spent 2 million on the Social and Economic Programme for East Port of Spain. But what bothers me the most is at 004, the name of that Item is, “Regeneration of Communities - East Port of Spain Region” and Minister gave some details of what that means. It is minor infrastructure which is very, very important in particular to unplanned areas, squatter communities, areas where there is no proper infrastructure, steps, handrails, or box drains. Things like that might seem small to the Minister, but they are very, very important to people in underprivileged areas, and I find it shocking that a Government that says it cares could just abandon a programme to regenerate communities in east Port of Spain.

Hon. Member: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Imbert: Why is there a zero? Why have you cut this programme out? What is it you have against the people of east Port of Spain? Why? Why did you do that?

Hon. Lee: Member. Member, I answered very nicely to the Member for Laventille West. Very nicely.

Mr. Imbert: You did not explain why it is zero.

Hon. Lee: I did.

Mr. Imbert: It is not important?

Mr. Chairman: No, no, no.

Hon. Lee: I said to you—

Mr. Chairman: That is not a fair assessment.

Hon. Lee: I said to you, once a board is in place, which will be installed soon—

Mr. Imbert: And what allocation would they use, a zero allocation?

Hon. Lee: Well, when that board comes in place and they have identified the projects in the particular area of east Port of Spain, Member, you know how it works, you were there, you did that, right?

Mr. Imbert: May I ask a supplemental question when you are finished? I have a supplemental.

Hon. Lee: So I am not making light of the infrastructural work that has taken place. I have given the Member for Laventille West an answer.

Mr. Imbert: Fine. I have a supplemental question based on your answer.

Hon. Lee: But do you need any steps in Maraval?

Mr. Imbert: I am not responsible at this time for communities in east Port of Spain, my colleagues to my left are. I have a supplemental question. You have said because there is no board in place with respect to the company that was doing this work—

Hon. Lee: Yeah.

Mr. Imbert:—there is no allocation provided.

Hon. Lee: Yeah.

Mr. Imbert: Have you used that same approach to all state enterprises and statutory authorities where no board exists at this point in time?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Chairman: Oh, my God. I do not think that arises.

Mr. Imbert: That is a rhetorical question. You have only done it to Port of Spain, everywhere else, they have no board, but you are giving them money.

Mr. Chairman: No, that does not arise. That does not arise.

Mr. Imbert: Deceitful.

Mr. Chairman: That does not arise! It is a general statement not based on any line item. It is an entirely inappropriate comment to make.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Chairman: Port of Spain South.

Mr. Scotland SC: Now, according to your rationale, hon. Minister, if there is need, for example, for a railing at Katanga in Sea Lots or a step now in east Port of Spain, well, there is no allocation for it now. What do the people of east Port of Spain do now, when they are in need of minor infrastructural works?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Lee: Member. Member.

Mr. Tancoo: Asked and answered.

Hon. Lee: Member, Member.

Mr. Tancoo: That question has been answered already.

Mr. Chairman: Come on. Come on.

Hon. Lee: Member. Member, clearly—

Mr. Scotland SC: Do you want them to answer?

Hon. Lee: Member, clearly you do not know how an organisation—

Mr. Scotland SC: And, Mr. Chairman, I am staying in my lane.

Hon. Lee: Clearly, you have never ran an organisation. Member—

Mr. Chairman: Alright. That is enough.

Hon. Lee: Member. Member, can I answer?

Mr. Scotland SC: Yes.

Hon. Lee: You clearly have not run an organisation.

Mr. Scotland SC: “Doh tell me what to do.”

Hon. Lee: No, I am not saying what to do.

Mr. Scotland SC: I will call the corporation Monday.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Lee: Member.

Mr. Scotland SC: “Hold on, ah eh finish.”

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Scotland SC: “Yuh” close down CEPEP who used to do that.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Chairman: Alright.

Mr. Scotland SC: And “yuh” close down URP.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Scotland SC: What are we to do in Port of Spain!

Hon. Member: Chairman.

Mr. Scotland SC: What are we to do? You have marginalised us.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Chairman: Alright.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Chairman: Alright. Alright. This now—

Hon. Lee: East Port of Spain is not closed down. Where did you get that idea from? East Port of Spain?

Mr. Chairman: This is now degenerating into unbridled, unruliness.

Mr. Padarath: Mr. Chairman, this is the hooliganism I have told you about by the Member for Port of Spain South.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: “Doh call people hooligan! Racist! That is a racist comment!

Mr. Padarath: Mr. Chairman, we cannot continue—

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Padarath: We cannot continue to accept that behaviour.

Mr. Scotland SC: Mr. Chairman—

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: “Doh sit down here and be racist.”

Mr. Gonzales: He is “fass” and out of place.

Ms. Mohit: No, “buttinsky”.

Hon. Members: [*Continuous crosstalk*]

Mr. Gonzales: Mr. Chairman, that was racist and he needs to withdraw it.

Mr. Chairman: No. No. No.

Mr. Gonzales: Racist.

Hon. Member: Two million in CEPEP contracts.

Mr. Chairman: No. No. No. Arouca/Lopinot, no. Withdraw that accusation now.

Mr. Gonzales: Mr. Chairman—

Mr. Chairman: Withdraw the accusation now.

Hon. Tancoo: No. You, withdraw it, now. You, withdraw it.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Chairman: Withdraw the accusation of racism, now.

Hon. Tancoo: You withdraw it.

Mr. Chairman: Nothing has been said like that. Withdraw it.

Mr. Gonzales: Mr. Chair—

Mr. Chairman: Withdraw it!

Mr. Gonzales: Mr. Chair, why are we being called hooligans? That is ridiculous!
And we are not going to tolerate that in this House!

Mr. Tancoo: Mr. Chair—

Mr. Gonzales: We are not going to tolerate it, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Chairman: Okay.

Hon. Member: Mr. Chair.

Mr. Chairman: I am going to suspend this House for 10 minutes and everyone give consideration as to how we move forward. Suspended for 10 minutes.

2.52 p.m.: *Standing Finance Committee suspended.*

3.00 p.m.: *Standing Finance Committee resumed.*

Mr. Chairman: All right. Now that Members have had 10 minutes to take stock of that behaviour, which was unacceptable, I am going to move ahead.

Mr. Hosein: Mr. Chairman, there was a ruling given earlier that the Member withdraw his statements. I do not think the Member withdrew the statements for the purposes of the record.

Mr. Chairman: Okay, Barataria/San Juan, please allow me to do so. Arouca/Lopinot, I am asking you to withdraw that accusation. It is a very serious one and I think you will agree with me. Withdraw it, please.

Mr. Gonzales: Mr. Chair, before—

Mr. Chairman: Let me explain something to you. You have used the raw accusation of racism in respond to the term, “hooliganism”.

Mr. Gonzales: Yes.

Mr. Chairman: The etymology of the term, “hooliganism” has never, ever attracted such a label. All right? So, I am inviting you, please—I am asking you, respectfully, withdraw—in the interest of moving forward, kindly withdraw the accusation.

Mr. Gonzales: Mr. Chair, please allow me. Can you please allow me, Mr. Chair?

Mr. Chairman: Yes.

Mr. Chairman: Mr. Chair, we have sat here consistently being accused of being hooligans on this other side, consistently. Mr. Chair, you have sat and heard the other side—

Mr. Hosein: Is the Member challenging the Chair’s ruling?

Mr. Gonzales: Mr. Chair, you have sat and you would hear Members of the Opposition being called “hooligans” and this was not—you did not take a step to bring this to an end.

Mr. Chairman: I have.

Mr. Gonzales: No, Mr. Chair, that is not true. Mr. Chair—

Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]

Mr. Hosein: Mr. Chairman, is the Member challenging—

Mr. Chairman: Listen, I am not going to invite any dissention, so as to lead to another uproar. Okay? I am respectfully—

Mr. Gonzales: Mr. Chair—

Mr. Chairman:—asking you to withdraw the comment.

Mr. Gonzales: Mr. Chair, are you willing to as well, as much as I am willing to withdraw the comment, are you willing to allow or to ask the Member on the other side to withdraw as well? Because, Mr. Chair, a hooligan—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Gonzales: Mr. Chair, a hooligan is a violent, young troublemaker, typically of a gang, and I do not believe you, Mr. Chair, believe that this Opposition behaves like a gang.

Mr. Chairman: Okay.

Mr. Gonzales: And I am prepared to apologize if you, Mr. Chair, in the interest of fairness, call upon to Member to also withdraw.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Hosein: Mr. Chairman, I have sat in this Parliament for a very long time, and when the Chair gives a ruling for a Member to withdraw a statement, it is unequivocal, it is without any condition.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Hosein: I am asking whether or not the Member is defying the ruling of the Chair. It is as simple matter.

Mr. Chairman: I do not intend to bind myself now with the attachment of the conditionalities to any requests to withdraw. I think you are understanding what I am saying there. Okay? Member, I am asking you kindly and respectfully and most deferentially, kindly withdraw that allegation of racism.

Ms. Beckles: Now, Mr. Chair, do you agree—

Mr. Chairman: Member for Arima.

Ms. Beckles:—that we should be called “hooligans”?

Mr. Chairman: Member for Arima, we have known each other for quite a long time.

Ms. Beckles: That is why—[*Inaudible*]

Mr. Chairman: Right. If you would allow me to do what I intend to do. I am kindly asking, respectfully, and as I repeated, most deferentially, asking the Member for Arouca/Lopinot to please withdraw that allegation.

Mr. Gonzales: Mr. Chair, for best interest of this House, the integrity of this House, the integrity of this Opposition, I will withdraw the remark.

Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]

Mr. Gonzales: But, Mr. Chair, I wish to bring to your attention and the country’s attention that the Opposition is not being treated fairly in this regard.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Gonzales: Because it is wrong for people to call us “hooligans” and the Member—

Mr. Chairman: Okay.

Mr. Gonzales:—who is making the allegation is not being called upon to apologize. It is wrong, Mr. Chair, and it is unfair to the Opposition.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Chairman: Why are you predetermining what I intend to do? Member for Couva South, I am kindly asking you to withdraw that accusation of hooliganism.

Mr. Padarath: Based on your assertion, Chair, I withdraw.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Chairman: Okay.

Mr. Gonzales: I stood my ground.

Mr. Chairman: Arouca/Lopinot—

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Chairman: You know, this glorified sandbox behaviour simply just does not cut it for the national community.

Mr. de Nobriga: Well, speak to the Member for Barataria/San Juan!

Mr. Chairman: Do not raise your voice at me, Diego Martin Central. I not inviting a discussion. I am making an observation that this protracted, glorified sandbox behaviour is counterproductive. It is counter-intuitive to the role of parliamentarians, and it certainly is deleterious to the image of the Parliament as a whole and to parliamentarians in the national community. Take a stock of yourselves. Nothing is to be gained by behaving in this manner; absolutely nothing. Let us move on.

We were on 005: Multi-Sectoral and Other Services; A. Administrative Services. This meeting—sorry, I should have called the meeting back to order. A. Administrative Services; F. Public Buildings. We go now to the Infrastructure Development Fund. Item 004: Social Infrastructure; E. Settlements, 287. Diego Martin North/East.

Mr. Imbert: Thank you. Minister, I noticed that your allocation under 08: Housing and Settlements for Item 230: Accelerated Housing Programme has been slashed by 33 per cent. Mr. Chairman, I would like to ask the Minister, in the context of arrears owed to contractors for the Accelerated Housing Programme, how will you manage with a reduced allocation, where \$100 million has been taken out of your allocation for this Item, especially in the context of the fact that the previous Government had raised a loan of \$200 million to allow the HDC to reduce its liabilities with respect to the Accelerated Housing Programme, and that loan was taken away by the Minister of Finance in August of 2025 and redirected to pay salaries in other places? So, you no longer have that loan funding of \$200 million, and your allocation has been cut by \$100 million. How are you going to be able to build a single house under the Accelerated Housing Programme, when your arrears are in excess of \$200 million, when your allocation is \$200 million?

3.10 p.m.

Hon. Lee: Member let me first start—you made a statement that a loan of \$200million was—the loan for the \$200 million could have been repurposed, which we did. So, we did not have a problem with that.

Mr. Imbert: The loan was taken away from Housing—

Hon. Lee: No, that is your definition.

Mr. Imbert:—and used to pay salaries. I have the Cabinet Note.

Hon. Lee: Huh?

Mr. Imbert: “Doh pretend.” I have it. It was taken away and used to pay salaries elsewhere. So you lost that \$200 million.

Hon. Lee: So—I lost my trend of thought.

Mr. Imbert: [*Laughter*] I am not sure if you had one. You lost \$200 million available for—

Hon. Lee: Mr. Chairman. Mr. Chairman. Mr. Chairman. Mr. Chairman. I take umbrage by that statement.

Mr. Imbert: Alright, sorry.

Hon. Lee: I mean I have been treating him with respect.

Mr. C. Imbert: I said okay. You said you lost your trend of thought.

Hon. Lee: I mean—

Mr. Imbert: Come on let us move on. Let us move on. You said you lost your trend of thought. Let me repeat. Your allocation for 2026, under the Item Accelerated Housing Programme is \$200 million.

Hon. Lee: Right.

Mr. Imbert: There was a loan arranged for the Housing Ministry and HDC in the sum of \$200 million, to clear arrears owed to contractors under this Accelerated Housing Programme, and you yourself have quoted a higher figure, you said \$500 million. So, how it is that you have arrears under the Accelerated Housing Programme exceeding \$200 million? Your allocation is \$200 million. How are you going to be able to build a single house? Is that you are not going to pay bills owed to contractors? Could you explain?

Hon. Lee: Member what you are asking in your question, is a very convoluted question, okay?

Mr. Imbert: What? What is convoluted about it?

Hon. Lee: This line Item talks about Accelerated Housing Programme. We got the same allocation in 2026 that we got in 2025, Member, alright? It is for Accelerated Housing Programme. It has nothing to do with that loan that you are talking about.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Imbert: Oh really?

Hon. Lee: So could you rephrase your question in different manner?

Mr. Imbert: Certainly. Since, I know that that loan for \$200 million was for settlement of arrears under the Accelerated Housing Programme, and since I know that those arrears still exist, and since I know that those arrears exceed \$200 million. How are you going to manage with an allocation of only \$200 million? How will you build a single house under the Accelerated Housing Programme? Is it that you are not paying your bills?

Hon. Lee: Okay. I will answer you. Remember that—through you, Mr. Chairman—we are renegotiating or we are negotiating some new loans. A loan that was underneath your tenure with RBC for \$750 million, that you did not want to approve for the sake of the country to build houses. We are going to get that loan approved very soon, and that will be utilized to help put HDC on a better strong footing, Member for Diego Martin North/East. With that funding along with sale of houses, along with the Accelerated Housing Programme we will build houses for people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Imbert: Alright. In the context in what you have said—

Hon. Members: [*Continuous desk thumping*]

Mr. Imbert:—you say you are going to borrow \$700 million. That loan was to be a Government guaranteed loan. Are you going to increase the public debt by \$700 million?

Hon. Lee: No, no. We are more creative than you Member.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Lee: It is not going to be a Government guaranteed loan.

Mr. Imbert: How it is going to be repaid?

Hon. Lee: It is going to be repaid by from the sale of homes.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Imbert: But the homes cost more to build than your sale price.

Hon. Lee: What?

Mr. Imbert: The homes cost more to build than your sale price. You lose money on every house.

Hon. Lee: No, under your maths Diego Martin North/East, not under my maths.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Imbert: Really?

Hon. Lee: Not under my maths.

Mr. Imbert: Minister of Housing under your administration—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Lee: Under your maths.

Mr. Imbert:—under your last Government—

Hon. Lee: You were the last Government.

Mr. Imbert:—you tripled the cost of—

Hon. Lee: You were the last Government.

Mr. Imbert:—construction of a house.

Hon. Lee: But you were the last Government.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Imbert: You tripled it.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Chairman: Alright, I think we strayed way beyond the line.

Hon. Lee: You created Victoria Keyes—

Mr. Chairman: Waved straight beyond boundary.

Hon. Lee:—Diego Martin North/East and you put a set of people rent-to-own in Victoria Keyes, luxury townhouse, apartment complex—

Mr. Imbert: I have another line Item, Sir.

Hon. Lee:—you all gave out people rent-to-own in a luxury item and the people—

Mr. Chairman: Alright, let us move to next line Item you have.

Mr. Imbert: Yes. Minister I hope you follow what I am saying because I find you are losing track of things easily. Under 231: Affordable Housing Programme allocation has been completely obliterated from a \$100 billion in 2025 to \$0 in 2026, \$0. How will you build a single affordable house with a \$0 allocation?

Hon. Lee: Member, this is allocation that you are talking about Affordable Housing Programme, according to you that we have no allocation in 2026. HDC is on a different footing than the last administration.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Lee: So, it is an all-encompassing, all-encompassing organization, so that while you see there is no allocation for Affordable Housing Programme, it is part of the restructuring of HDC.

Mr. Imbert: [*Member steups*]

Hon. Lee: I mean you—Mr. Chairman, the individual is “steupsing.” I am not taking that. I am not taking that.

Mr. Imbert: “He not taking ah steups?”

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: And you know he is sensitive.

Mr. Imbert: “He not taking ah steups?”

Hon. Lee: Mr. Chairman, I have been very respectful to the Member for Diego Martin North/East.

Mr. Imbert: You are very sensitive. You are very sensitive.

Hon. Lee: Very respectful, and I am not taking anything from the Diego Martin North/East anymore.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Imbert: You are very sensitive.

Hon. Lee: He might be vertically challenged, but I am not.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Chairman: Alright, let us just move on without the invective please. Let us just forget the personal invective.

Hon. Lee: No, I responded, Mr. Chairman, to his question.

Mr. Imbert: Actually you did not. You have \$0 and you are doing \$0.

Mr. Chairman: Alright.

Mr. Imbert: When are we going to do 14 A., Mr. Chairman, after this one or at the same time? Because it is under the same 004.

Mr. Chairman: No, we do it after.

Mr. Imbert: Okay.

Mr. Chairman: A. Community Development. Oh, sorry, I beg your pardon, Member for Arouca/Lopinot had his hand up, but—

Mr. Gonzales: Thank you very much.

Mr. Chairman:—perhaps, I should not say more. I was going to give him another admonition, but perhaps, I should not say more. Arouca/Lopinot.

Mr. Gonzales: Thank you very much. To the Minister of Housing, I am at E. 230, as well as 231, Settlements, the Accelerated Housing Programme, the Affordable Housing Programme. Minister given your Government's commitment to distribute 500 houses per week. Yes, 500 houses per week. Minister can you indicate since April 28th, how many of the 500 houses you have distributed?

Mr. Chairman: [*Inaudible*] that is not a relevant question.

Mr. Gonzales: Minister? Mr. Chairman, under this line Item Accelerated Housing Programme.

Mr. Chairman: Yes, I am ruling it does not apply.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Chairman: That question does not apply here. Laventille West.

Mr. Marcelle: Deeply grateful.

Mr. Chairman: That question does not apply here. Laventille West.

Mr. Marcelle: Deeply grateful. To the hon. Minister line Item 08, E. 230: Accelerated Housing Programme, could the hon. Minister indicate from the \$200 million allocated in this fiscal, how many homes are intend to be built of this \$200 million allocation?

3.20 p.m.

Hon. Lee: Based on the information I have, Member, out of that \$200 million, we have identified to construct 612 homes.

Mr. Marcelle: In the hon. Minister of Finance's budget statement he indicated that there is an intention to create 20,000 or 10,000 homes within a two-year time period. Could the hon. Minister indicate—

Hon. Lee: Member, that statement was not in the budget statement. If you read the budget statement, it talked about the delivery of 20,000 homes over the next five years.

Mr. Marcelle: On page 42. Sorry, please. Chairman, I am going to read from the hon. Minister of Finance's budget speech, page 40 of the statement, before I ask this question again.

“Our...target is 20,000 affordable homes”—within two years—“through PPPs and innovative designs.”

It is on that basis I am asking, whether this year's allocation would set you on target to accomplish that, please?

Hon. Lee: Member if I can just draw you to *Hansard*. The Minister of Finance never said that in his statement when he presented the budget. It might have been a

typographical error.

Mr. Marcelle: “Ohhh.” Thank you very kindly, Mr. Chairman.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Chairman: Member for Diego Martin North East.

Mr. Imbert: Based on the answer just given by the Minister with respect to the number of houses, a quick calculation will indicate that you expect to pay contractors \$300,000 per house. That is impossible. Your current cost is over \$1 million. How are you going to build an HDC for \$300,000?

Hon. Lee: Chairman, through you, again, that is the PNM style of building houses.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Lee: It is not the UNC administration’s efficient style of building houses.

Mr. Imbert: Mr. Chairman, my question was in the context of the last UNC Minister of Housing coming into this Parliament where I was and confirming—

Mr. Chairman: No, no.

Mr. Imbert:—a cost of 1.3 per house.

Mr. Chairman: You invited an answer which you got, so let us move on. So I propose now to move—

Mr. Imbert: I would like to go to 14 when you are ready, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Chairman: I propose to move to A. Community Development.

Mr. Imbert: That is the one, yeah.

Mr. Chairman: Page 287. Member for Diego Martin North/East.

Mr. Imbert: Thank you very much. Mr. Chairman, the PNM’s constituencies at this time are mostly, or half of the most, in urban areas or suburban areas. Why therefore have you a zero allocation for urban redevelopment in 2026? Is it targeted at those of us who represent urban areas? Why zero for urban

redevelopment? What happen Minister, “yuh cyah” see the zero? You have a problem with that?

Hon. Lee: Member again, while in 2025 there was a Revised Estimate of \$10.1 million, there is no allocation in 2026 at this point in time. Again, my answer remains the same, that once a board is in place they would then reprioritize or look at the projects going forward in 2026.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Lee: And, I am sure Member, just like you when you were a former Minister of Finance, you would allocate funds as the need arises.

Mr. Imbert: Okay. Based on your answer you are telling me that a company that does not have a board is the company that did that work in 2025? That \$10 million was spent by that company? That is what you are saying, the one that does not have a board right now?

Hon. Lee: I have been told prior to this new administration coming in to being.

Mr. Imbert: “Eh-heh”, that is what you are saying?

Hon. Lee: That is what I have been told.

Mr. Imbert: Well you have been misinformed.

Mr. Chairman: Item 005: Multi-Sectoral and Other Services, F. Public Buildings. Member for Port of Spain South.

Mr. Scotland SC: I am very much obliged to you. Chairman, I am under Item 005/06/F. 001. Hon. Minister, the Port of Spain Shopping Complex Development and Management of Properties located at 43 Independence Square was allocated \$16 million, an Estimate, in 2025. There was a \$5 million Revised Estimate in 2025. Are you confirming now that there is a zero allocation in this line Item for the Port of Spain Shopping Complex? Not one cent?

Hon. Lee: Member that is what is there in front of us.

Mr. Scotland SC: Okay. That being in front of us, remember when I started to interrogate you, hon. Minister, in your opening you spoke of a theme of equality, of justice, of fairness. Minister you have cut East Port of Spain, you have cut the malls and now you have reduced every single cent for the Port of Spain Shopping Complex. Where are they to find funding now? Could you tell the management of this complex, where?

Hon. Lee: Member from what I am being told, this is the development of the mall that is located at 43 Independence Square, correct? And NIPDEC is the company that is projected, managing and building this—

Mr. Scotland SC: Understood.

Hon. Lee: All right. So that—

Mr. Scotland SC: This is a line allocation and you have allocated that already.

Hon. Lee: So that presently—

Mr. Scotland SC: Yes.

Hon. Lee: Presently, because the mall is being constructed by NIPDEC—

Mr. Scotland SC: Yes.

Hon. Lee: Member there is no need for an allocation at this point.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Scotland SC: So if we go, hold on----

Hon. Lee: So you would have seen---

Mr. Scotland SC: Let me just put it on the *Hansard*. Hold on. So if we go to the allocation, wherever we find the allocation for NIPDEC, because we will, will we find an allocation, Sir—

Hon. Lee: Asked and answered.

Hon. Member: Asked and answered.

Mr. Scotland SC: I have not asked anything as yet, Sir. So, Chairman, may I

ask?

Mr. Chairman: You can, but if I—well you can.

Mr. Scotland SC: I am very grateful.

Mr. Chairman: Ask your question and then the answer or the non-answer will come.

Mr. Scotland SC: So you have told us under this line Item that NIPDEC is responsible for this project. Now, so if we go to an allocation under NIPDEC wherever it is, will we find the moneys for this project there?

Mr. Chairman: Well, I do not think this Minister is capable of answering that question.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Chairman: I think you will have to ask the Minister with responsibility for NIPDEC that.

Mr. Scotland SC: Well, Mr. Chairman—

Mr. Chairman: Or you know how you can get that.

Mr. Scotland SC: Mr. Chairman, but the Minister of Finance is here. So can I ask—and he is always interjecting. May I ask the Minister of Finance if we look under NIPDEC if we will find an allocation for the Port of Spain Shopping Complex Development Programme for 2026?

Mr. Tancoo: Mr. Chairman, we are currently at Head 61: Ministry of Housing.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Chairman: Yes.

Mr. Tancoo: I think the Member is lost. Find your way back.

Mr. Chairman: I think you can consider other state enterprises under this Head. That is why I am telling you, you know very well how to get that information so.

Mr. Scotland SC: Can I then ask this question.

Mr. Tancoo: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Scotland SC: You have a grip?

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Mr. Scotland SC: Right. May I ask this question then, staying in my lane? Why has, under this line Item, every single project as it relates to Port of Spain, either been reduced or totally eliminated? Why?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

3.20 p.m.

Mr. Chairman: The problem with that question is you can confine it to Port of Spain Shopping Complex Development and Management. So, while you made that point already, let us move on.

Mr. Scotland SC: Yes, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Chairman: It is one Item in this, one.

Mr. Scotland SC: A very important Item. So, when can we expect—my last under this—this project to restart, Sir, under this line Item—the Port of Spain—because here “the sod has been turned.” When can we expect it to restart? In this fiscal?

Hon. Lee: Member, if you pass in front of that mall right now—

Mr. Scotland SC: Nothing is happening.

Hon. Lee:—you will see a big crane—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Scotland SC: “PNM leave it there.”

Hon. Lee: Oh, lord. They are drilling presently. They are pile driving, according to my colleague here

Mr. Scotland SC: Which colleague?

Mr. Alexander: They are preparing for piling.

Mr. Scotland SC: Okay, thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Port of Spain South.

Mr. Scotland SC: Yes, yes, Chair.

Mr. Chairman: All right. Laventille West.

Mr. Marcelle: Deeply grateful, Mr. Chairman. Hon Minister, line Item 005/06/F./001, could the hon. Minister indicate what is the value of the existing contract to build this new Port of Spain—the mall, located at No. 43 Independence Square Port of Spain?

Hon. Lee: One second. The estimated cost, Member, to construct, from what I have here is \$44.5 million.

Mr. Marcelle: Could the hon. Minister indicate, based on the existing contract in the last fiscal, how much funds from that said contract were paid?

Hon. Lee: Mr. Chairman, \$4,076,447.19.

Mr. Marcelle: Hon. Minister, in this fiscal year, under this said project, what is the estimated value of works to be completed within this fiscal?

Hon. Lee: I do not have that at this point in time. I could put it in writing and send it to you.

Mr. Marcelle: I am deeply grateful. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Chairman: There being no other questions, I propose to put the question to the Committee.

Question put and agreed to.

Head 61 ordered to stand part of the Schedule.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Lee: Chairman, just before we close, I would just like to thank, on behalf of myself, the hardworking staff of the Ministry of Housing and the hardworking staff of the HDC and the subsidiaries, thank you so much.

Mr. Chairman: Yes. I too, on behalf of the Parliament, would wish to extend our gratitude. Thank you very much.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

3.35 p.m.

Mr. Chairman: We move now to Head 34: Ministry of Transport and Civil Aviation. I invite the Minister for Transport and Civil Aviation, together with his advisers and technocrats, to come forward.

Head 34: Ministry of Transport and Civil Aviation, \$545,839,000.

Mr. Chairman: I will now invite the Minister of Transport and Civil Aviation to make a brief opening statement not exceeding five minutes.

Hon. Zakour: Good afternoon, Chairman, and Members of the Committee, and greetings to the viewing and listening public. I am honoured to appear before the Standing Finance Committee to respond to questions on the proposed allocations for the Ministry of Transport and Civil Aviation for fiscal year 2026. The newly established Ministry of Transport and Civil Aviation reflects this Government's strong commitment to restoring structure, strengthening oversight and improving national transport systems, following years of underinvestment, financial mismanagement and operational inefficiencies that affected key sectors of the economy.

Upon assuming office, what I encountered was profoundly troubling. Systems were fragmented, accountability was weak and critical infrastructure had been allowed to deteriorate to alarming levels. The newly-formed Ministry underscores the Government's dedication to streamlining national transport and placing heightened emphasis on the critical role of civil aviation and efficient transport infrastructure in driving economic diversification, national development and resilience.

The Ministry's portfolio of responsibilities includes licensing and regulation of motor vehicles, civil aviation, the management of national airports, traffic management, traffic wardens, coordinated national transport planning, public transport systems and the overall management of the Government's fleet of vehicles.

As we move forward in fulfilling our mandate, we will remain focused on advancing the modernization of the transport sector through digital transformation, enhancing traffic management, improving public transportation services, enhancing motor vehicle licensing and regulatory systems, robust civil aviation oversight and the effective and secure management of our national airport, among other priorities.

At today's Committee meeting, discussions are expected to revolve around the Ministry's proposed allocations for fiscal 2026, which include estimates for Recurrent Expenditure in the amount of \$487,939,000 and estimates of the Development Programme expenditure in the amount of \$57,900,000. As such, I will seek to provide any clarification requested by hon. Members.

In closing, Mr. Chairman, I wish to assure hon. Members that the Ministry of Transport and Civil Aviation is committed to utilizing resources allocated by the Ministry of Finance in a responsible, transparent and efficient manner in service to the people of Trinidad and Tobago, unlike the previous administration. Mr. Chairman, I thank you.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Question proposed: That Head 34 stand part of the Schedule.

Mr. Chairman: This sum of 545,839,000 for Head 34: Ministry of Transport and Civil Aviation is comprised of moneys proposed for expenditure under the

Appropriation Bill, 2025
 Head 34: Ministry of Transport
 & Civil Aviation (cont'd)

following Sub-Heads and Items to be found in the *Draft Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure*, the *Draft Estimates of the Revenue and Expenditure of the Statutory Boards and Similar Bodies and of the Tobago House of Assembly*, and the *Draft Estimates of Development Programme*.

We shall now consider the *Draft Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure*. These items are to be found between pages 246 to 247 of the relevant volume. Sub-Head 01: Personnel Expenditure; Item 001: General Administration. Arouca/Lopinot.

Mr. Gonzales: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, to the Minister. Minister, I am at Sub-Item 03: Overtime - Monthly Paid Officers. Can you indicate to the Parliament how many monthly paid officers you have at the Transport—General Administration, I am sorry?

Hon. Zakour: Currently, we have 108—

Mr. Gonzales: Member, 108 monthly-paid.

Hon. Zakour:—officers.

Mr. Gonzales: That is 108 monthly-paid? That is on the establishment?

Hon. Zakour: Monthly-paid officers. That is correct, Member.

Mr. Gonzales: All vacancies are filled?

Hon. Zakour: No, we have currently, 55 vacancies.

Mr. Gonzales: Member, 55 vacancies?

Hon. Zakour: Yes.

Mr. Gonzales: So, out of the—so, the 108 that you just gave is 108 positions or 108 employees?

Hon. Zakour: Positions.

Mr. Gonzales: So, you just have 55 of these positions filled?

Hon. Zakour: That is correct.

Mr. Gonzales: I see you have, Minister, an allocation of \$10,000. Is that sufficient?

Hon. Zakour: It is sufficient, yes.

Mr. Gonzales: What was the allocation, or rather, how much the Ministry spend on overtime in the last fiscal year?

Hon. Zakour: The variance, you will know, Minister—sorry, Member, that the variance is because it was the Ministry of Works and Transport. Now it is just the Ministry of Transport and Civil Aviation, hence the variance you are seeing in front of you, Sir.

Mr. Gonzales: These monthly-paid officers, are they clerical officers or do they go out and perform duties on the outside?

Hon. Zakour: Yes, Member, it is a mixture of technical and administrative.

Mr. Gonzales: And you are saying that the \$10,000 allocation is sufficient to meet the requirements for this current financial year?

Hon. Zakour: It is sufficient, yes.

Mr. Chairman: Laventille East/Morvant.

Mr. Birchwood: Thank you, Chair. Same line Item. There was a decrease, I am noticing in that overtime, as the allotment was \$40,000, taking the information from the previous Ministry. So, we just want confirmation that that amount of money allotted would be sufficient to cover the fiscal year?

Hon. Zakour: Yes, it will be, Member.

Mr. Birchwood: Thank you very much.

Mr. Chairman: Item 002: Transport Division. Laventille East/Morvant.

Mr. Birchwood: Item 002/01: Salaries Costs of Living Allowance. Once again, the allotted amount, we just need confirmation that this would be not impede upon

the Minister's ability to execute?

3.45 p.m.

Mr. Chairman: The question is whether the amount allocated will not impede your ability to run the Ministry.

Hon. Zakour: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. Laventille West.

Mr. Marcelle: [*Interruption*]

Mr. Chairman: Very well. Item 003: Traffic Management. Arouca/Lopinot.

Mr. Gonzales: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. To the Minister, I see again at Sub-Item 03: Overtime - Monthly Paid Officers and there is an allocation of 12,800. How many monthly-paid officers do you have attached to the Traffic Management Branch?

Hon. Zakour: We have 23 public officers; offices filled, five; total vacant 18.

Mr. Gonzales: 18?

Hon. Zakour: Yes, correct. Offices vacant with bodies, five and without bodies, 12, Member.

Mr. Gonzales: Minister, the allocation of 12,800 for this fiscal, is that going to be sufficient to meet—

Mr. Chairman: Member, can I intervene? I think under 03, you are looking at 003/03. I think you need to reuse the ruler.

Mr. Gonzales: So there is no allocation for overtime. It is worse. So I observe—

Mr. Chairman: The figure you quoted is 12.8 million above which applies to wages and COLA.

Mr. Gonzales: Oh, yes, yes, I read it differently. Thanks for your guidance, Mr. Chair. So Minister, so at 03: Overtime - Monthly Paid Officers, there is no

Appropriation Bill, 2025
Head 34: Ministry of Transport
& Civil Aviation (cont'd)

allocation for overtime. Can you give the reason for that?

Hon. Zakour: Apparently no, but if we need funds, we will vire for that, Sir.

Mr. Gonzales: Can you say that again, Minister?

Hon. Zakour: Currently these persons do not work overtime but if there is a need, we will vire within our allocations, Sir.

Mr. Gonzales: And from where are you going to vire that? From which other allocation?

Hon. Zakour: Well we will follow established protocols and we will liaise with the Ministry of Finance, Member.

Mr. Chairman: Laventille East/Morvant.

Mr. Birchwood: Thank you, Chair. Line Item 003/030: Allowances - Daily-Rated Workers, there has been an increase. Could the Minister account for the additional 50,000?

Hon. Zakour: Yes, this is for the use of thermoplastics, meals and out-of-district allowances, Member.

Mr. Birchwood: Thank you.

Hon. Zakour: You are welcome.

Mr. Chairman: Arouca/Lopinot.

Mr. Gonzales: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. Minister, how many daily-rated workers do you have attached to the Traffic Management Branch?

Hon. Zakour: Which line Item?

Mr. Gonzales: I am sorry. I am at the same line Item asked by my colleague from Malabar.

Hon. Zakour: It is 171, Member.

Mr. Gonzales: Yeah, so I am at Sub-Item 030.

Appropriation Bill, 2025
Head 34: Ministry of Transport
& Civil Aviation (cont'd)

Hon. Zakour: Yes, it is 171 daily-rated workers.

Mr. Gonzales: One hundred and—?

Hon. Zakour: 71, Member.

Mr. Gonzales: 71?

Hon. Zakour: Yes.

Mr. Gonzales: Workers, daily-rated workers?

Hon. Zakour: Daily-rated workers, yes.

Mr. Gonzales: Minister, my understanding is that these daily-rated workers, they are usually used to do your road markings and other traffic improvements, their markings, et cetera.

Hon. Zakour: Yes.

Mr. Gonzales: And they operate mainly at night times.

Hon. Zakour: Not always, Sir.

Mr. Gonzales: Well in many instances, they operate—

Hon. Zakour: Some instances.

Mr. Gonzales: Right, so you tend to have the need for high overtime expenditure for these daily-rated workers because of the nature of the job that they do. You said that you have 129 employees classified as daily-rated workers.

Hon. Zakour: 171, Sir.

Mr. Gonzales: 179. Worse yet.

Hon. Zakour: But not all.

Mr. Gonzales: Yeah. This allocation of \$35,000, is that sufficient to meet your overtime budgetary requirement?

Hon. Zakour: As of now, Member, firstly, not all of them paint lines on the road ways. Yes, it is sufficient right now. Painting lines on the road is not something

Appropriation Bill, 2025
Head 34: Ministry of Transport
& Civil Aviation (cont'd)

we do very often. There is also a safety component that we have to look at based on where we are doing the lines. If it is not sufficient, again, we will follow the established protocols and approach the Ministry of Finance.

Mr. Gonzales: So the daily-rated workers or those workers that are classified as daily-rated workers or officers, where else are they attached in the Traffic Management Branch?

Hon. Zakour: “Ah doh understand, Sir.” Where?

Mr. Gonzales: Which other departments apart from doing road enhancements and what have you?

Hon. Zakour: The head office and seven district offices, Sir.

Mr. Gonzales: And you are saying that if there is a need to go beyond the \$35,000 that is allocated, you are going to use the necessary protocols to get the additional funding?

Hon. Zakour: Yes, Member.

Mr. Gonzales: Chair?

Mr. Chairman: Thank you.

Mr. Gonzales: Just at Sub-Item 30: Allowances - Daily-Rated Workers, you have an allocation of \$150,000. Is that sufficient to meet the requirements for the fiscal year?

Hon. Zakour: That was asked and answered previously.

Mr. Gonzales: No, no, no, I asked about overtime. I am now asking something completely different.

Hon. Zakour: It is sufficient, yes, Sir.

Mr. Gonzales: Right, it is not asked and answered, it is the first time I am asking the question. So you are saying now that it is sufficient?

Appropriation Bill, 2025
Head 34: Ministry of Transport
& Civil Aviation (cont'd)

Hon. Zakour: Yes, Sir.

Mr. Gonzales: Thank you very much.

Hon. Zakour: Your welcome.

Mr. Chairman: All right. Sub-Head 02: Goods and Services, pages 247 to 251.
Item 001: General Administration. 002: Transport Division.

Mr. Gonzales: I have a question.

Mr. Chairman: Yes, Arouca/Lopinot.

Mr. Gonzales: I have a question on 001, Sub-Item 16: Contract Employment, there is an allocation of \$3.5 million. Can the Minister state how many positions for contract employment are captured under this Sub-Item?

Hon. Zakour: Currently, we have 58 persons employed; positions vacant, 33.

Mr. Gonzales: How many vacant?

Hon. Zakour: 33.

Mr. Gonzales: How much?

Hon. Zakour: 33, Sir.

Mr. Gonzales: 33?

Hon. Zakour: Yes, Sir.

Mr. Gonzales: Minister, can you state whether you intend to fill those vacancies in this fiscal year?

Hon. Zakour: Yes. These vacancies were recently advertised in our national recruitment drive, Sir.

Mr. Gonzales: And, Minister, if and when you fill those 33 vacancies, the \$3.5 million allocation, is it going to be sufficient?

Hon. Zakour: Yes, Member, it is going to be sufficient.

Mr. Chairman: Laventille East/Morvant.

Mr. Birchwood: Thank you, Chair. To the Minister, that same line Item 002, 016: Contract Employment, that has been a noticeable increase from the previous allotment. Can the Minister advise?

Hon. Zakour: Are you looking at the right Item, Sir?

Mr. Birchwood: I am seeing Contract Employment here, yeah, 16.

Hon. Zakour: This is General Administration. As I answered before, it was the Ministry of Works and Transport, the Ministries have since split.

Mr. Birchwood: Yeah, the allotment—

Hon. Zakour: So this is for Transport and Civil Aviation, Member.

Mr. Birchwood: The allotment for 2025, could you confirm if it was 1.825?

Hon. Zakour: What figure are you seeing there, Sir?

Mr. Birchwood: Not the Estimates for 2026, but for 2025 previous.

Hon. Zakour: What figure are you seeing, Sir?

Mr. Birchwood: 1.85 million.

Hon. Zakour: Member, I am being advised the positions were not filled in that year, Sir. It was not budgeted for.

Mr. Birchwood: Okay.

Mr. Chairman: Item 002: Transport Division. Arouca/Lopinot.

3.55 p.m.

Mr. Gonzales: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. Minister, I am pointing to Sub-Item 22: Short-term Employment. You have an allocation of \$3.5 million. How many employees do you have classified in that division as short-term employees?

Hon. Zakour: It is 111, Member.

Mr. Gonzales: Minister, 111—

Appropriation Bill, 2025
Head 34: Ministry of Transport
& Civil Aviation (cont'd)

Hon. Zakour: Yes, that is correct.

Mr. Gonzales:—short-term employees?

Hon. Zakour: Yes, 111.

Mr. Gonzales: Minister, can you state whether the 111 short-term employees are persons who, or rather, they pertain to contractual positions that came to an end?

Hon. Zakour: Some of them, Member, not all.

Mr. Gonzales: How many out of the 111 pertain to contractual positions that came to an end?

Hon. Zakour: Member, please, I will have to give you that in writing.

Mr. Gonzales: Okay. And those persons who have been employed, not against approved contract positions, what is the Ministry doing with respect to having those employees? How long do you plan to continue engaging those persons under short-term employment?

Hon. Zakour: It is currently before PMCD to put some life to these positions, Member.

Mr. Gonzales: Before PMCD?

Hon. Zakour: Yes, that is correct, Sir.

Mr. Gonzales: How many positions you are seeking approval for from PMCD under this Item?

Hon. Zakour: That again we will have to submit in writing, Member.

Mr. Birchwood: So will commit the both things—

Hon. Zakour: Yes, Member, please.

Mr. Gonzales:—to provide it in writing?

Hon. Zakour: I will. Yes, Member.

Mr. Gonzales: Thank you very much.

Appropriation Bill, 2025
Head 34: Ministry of Transport
& Civil Aviation (cont'd)

Hon. Zakour: You are welcome, Member.

Mr. Gonzales: Sub-Item 23: Fees. What are those fees in relation to Minister?

Hon. Zakour: It will be used for the rental of Linx machines at the various banks.

Mr. Gonzales: Rental of?

Hon. Zakour: The Linx machines and the credit card machines, as well as the mobile machines.

Mr. Gonzales: Linx machines?

Hon. Zakour: Yes. As you know, there is a monthly rental for machines.

Mr. Gonzales: Okay. It is for the Licensing Division?

Hon. Zakour: Yes.

Mr. Gonzales: Or, yes.

Hon. Zakour: For the licensing offices, Sir, yes.

Mr. Gonzales: Okay. Thank you.

Hon. Zakour: You are welcome, Sir.

Mr. Chairman: Laventille East/Morvant.

Mr. Birchwood: Thank you, Chair. Line Item 02/001/28: Other Contracted Services. Can the Minister elaborate on what services are needed?

Hon. Zakour: This is the provision of sanitary bins to the five offices and the renewal of the software licences, Member.

Mr. Birchwood: Could you come again?

Hon. Zakour: The renewal of software licences.

Mr. Birchwood: Software licences?

Hon. Zakour: Yes, sir.

Mr. Birchwood: Okay. And Janitorial Services, which will be 02/001/37. Can the Minister highlight which company? If it is outsourced? If it is handled in-

Appropriation Bill, 2025
Head 34: Ministry of Transport
& Civil Aviation (cont'd)

house?

Hon. Zakour: The company is called Island Cleaning, Member.

Mr. Birchwood: Island Cleaning?

Hon. Zakour: Yes, Member.

Mr. Birchwood: Okay. Contracted for the entire year?

Hon. Zakour: Sorry, Member?

Mr. Birchwood: Contracted for the entire year?

Hon. Zakour: Yes, Member.

Mr. Birchwood: And can the Member outline how was the company selected, the selection process?

Hon. Zakour: It was a procurement process, and they were awarded, Member.

Mr. Birchwood: Procurement process?

Hon. Zakour: Yes, Member.

Mr. Birchwood: Okay, thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Item 0-0—

Mr. Birchwood: Sorry, Chair. Before we move on, I am not seeing an allotment for Security Services. Can the Member elaborate?

Hon. Zakour: Yes, this is security services for all of the Licensing Division offices: Caroni, Sande Grande, Arima, Wrightson Road, San Fernando, Princes Town, and Point Fortin.

Mr. Birchwood: I am not seeing an allocation.

Hon. Zakour: Yes. You have CIT, Cash in Transit, and then you have guard service as well, Sir.

Mr. Birchwood: Okay.

Mr. Chairman: Item 003: Traffic Management. Arouca/Lopinot.

Appropriation Bill, 2025
Head 34: Ministry of Transport
& Civil Aviation (cont'd)

Mr. Gonzales: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. Minister, I am at Sub-Item 28: Other Contracted Services. I see you have an allocation of \$17 million. Can you state what is the purpose of this allocation?

Hon. Zakour: Yes, just for the general use for maintenance of the traffic signals throughout the island, and the upgrading of traffic signals as well.

Mr. Gonzales: Okay. Is that allocation sufficient to meet the requirements of the Traffic Management Branch?

Hon. Zakour: For this fiscal, as of now, yes, Sir.

Mr. Gonzales: What was the expenditure under this Sub-Item in the last fiscal year?

Mr. Birchwood: I am seeing here about \$21 million.

Mr. Gonzales: Twenty-one million? .

Hon. Zakour: Yes, as I am seeing here, yes.

Mr. Gonzales: And there is full utilization of the \$21 million?

Hon. Zakour: Yes, that is correct.

Mr. Birchwood: So, on what basis then are you saying that the \$17 million will be sufficient?

Hon. Zakour: Based on the needs for this fiscal year, Sir?

Mr. Gonzales: So, is the \$17 million consistent with the requirements at the request of the Traffic Management Branch?

Hon. Zakour: Yeah. It will be sufficient.

Mr. Gonzales: So they have requested \$17 million?

Hon. Zakour: We are working within the allocation.

Mr. Gonzales: I am not hearing you, Sir.

Hon. Zakour: We are working within the allocation.

Appropriation Bill, 2025
Head 34: Ministry of Transport
& Civil Aviation (cont'd)

Mr. Gonzales: You will work with the allocation.

Hon. Zakour: Yes, Sir.

Mr. Gonzales: I understand.

Mr. Chairman: Item 004: Traffic Warden Unit. Sub-Head 03: Minor Equipment Purchases—pages 251 to 252—Item 001: General Administration. Arouca/Lopinot.

Mr. Gonzales: Page 251, Item 004: Goods and Services. Are you on that Item?

Mr. Chairman: No, I am on the Minor Equipment Purchases. We have moved passed Goods and Services.

Mr. Gonzales: Okay.

Mr. Chairman: So we are now on to Minor Equipment Purchases; Item 001: General Administration; Item 002: Transport Division; Item 003: Traffic Management—

Mr. Birchwood: [*Interruption*]

Mr. Chairman: Laventille East/Morvant.

Mr. Birchwood: Thank you, Chair. Line Item 002/04: Other Minor Equipment. Can the Minister identify what equipment?

Hon. Zakour: Air condition units, microphone systems, fire extinguishers, microwaves, refrigerators, and stuff like that, Sir.

Mr. Birchwood: Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Item 003: Traffic Management; Item 004: Traffic Warden Unit. Sub-Head 04: Current Transfers and Subsidies; Item 003: United Nations Organisation; Item 005: Non-Profit Institutions; Item 007: Households; Item 009: Other Transfers. Arouca/Lopinot.

Mr. Gonzales: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. To the Minister, 07: Traffic

Appropriation Bill, 2025
Head 34: Ministry of Transport
& Civil Aviation (cont'd)

Enforcement Centre Unit. Minister, you have an allocation of \$7 million. What is the annual operational cost of the Traffic Enforcement Centre?

Hon. Zakour: Member, I will have to give you that in writing.

Mr. Gonzales: You will provide the information in writing?

Hon. Zakour: Yes, Member.

4.05 p.m.

Mr. Gonzales: How many employees do you have attached to the Traffic Enforcement Centre?

Hon. Zakour: We have 114, Member.

Mr. Gonzales: One hundred and—?

Hon. Zakour: Fourteen, 114.

Mr. Gonzales: Are they all on existing contractual arrangements?

Hon. Zakour: No, some are on short-term, Member.

Mr. Gonzales: How many?

Hon. Zakour: I am being advised that all are on short-term, Member.

Mr. Gonzales: All are on short-term?

Hon. Zakour: Yes, Member.

Mr. Gonzales: All 114 employees of the Traffic Enforcement Centre—

Hon. Zakour: Yes, Member.

Mr. Gonzales:—are on short-term contracts?

Hon. Zakour: That is correct, Member.

Mr. Gonzales: Is the Ministry making any arrangements to have those persons either subsumed in the establishment or back as contract officers?

Hon. Zakour: We are in consultations with PMCD.

Mr. Gonzales: Can you say that again, Minister?

Hon. Zakour: I said we are liaising with PMCD.

Mr. Gonzales: Yes? So you expect after the consultation with PMCD to have this matter rectified?

Hon. Zakour: Yes, Sir.

Mr. Gonzales: Minister, in the Traffic Enforcement Centre Unit, can you say whether it works in tandem with the Licensing Division and the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service as it relates to your traffic ticketing system that contributes to revenues under this Item?

Hon. Zakour: Yes, it does, Member.

Mr. Gonzales: And can you say how much revenue it collects or assists in collecting on an annual basis?

Hon. Zakour: We will have to submit that in writing, Member.

Mr. Gonzales: Thank you very much.

Hon. Zakour: You are welcome.

Mr. Chairman: Item 011: Transfers to State Enterprises. Diego Martin North/East.

Mr. Imbert: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Minister, I noticed that the allocation for VMCOTT 2026 is \$10 million. What are your plans for VMCOTT in 2026? Do you plan to grow the company? Expand its offerings, et cetera?

Hon. Zakour: Member, VMCOTT has to go back to its original mandate. VMCOTT was left to deteriorate over many, many years. Prior to the elections, there was no Board in VMCOTT for these six months. The company, the management literally had no guidance or ministerial oversight. Currently, there is a Board in place, and we are working tirelessly to restore VMCOTT.

Mr. Imbert: Minister, you did not answer my question. I did not ask you about

Appropriation Bill, 2025
Head 34: Ministry of Transport
& Civil Aviation (cont'd)

2025.

Mr. Gonzales: But—

Mr. Imbert: I asked you what you planned to do. Do you plan to expand—

Hon. Zakour: Yes.

Mr. Imbert:—the operations?

Hon. Zakour: We do.

Mr. Imbert: You do?

Mr. Imbert: Yes.

Mr. Gonzales: Okay, how are you going to do that if your allocation for 2026 is \$5 million less than 2025?

Hon. Zakour: Member, by restoring the mandate. The mandate of VMCOTT is to fix the government fleet of vehicles. As you might be aware, the police service has been going to uncertified garages throughout the country. By restoring the mandate and bringing the vehicles back to VMCOTT. It will increase our revenue, Member.

Mr. Imbert: Revenue?

Hon. Zakour: Your colleague from Arouca/Lopinot was on the Board of VMCOTT, so he very much understands what I am saying.

Mr. Imbert: So, VMCOTT needs less money in '26 than in '25, even though you intend to expand the operations?

Hon. Zakour: This will be sufficient.

Mr. Imbert: You expect me to believe that, okay, fine.

Hon. Zakour: We will be cutting out the corruption, Member.

Mr. Imbert: Yeah, the corruption. UNC lost two elections because of corruption.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Imbert: You expect me to believe that.

Hon. Zakour: This Government recently approved the expansion of categories for inspection stations, so persons with vehicles over 3,200 kilograms could now go to VMCOTT, for instance, maxi-taxis.

Mr. Chairman: Arouca/Lopinot.

Mr. Gonzales: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. What are VMCOTT's annual revenues at this point in time?

Hon. Zakour: The annual revenue for the last fiscal, I believe it was \$14 million, Member.

Mr. Gonzales: Fourteen million?

Hon. Zakour: It was 14 million, yes.

Mr. Gonzales: And what are VMCOTT's annual operational costs?

Hon. Zakour: One second, Member. Yes, Member.

Mr. Gonzales: Yeah, so that is why I am asking what the subvention is for, then?

Mr. Imbert: Member, I do not want to go down a road—

Mr. Gonzales: So it is—

Hon. Zakour: Like what happened transpired, but there is a lot going down in VMCOTT, many will be in front of the authorities very, very soon. I do not want to have any further discussions.

Mr. Gonzales: No, I am asking, Sir, I am asking. So, VMCOTT meets its operational expenditure?

Hon. Zakour: Yes, it does.

Mr. Gonzales: So, what is the purpose of this submission if VMCOTT is meeting its operational costs?

Hon. Zakour: We need to upgrade equipment, we need to repurchase tools, tools

that were sold under the table over the last several years. So that is what the money would be for, Sir.

Mr. Chairman: Sub-Head 06: Current Transfers to Statutory Boards and Similar Bodies, Item 004, page 254. Hon. Members, we now move to the Draft Estimates of the Revenue and Expenditure of the—

Mr. Imbert: You are not looking over here.

Mr. Chairman: I did.

Mr. Imbert: No, Sir, you had your head down. Because if you were looking over here you would have seen me with my hand up.

Mr. Chairman: You know—

Mr. Imbert: Yes, I had my hand up and I was looking straight at you and you were looking so.

Mr. Chairman: No, I was looking at your lower Benches and up—

Mr. Imbert: For the umpteenth time. My hand is up, Sir. May I speak? Would you invite me to speak, please?

Mr. Chairman: I will.

Mr. Imbert: Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: If you behave yourself.

Mr. Imbert: No, no, Sir. It has no conditions like before. It has no conditions. Would you invite me to speak, please?

Mr. Chairman: Yes.

Mr. Imbert: Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Which Item are you on?

Mr. Imbert: Item 06/39. Minister, there is some confusion as to which Ministry, based on utterances made by your colleagues, there is some confusion as to which

Ministry will be responsible for the new airport terminal in Tobago. Could you clarify which Ministry would be responsible for that?

Hon. Zakour: Ministry of Transport and Civil Aviation, Member.

Mr. Imbert: Your Ministry?

Hon. Zakour: Yes, Member.

Mr. Imbert: Okay. Who is responsible for payments to the contractor for the new terminal building and associated infrastructure?

Hon. Zakour: Yes, under which line Item is that?

Mr. Imbert: On 39, the Airports Authority of Trinidad and Tobago. You said you were responsible.

Hon. Zakour: Member, currently the terminal is under the purview of—

Mr. Imbert: Do not take the basket from him, you know.

Hon. Zakour: Member, you will be aware that currently the terminal is under the purview of the Ministry of Works and Infrastructure. And when it is completed, it will be handed over to the Ministry of Transport and Civil Aviation.

Mr. Imbert: Would you repeat what you just said?

Hon. Zakour: The terminal is currently under the purview of the Ministry of Works and Infrastructure. Once it is completed, it will be handed over to the Ministry of Transport—

Mr. Imbert: So you are modifying what you told me that the new terminal building is under your Ministry.

Hon. Zakour: When it is completed, Member.

Mr. Chairman: Okay, I think you need to be fair to the Minister.

Mr. Imbert: Why?

Mr. Chairman: The question you asked the Minister is whether his Ministry will

Appropriation Bill, 2025
Head 34: Ministry of Transport
& Civil Aviation (cont'd)

have operational control of the terminal.

Mr. Imbert: I never used those words. I said, “Who is responsible for it”?

Mr. Chairman: But in effect, that is what you meant.

Mr. Imbert: No, Sir. I said who is responsible and he said him.

Mr. Chairman: Alright.

Mr. Imbert: So, you are not responsible for paying any bills on the construction project?

Hon. Zakour: No, Member.

Mr. Imbert: Fine. So, your Ministry will be responsible for sending money to the Airports Authority for the operation of the new terminal and associated infrastructure at the ANR Robinson International Airport, as well as your current responsibilities at Piarco International Airport?

Hon. Zakour: Which line Item are you on, Sir?

Mr. Imbert: I am on 39. I just spoke about airports. We have two airports in Trinidad and Tobago. We have the ANR Robinson International Airport, and we have the Piarco International Airport. What kind of question is this, Mr. Chairman?

Hon. Zakour: What page are you on?

Mr. Imbert: The Chairman said page 254, Sub-Head 04: Current Transfers to Statutory Boards and Similar Bodies, 004 Statutory Boards, 39: Airports Authority of Trinidad and Tobago. Mr. Chairman, come on. What is going on here? You are asking me what page we are on?

Hon. Zakour: Chairman, the—

Mr. Imbert: I am trying to ask my question, he is asking me what page we are on.

Hon. Zakour:—details would be on the other document.

Mr. Imbert: So, your Ministry, Sir, is and/or will be responsible for Piarco International Airport and the new terminal building and associated infrastructure at the ANR Robinson International Airport and other facilities at the ANR Robinson International Airport. Am I correct?

Hon. Zakour: Correct, once it is completed, yes.

Mr. Imbert: You are already responsible for Piarco International Airport, and once the facility in Tobago is completed, you will be responsible for that as well. Do you expect that to occur in this fiscal year 2026?

Hon. Zakour: Yes, yes, Member, of course.

4.15 p.m.

Mr. Imbert: So, previously, the Airports Authority had responsibility for managing the ANR Robinson International Airport in Tobago, the old terminal facilities and the existing terminal facilities at Piarco. Now you will have a much larger facility to manage in Tobago, with much larger airside facilities and so on. Can you explain, therefore, if the allocation to the Airports Authority in 2025 was \$96,478,000, and the allocation to the Airports Authority under this same line Item in your Ministry is now \$20,298,000, or \$76 million less, but you have a facility in Tobago that is about five times the size—

Hon. Member: Chairman.

Mr. Imbert: Mr. Chairman, I am still talking. He cannot interrupt me. What is that? What is that? I am asking the Minister—

Hon. Member: Chairman.

Mr. Imbert: Mr. Chairman, I would like to be able to finish my question, please. I did not use five minutes yet.

Mr. Chairman: Finish your question.

Mr. Imbert: Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: But I do not think he was erupting you. I think he was interrupting you. But ask your question.

Mr. Imbert: What?

Mr. Chairman: Ask your question.

Mr. Imbert: So, you agree he could interrupt me? Okay.

Mr. Chairman: No, I did not say that. I did not think he was erupting you. I think he was interrupting you.

Mr. Imbert: Fine, no problem. Minister, the facility that you will have responsibility for in fiscal 2026, not physical 2026, is much larger. The facility in Tobago, it demands far more expenditure. It is a brand new facility, so that its revenue-generating capacity will be very limited at the beginning. It needs to grow. It needs to get tenants. It needs to get aircraft landing. It needs to generate revenue. It will take a while.

And therefore, I would like you to explain to me, your Ministry has much greater responsibilities in 2026 than the previous divisions of government, which make up your Ministry, had with respect to airports in 2025. You have \$76 million less available to you under this line item. How are you going to manage?

Hon. Zakour: What I was going to say is the operations of the new terminal will be met by the estimates of the revenue and expenditure. I was also going to say that when we get to page 209, we have the full details of expenditure.

Mr. Imbert: I just want to know how you are going to manage with a much bigger facility in Tobago with \$76 million less.

Hon. Zakour: We will manage fine, Member. Thank you.

Mr. Imbert: You will manage?

Appropriation Bill, 2025
Head 34: Ministry of Transport
& Civil Aviation (cont'd)

Hon. Zakour: We will.

Mr. Imbert: A reduction of 75 per cent, with a facility that is 500 per cent bigger—

Hon. Zakour: We will manage.

Mr. Imbert:—you will manage?

Hon. Zakour: We will manage.

Mr. Imbert: Okay, magic, just like the Minister of Housing. Okay, no problem. All right.

[Member sucks teeth]

Hon. Zakour: Chairman, I am not going to sit here while the Member disrespects myself.

Mr. Chairman: Member for Diego Martin North/East. No, I am getting a complaint from the Minister that you have—I think “steupsing” is a Trinidadianism, but I think for parliamentary language, you sucked your teeth in his direction or towards him.

Hon. Zakour: Chairman—

Mr. Imbert: *[Inaudible]*

Mr. Chairman: You should not. You should apologize to him.

Mr. Imbert: *[Inaudible]*

Mr. Chairman: Oh, so you will—

Mr. Imbert: *[Inaudible]*—I will check.

Hon. Zakour: Chairman, if I may? Disrespecting me is disrespecting the public servants and I am not tolerating that.

Hon. Members: *[Desk thumping]*

Mr. Imbert: Mr. Chairman, I must be allowed to answer that. The Minister is

Appropriation Bill, 2025
 Head 34: Ministry of Transport
 & Civil Aviation (cont'd)

using the same technique—the same technique that another Minister used. I have total respect for your Permanent Secretary and all the public servants in your Ministry. “Doh try dat. Doh try dat”.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Zakour: Okay. So, why are you “steupsing”? So, why are you “steupsing”? Chairman, I would like to respond to that.

Mr. Chairman: Hon. Members, we now move to the *Draft Estimates of the Revenue and Expenditure of the Statutory Boards and Similar Bodies and of the Tobago House of Assembly*.

Hon. Zakour: As Minister of Works and Transport, there was an elevator that only he could have used. That no—

Mr. Chairman: All right, Minister, let us—

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Chairman: Okay, Minister, let us—Sub-Head 01: Airports Authority of Trinidad and Tobago, 39. Page 209 of the *Draft Estimates of the Revenue and Expenditure of the Statutory Boards and Similar Bodies and of the Tobago House of Assembly*, that volume. So, page 209. Member for Arouca/Lopinot.

Mr. Gonzales: No, no, Mr. Chair, I did not ask you—[*Inaudible*]

Mr. Chairman: I know you are unaccustomed to dealing with large volumes of paper, but have you reached there?

Mr. Gonzales: I am very much accustomed to dealing with large volumes of paper and much more. I am not taking that, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Chairman: Sub-Head 01—

Mr. Gonzales: I am not taking that.

Mr. Chairman:—Personnel Expenditure; Item 001: General Administration; Item

Appropriation Bill, 2025
Head 34: Ministry of Transport
& Civil Aviation (cont'd)

002: Passenger and Cargo Terminals; Item 003: Airport Operations; Item 004: Runways, Taxiways, Grounds and Car-Parks. Member for Laventille West.

Mr. Marcelle: Thank you very kindly, Mr. Chairman. Line Item 004/01: Salaries and Cost of Living Allowance, I am seeing an increase of \$5.7 million. Could the hon. Minister indicate in this fiscal year what is the rationale for the increase?

Hon. Zakour: We will be filling the vacancies. There is currently 45 vacancies, Member.

Mr. Marcelle: Deeply grateful.

Mr. Chairman: Can I move on?

Mr. Marcelle: Yes, please.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. Item 005: Security. Member for Laventille West.

Mr. Marcelle: Deeply grateful. Mr. Chair, line Item 005/03: Overtime - Monthly Paid Officers, I am seeing a decrease of \$35.2 million. Could the hon. Minister indicate, one, relative to fiscal 2025, what was the reason for the significant increase, and in 2026, what is the reason for the drastic reduction?

Hon. Zakour: Yes, Member, the vacancies will be filled, so there will be less persons working on overtime.

Mr. Marcelle: And in 2025, what was the reason for such a drastic increase? I am seeing that the original Estimate was \$12.4 million, and the Revised Estimate, actual spend was \$30 million more.

Hon. Zakour: The vacancies were not filled? They were vacant, so persons were working overtime, Member.

Mr. Marcelle: Noted.

Hon. Zakour: Thank you, Member.

Mr. Chairman: Sub-Head 02: Goods and Services, pages 210 to 212. Item 001: General Administration. Member for Laventille West.

Mr. Marcelle: Deeply grateful, please, Mr. Chairman. Hon. Minister, line Item 02/001/22: Short-term Employment, I am seeing an introduction of a \$500,000 allocation. Could the hon. Minister indicate how many short-term employees would be brought on in the fiscal, please?

Hon. Zakour: Forty, Sir, 4-0.

Mr. Marcelle: And could the hon. Minister indicate what would be the process for recruitment of the short-term employees, please?

Hon. Zakour: This is a vacation training programme, Sir.

Mr. Marcelle: And the vacation training programme, in terms of interested applicants, what is the process of onboarding for these interns?

Hon. Zakour: Anyone can apply, Member, directly to the Airports Authority.

Mr. Marcelle: Deeply grateful, please, hon. Minister.

Mr. Chairman: 002: Passenger and Cargo Terminals. Member for Laventille East/Morvant.

Mr. Birchwood: Sorry, Chair, you did not see my hand up, I was still on 02. If you may permit me, sorry, 02/001, under Repairs and Maintenance - Buildings, line 21, I am seeing an increase there.

Hon. Zakour: Yes. Item 21, Member? Repairs to the procurement offices and purchase of paints and plumbing supplies, Member.

4.25 p.m.

Mr. Birchwood: Janitorial Services. Line 37.

Hon. Zakour: Yes, this is for glass cleaning, and grass cutting at the east terminal at the ANR Robinson Airport.

Mr. Birchwood: Can you identify the companies that are—

Hon. Zakour: The company, Sir, is BridgeCon.

Mr. Birchwood: How are they sourced?

Hon. Zakour: There is a procurement process, Sir.

Mr. Birchwood: Procurement process. Thank you.

Hon. Zakour: Correct. That was under the previous administration, Sir.

Mr. Birchwood: Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Item 003: Airport Operations. Item 004: Runways, taxi ways, grounds and carparks. Item 005: Security. Sub-Head 03: Minor Equipment Purchases; Item 001: General Administration. Sub-Head 04: Current Transfers and Subsidies; Item 007: Households. Item 009: Other Transfers. 52. Public Transport Service Corporation. Sub-Head 01: Personnel Expenditure, pages 224-225; Item 001: General Administration. Laventille West.

Mr. Marcelle: Deeply grateful, please, Mr. Chairman. To the hon. Minister, Line Item 01/001/01, I am seeing a decrease of 146,000. Could the hon. Minister indicate, one, what are the current vacancies under this line Item?

Hon. Zakour: It is 448 established vacancies, Member.

Mr. Marcelle: Hon. Minister, does the corporation intend to fill these vacancies within this fiscal year?

Hon. Zakour: The Board is reviewing, Sir, and we will fill as needed.

Mr. Marcelle: Deeply grateful.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you very much. 002: Vehicles and Equipment Maintenance. 007: Property Development Services. 008: Transit Express Commuter Services. Sub-Head 02: Goods and Services, pages 225-227; Item 001: General Administration. Laventille West.

Mr. Marcelle: Deeply grateful, please, Mr. Chairman. To the hon. Minister, Line Item 02/001/09: Rent. We are seeing an increase in \$1.6 million to this line Item. Could the hon. Minister indicate whether there is an intention to rent or lease what the type of vehicles and/or equipment, please?

Hon. Zakour: Yes, from time to time, Member, we do have to rent vehicles for maintenance.

Mr. Marcelle: I am just seeing a drastic increase. So, I am asking in this fiscal year, what is the intention?

Hon. Zakour: Well as you are aware, Member, at PTSC it has a very aging fleet, which requires a lot more care.

Mr. Marcelle: So, you intend to increase the fleet?

Hon. Zakour: Yes.

Mr. Marcelle: Yeah? Deeply grateful. Line Item 02/001/15: Repairs and Maintenance of the Equipment. You indicated a short ago that you have an ageing fleet, in terms of both vehicles and equipment. Could the hon. Minister indicate, with the decrease amounting to 700,000, if it would be sufficient in this fiscal year to treat with the repairs and maintenance of your equipment?

Hon. Zakour: Containers for vehicles is handled under a different Item on the other page—

Mr. Marcelle: No, I was not asking about the vehicles, Member.

Hon. Zakour: It would be sufficient, Member.

Mr. Marcelle: Yes. But it is not the vehicles I am asking about, I am asking specifically about the equipment. That line Item says, 15: Repairs and Maintenance of Equipment, and I seeing—

Hon. Zakour: It would be sufficient, Member.

Appropriation Bill, 2025
Head 34: Ministry of Transport
& Civil Aviation (cont'd)

Mr. Marcelle: Deeply grateful. One last question under this line Item—no, not this Item, but 02/001/23: Fees. I am seeing an increase of 2.2 million for Fees. Could the hon. Minister indicate, what are the intended fees to be paid in this fiscal, please? Will that be broken up into legal and otherwise?

Hon. Zakour: This is legal claims and audit fees, Member.

Mr. Marcelle: Deeply grateful, Minister.

Hon. Zakour: Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Item 002: Vehicles and Equipment Maintenance. Item 005: Port of Spain Transit Centre. Item 006: Para Transit Unit. Item 007: Property Development Services. 008: Transit Express Commuter Services. Sub-Head 03: Minor Equipment Purchases; Item 001: General Administration. Sub-Head 04: Current Transfers and Subsidies; Item 007: Households. 009: Other Transfers. 57. Trinidad and Tobago Civil Aviation Authority, page 237; Item 001: General Administration. Laventille West.

Mr. Marcelle: Just one question on this whole section, please, Mr. Chairman. Item 01/001/01. I am seeing an increase of 4.8million this fiscal. Could the hon. Minister what indicate, what are the vacancies under this line Item, and whether the Authority intends to fill these vacancies within this fiscal year, please?

Hon. Zakour: We currently have 1616 vacancies, and yes we intend to fill them this fiscal year. Sir.

Mr. Marcelle: Deeply grateful, Mr. Chairman. That is it.

Mr. Chairman: Sub-Head 02: Goods and Services; Item 001: General Administration. Sub-Head 03: Minor Equipment Purchases; Item 001: General Administration. Sub-Head 04: Current Transfers and Subsidies; Item 001: Regional Bodies. Item 004: International Bodies. Item 007: Households.

Hon. Members, we shall now move on to the *Draft Estimates of the Development Programme* Consolidated Fund, page 99. As we change volumes. A. Administrative Services. Item 003: Economic Infrastructure. P. Coastal Protection. A. Air Transport. B. Bus Transport. Arouca/Lopinot.

Mr. Gonzales: Minister, under Bus Transport: I have observed a number of items, and I will ask a collective question in the interest of time. Upgrade of the Port of Spain Maxi Taxi Facility; Development of a Passenger Facility at Rio Claro; 68. Design and Construction of a New Multimodel Transportation Hub at Tarouba, Design and construction of a new multi-model Transportation Hub at Factory Road, in Chaguanas. Preparation for Master Space Plan for all existing and proposed PTSC facilities. Then you have the respective allocations.

Can you state, whether or not the allocations to pursue these projects are sufficient to commence in this fiscal year, because they have been around for some time. I know.

Hon. Zakour: Currently we are going with the preliminary works, and yes it is sufficient, Member.

Mr. Gonzales: For all of the Items, I have just mentioned?

Hon. Zakour: Yes. The [*Inaudible*] will guide everything for all the works moving forward, Member.

4.35 p.m.

Mr. Gonzales: Which state agency or procurement vehicle your Ministry intends to utilize to implement those projects?

Hon. Zakour: That has not been decided as yet, Member.

Mr. Gonzales: All of these projects have been approved by Cabinet, and that is the only allocation you have for their full implementation, Minister?

Appropriation Bill, 2025
Head 34: Ministry of Transport
& Civil Aviation (cont'd)

Hon. Zakour: Some have Cabinet approval.

Mr. Gonzales: Some have?

Hon. Zakour: Yes. From previously, yes.

Mr. Gonzales: Some do not have?

Hon. Zakour: Correct.

Mr. Gonzales: Can you state which one of them has?

Hon. Zakour: I will submit that writing to you, Sir.

Mr. Gonzales: Thank you very much.

Mr. Chairman: Laventille East/Morvant.

Mr. Birchwood: Thank you, Chair. To the hon. Minister, what does preliminary works constitute? I only ask because we have a cost, but we may need a scope and a timeline of completion. The three pillars of project management, basically.

Hon. Zakour: Surveys. It is for the survey works, Member.

Mr. Birchwood: Okay, but timeline?

Hon. Zakour: I do not have a timeline. I will submit it in writing.

Mr. Birchwood: Thank you.

Hon. Zakour: You are welcome.

Mr. Chairman: G. Road Systems Operations and Services. Yes. Arouca/Lopinot.

Mr. Gonzales: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. Minister, Road Systems Operations and Services. What do you propose to do with this allocation of \$5.5 million?

Hon. Zakour: Which line Item, Sir?

Mr. Gonzales: Road Systems, Operations and Services. It is G.

Hon. Zakour: Several line Items, Sir, several.

Mr. Gonzales: Okay, so at 086, I am assuming Provision of Road Safety Audit on the Roadways of Trinidad is part of this line Item?

Hon. Zakour: Yes, it is a road safety assessment for 8,320 kilometres of roadways.

Mr. Gonzales: Minister, I see under the Provision of Road Safety Audit on the Roadways of Trinidad, you have an allocation of \$500,000. What is this Road Safety Audit about? In other words, Minister, what do you plan to achieve by that audit?

Hon. Zakour: Member, it was to collect data on the movement of vehicles and to assess the safety of the roadways as well, Member.

Mr. Gonzales: Thank you very much. Minister, in light of the horrific and unfortunate increase in road fatalities in Trinidad and Tobago and serious road accidents, do you expect that with the full implementation of what you are seeking to achieve under this line Item, that you expect to implement recommendations from this audit that will hopefully see a reduction in road fatalities and serious road accidents?

Hon. Zakour: So this would be integrated with the national transportation policy, this is just one component.

Mr. Gonzales: The national—

Hon. Zakour: We are currently working on the national transportation policy and this would be a component of that policy.

Mr. Gonzales: So, you do not know whether or not coming out of this, we expect to see recommendations for the reduction in serious road accidents and road fatalities.

Hon. Zakour: So this Government takes road safety very seriously and we have

been rolling out road safety plans as the weeks have been passing. As you will notice, we started erecting road safety signs on all the highways throughout the country. I am sure you may have noticed.

Mr. Gonzales: What I am asking, Sir, is in light of the—I know what you say your commitment is going to be. I do not expect you to say that you are not committed to safer roads. We are expected to be all committed to safer roads in Trinidad and Tobago. So, I am not going down that road.

Hon. Zakour: See, our mandate is to make the roads in Trinidad and Tobago safer.

Mr. Gonzales: No, no, please. I am asking the question. I have five minutes to put my question to you. So do not get into it. All I just want to know, Minister, is whether or not coming out of this line Item, 086, that the Ministry expects to implement perhaps recommendations that would result in the reduction of road fatalities and serious road accidents? That is simple as it is.

Hon. Zakour: Yes. Yes, Member.

Mr. Gonzales: Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: I. Administration. Arouca/Lopinot.

Mr. Gonzales: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. Expenses—that is Administration, I. 100. Expenses of the Steering Committee and Project Unit - Transformation of the Transport Division. What is the mandate of that Committee, Minister? And is this an active committee in the Ministry?

Hon. Zakour: Member, this was intended to be the contract unit team to manage the transformation of the Transport Division to an authority, which never got off the ground, as you are very much aware.

Mr. Gonzales: So what do you plan to do with that allocation of \$100,000?

Hon. Zakour: It is currently being re-evaluated, Sir.

Mr. Gonzales: What is the response, Minister?

Hon. Zakour: It is currently being re-evaluated. Nothing much has been done in the last 10 years regarding this, Member.

Mr. Gonzales: Fair enough, but you have an allocation of \$100,000. The question I am asking is not whether or not you intend to re-evaluate the committee, or the roles of the committee. How do you plan to spend the \$100,000 allocation under this line Item?

Hon. Zakour: There was one Member of staff who recently retired, Member.

Mr. Gonzales: And?

Hon. Zakour: We will have to fill that position.

Mr. Gonzales: You are looking to fill that position?

Hon. Zakour: Yes, Sir.

Mr. Gonzales: So it is a functioning committee?

Hon. Zakour: It will be. Yes, Sir.

Mr. Gonzales: Thank you.

Hon. Zakour: Member—[*Inaudible*]—for some time. You are very much aware.

Mr. Gonzales: No, no, no. Let us not go down that road.

Mr. Chairman: Item 005: Multi-sectoral and Other Services; P. VMCOTT, V-M-C-O-T-T rather, for the accuracy of the public record. A. Administrative Services. Laventille East/Morvant.

Mr. Birchwood: Thank you, Mr. Chair. A. 140: Procurement of Software Management Systems for the Operationalization of the MVRTA Amendments. What software is that, hon. Minister?

Hon. Zakour: So this is a U-turn and the red light enforcement systems.

Appropriation Bill, 2025
Head 34: Ministry of Transport
& Civil Aviation (cont'd)

2025.10.24

Mr. Birchwood: Okay. Four million?

Hon. Zakour: I am sorry, Member?

Mr. Birchwood: I am seeing an Estimate of 4 million assigned to that?

Hon. Zakour: Yes, Member.

Mr. Birchwood: Okay. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: No further questions, I propose to put the question to the committee.

Question put and agreed to.

Head 34 ordered to stand part of the Schedule.

Hon. Zakour: Chairman, I would like to thank the Permanent Secretary and the technical team of the Ministry of Transport and Civil Aviation, who worked tirelessly over the last few days to put this document together. I would also like to apologize to them for what they experienced earlier with the Member for Diego Martin North/East, and I thank you.

Mr. Chairman: I too should like to do so—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Chairman:—and express my gratitude to the public officers who would have attended and assisted in preparation towards lending assistance to the Parliament. So, thank you on behalf of everyone.

I propose to move to Head 67, but it now quarter to five. I propose to come back at five past five, and then we sit straight through, at 5.05. Yes, thank you. Suspend until five minutes past five. Thank you.

4.45 p.m.: *Standing Finance Committee suspended.*

5.05p.m.: *Standing Finance Committee resumed.*

Mr. Chairman: Alright, this meeting of the Standing Finance Committee is now

hereby reconvened. I am to announce that there has been an agreement between both sides to examine the following Heads before Head 67: The Ministry of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development. We propose to examine Head 23, Head 04, and Head 03 in that order. So I propose to start at Head 23: Office of the Attorney General. Hon. Attorney General, are you ready, or do you need to wait for your staff?

Hon. Jeremie SC: I am ready, Chair.

Head 23: Office of the Attorney General, \$282,267,600.

Mr. Chairman: I will now invite the Attorney General to make a brief opening statement within the usual time.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Jeremie SC: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. The Estimates of Expenditure before this Committee this afternoon are set out in the Appropriation Bill, which was laid on the same day that the budget was read; that is, the 13th of October, 2025. Consistent with section 113 of the Constitution, Part 3 of the Exchequer and Audit Act, the allocations for the Office of the Attorney General for the financial year 2026 are before this Committee this afternoon.

As I begin, I must recognize the many public servants and administrative staff who have worked tirelessly at the Office of the Attorney General, and who would have spent many hours putting together the submissions and materials which are to be discussed today. Their dedication and diligence keep the Office of the Attorney General operating, and I wish to record my sincere appreciation for their efforts.

The Office plays an important role as the guardian of the public interest, the principal legal advisor to the State and the custodian of the rule of law.

Members will be aware that substantial structural changes have taken place at the office with the splitting off of the Ministry of Legal Affairs, which has now evolved into the Ministry of Land and Legal Affairs, while the Ministry of Justice has been reestablished to assume responsibility for certain functions, previously housed within the Attorney General's purview.

In other words, there is not this year, as there was in the last fiscal, a Ministry of the Attorney General and Legal Affairs. These institutional realignments were undertaken to rationalize and strengthen the delivery of security legal services across the state sector. Some of the responsibilities—not all that are stated in the most recent *Gazette*—have influenced the budgetary submissions and allocations that are before us today.

Various critical entities and divisions I refer to as falling within and under the office of the Attorney General include: The DPP's Office, the civil law department, the Central Authority Unit, the Antiterrorism Unit, the Law Reform Commission, and the International Law and Human Rights Unit, among others. Added responsibility for the ACIB, the Anti-Corruption Investigation Bureau, has recently been returned to the Office, and areas of responsibility for the SSC have also been assigned. There are no allocations in respect of either, in Head 23.

The work of these divisions is far-reaching. I am not now convinced that the units are all indispensable to our core mission: the rule of law, promotion of justice, and security, but that is an exercise for another day.

Collectively, the units provide services including advice and representation to all Ministries and state enterprises, manage and defend civil litigation against the State, draft legislation in accordance with the Government's legislative agenda, facilitate international cooperation in criminal matters through mutual legal

assistance, and ensure that Trinidad and Tobago continues to meet its international obligations under a wide range of international treaties and conventions.

Mr. Chairman: I hate to do this, but I am advised by the clerk that the five-minute period is finished.

Hon Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Chairman: So, I will propose the question, and I suppose you will get a chance to give a more fulsome response, perhaps in the question period.

5.15 p.m.

Question proposed: That Head 23 stand part of the Schedule.

Mr. Chairman: Hon. Members, this sum of \$282,267,600 for Head 23: Office of the Attorney General is comprised of moneys proposed for expenditure under the following Sub-Heads and Items to be found in the *Draft Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure* and the *Draft Estimates of Development Programme*. We shall now proceed to consider the *Draft Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure*. These estimates are to be found at pages 157 to 160 of the relevant volume. So, we start with Sub-Head 01: Personnel Expenditure; Item 001: General Administration. Shall I await Members to get to the relevant page?

Hon. Members: No.

Mr. Chairman: Okay. Item 002: Law Reform Commission; Item 003: Equal Opportunity Commission; Item 005: Law Revision Commission; Item 007: Intellectual Property Office; Item 009: Criminal Law Department. Sub-Head 02: Goods and Services; Item 001—

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping and laughter*]

Appropriation Bill, 2025
Head 23: Office of the
Attorney General (cont'd)

Mr. Chairman: You know, if is two things the Member to my left specializes in is disturbing me and jocularly.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Mr. Chairman: Sub-Head 02: Goods and Services; Item 001: General Administration. I am going to proceed quickly, unless I am told otherwise. Item 002: Law Reform Commission; Item 003: Equal Opportunity Commission; Item 005: Law Revision Commission; Item 007: Intellectual Property Office; Item 009: Criminal Law Department. Sub-Head 03: Minor Equipment Purchases; Item 001: General Administration; Item 002: Law Reform Commission; Item 003: Equal Opportunity Commission.

Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]

Mr. Chairman: All right. Item 005: Law Revision Commission; Item 007: Intellectual Property Office; Item 009: Criminal Law Department. Sub-Head 04: Current Transfers and Subsidies, pages 168 to 169, inclusive; Item 005: Non-profit Institutions; Item 007: Households; Item 009: Other Transfers; Item 010: Other Transfers Abroad.

Hon. Members, we will now move to the *Draft Estimates of Development Programme*, Consolidated Fund. Item 005: Multi-Sectoral and Other Services; A. Administrative Services, page 69; F. Public Buildings, pages 69 to 70; C. Welfare Services, page 71. Seeing that there are no questions to the hon. Attorney General on any of the Items.

Question put and agreed to.

Head 23 ordered to stand part of the Schedule.

Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]

Mr. Chairman: All right. We are moving on quickly. I invite the hon. Attorney General to invite the staff of the Industrial Court to take the place of the staff of the Attorney General.

Head 04: Industrial Court, \$28,889,200.

Mr. Chairman: I will now invite the hon. Attorney General to make a brief opening statement not exceeding five minutes, should he propose to do so on the Industrial Court.

Hon. Jeremie SC: Mr. Chairman, I am authorized to read this statement on behalf of the Industrial Court, which is a separate entity from the Attorney General, although it falls within my purview. It is a constitutional anachronism, along with the Judiciary.

It is my pleasure to appear before this sitting of the Standing Finance Committee to present the budgetary allocation of the Industrial Court for examination. The Industrial Court is an important judicial institution in Trinidad and Tobago, which came into existence almost 60 years ago under the Industrial Stabilisation Act, and at that time, became the first Industrial Court in the English-speaking Caribbean.

The court, as a superior court of record, achieves its mandate of upholding the principles and practices of good industrial relations as pillars of industrial peace, economic and social development, through the resolution of disputes between trade unions and employers by way of conciliation, which is voluntary, amicable dispute resolution and by the adjudication of matters where necessary. The court is seized with the power to adjudicate on and therefore, resolve unresolved disputes between employers and unions that deal with the minimum wages, retrenchment and severance benefits, maternity protection, and occupational health and safety matters, among others.

Additionally, there is a special tribunal established by the Civil Service Act, which hears and determines disputes in the civil service, the police service, the fire service, the prison service, the teaching service, the supplemental police and the Central Bank.

The court is comprised of a complement of 26 members, judges who are appointed based on their expertise in areas of industrial relations law, economics and accounting. I recognize and value the contribution of the court to Trinidad and Tobago, and I look forward to discussing this Head of Expenditure.

Question proposed: That Head 04 stand part of the Schedule.

Mr. Chairman: Hon. Members, this sum of \$28,889,200 for Head 04: Industrial Court is comprised of moneys proposed for expenditure under the following Sub-Heads and Items to be found in the *Draft Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure* and the *Draft Estimates of Development Programme*. We shall now consider the *Draft Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure*, which is to be found at page 18 of the relevant volume. Sub-Head 01: Personnel Expenditure; Item 001: General Administration. Sub-Head 02. Member for Arima.

Ms. Beckles: Thank you kindly. Hon. Attorney General, as it relates to Item 23: Salaries - Direct Charges, I see there is a decrease of \$5.242 million. Could you indicate the reason for that decrease, please?

Hon. Jeremie SC: Let me just—

Ms. Beckles: Item 23?

5.25 p.m.

Hon. Jeremie SC: Say again?

Ms. Beckles: Yeah, 23: Salaries - Direct Charges 5.242.

Hon. Jeremie SC: Okay. So, if you—just be patient with me—

Ms. Beckles: Sure.

Hon. Jeremie SC:—This is not my institution. It is supposed to be a separate institution—and it is of course. I am told that this is because there has been an overlap with three judges who will be leaving the court on November 6th as they received extensions. Three new judges were appointed on August 28th, the overlap increased expenses under 23/24/31 and the funds will perhaps have to be adjusted to take into account the realities.

Ms. Beckles: Okay. So that—I am just trying to follow—Okay, so three judges are leaving? Yes.

Hon. Jeremie SC: Yes, but they were extended.

Ms. Beckles: Or they were extended. Okay. So—I mean, why would there be a decrease then? Would it not there be a continuation of employment—in other words, would their salary not automatically continue?

Hon. Jeremie SC: I think that there would have been—let me seek advice from the institution.

Ms. Beckles: Okay. Yes.

Hon. Jeremie SC: I could give a guess. Okay, so I am told that it has to do with concurrent terms, the three persons who have been extended, there was an allocation for three other judges—this is what the public servants tell me and the anomaly there may be accounted for by that.

Ms. Beckles: Yeah, well I understand because it is not your—

Hon. Jeremie SC: Just hold on a second please. There is another answer, which I mean I could give, which is that direct charges do not form a part of the Appropriation Bill. So the question is not really before us. I would like to be as helpful as possible, but that is helpful as I can be.

Ms. Beckles: Well, you know, I do not quite understand the explanation, I would not—I do know if it is worth it to belabor the point, but—

Hon. Jeremie SC: Okay.

Mr. Chairman: Sub-Head 02: Goods and Services. Pages 18 to 20. Item 001: General Administration. Member for Arima.

Ms. Beckles: Okay. Yes under 002: Rent/Lease – Office Accommodation and Storage, an increase of \$488,000, is that in relation to the court itself or is that another building? Hon. Attorney General, 08: Rent/Lease - Office Accommodation and Storage.

Hon. Jeremie SC: I am told that, that relates to arrears of rent. I have no particulars beyond that which have to be paid in the current fiscal—last fiscal there were not sufficient funds to pay rent.

Ms. Beckles: I do not need the answer now, but if they can provide at—exactly which building they are referring to, I am fine with that.

Hon. Jeremie SC: Okay. So on that—I am careful about giving commitments—

Ms. Beckles: Yes.

Hon. Jeremie SC:—especially if I have no control over the commitments and I am not supposed to have control over the commitments.

Ms. Beckles: Yes.

Hon. Jeremie SC: So, what I would undertake to do is, to ask a question and if that question is answered, to provide the answer to you. Fair enough?

Ms. Beckles: Well, the only thing, hon. Attorney General—I mean I am not trying to create any unnecessary mischief, “yuh kno”, I am just saying that they have a building here they are paying. I am just asking—I do not think it is too difficult “yuh kno”. Because if they put it here for that figure—

Hon. Jeremie SC: I do not think it was difficult either, but it is just—it does not typically concern me. It is not the Office of the Attorney General. It is not across the street.

Ms. Beckles: Well, I mean—so you can ask the two ladies assisting you if it is a difficult request.

Hon. Jeremie SC: No, I can ask them, but with the greatest respect, if they tell me they will provide the answer by tomorrow, I am not going to give you an undertaking that the answer would be provided by tomorrow.

Ms. Beckles: No. I did not ask for it tomorrow. I am saying within reasonable time.

Hon. Jeremie SC: If they told me they would provide the answer within the next year, I am not going to give you an undertaking to provide the answer the next year. I do not know. All that I can say, is that I will endeavour to get an answer, if that answer is provided, I would be happy to give it to you. That is the best that I can do. If it is in the Office of the Attorney General, sure.

Ms. Beckles: Attorney General, all I could say is that I know you are here and I know you want to be very meticulous, but I am sure that those ladies there are quite competent, because this is a simple issue, but I will move on.

Mr. Chairman: Item 002: South Office. Item 003: Tobago

Ms. Beckles: What page are you on, just to be clear.

Mr. Chairman: Page 20.

Ms. Beckles: 20? Okay, thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Yes. We now go to page 21, Sub-Head 03: Minor Equipment Purchases, Item 001: General Administration. Sub Head 04: Current Transfers and Subsidies, Item 007: Households. Hon. Members, we now move to the *Draft Estimates of the Development Programme*, Consolidated Fund, Item 005: Multi-Sectoral and Other Services at page 7 A. Administrative Services. F. Public—

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Chairman: Seven.

Ms. Beckles: Seven, thank you. Sure. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: There are no questions I take it. F. Public Buildings. Okay, I propose to put the question.

Question put and agreed to.

Head 04 ordered to stand part of the Schedule.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Chairman: Hon. Attorney General, allow me to thank the staff of the Industrial Court for attending and assisting us. Thank you all very much.

5.35 p.m.

Head 03: Judiciary, \$517,004,850.

Mr. Chairman: I will now invite the Attorney General to make a brief opening statement not exceeding five minutes, should the hon. Attorney General choose to exercise the option to do so.

Hon. Jeremie SC: Chair, the opening remarks, which were approved, were approved by the hon. Chief Justice who has resigned. I would read those remarks. I attempted to reach the Chief Justice on behalf of the Judiciary today.

Mr. Chairman: A matter entirely for you, hon. Attorney General. But as I said, that is why I gave you the option of doing so. Should you choose not to do so, that is readily understandable.

Hon. Jeremie SC: I think it is noncontroversial. If, as I read it, I see something that I think I should not say, I undertake to do the proper thing. May I begin?

Mr. Chairman: Yes. Of course.

Hon. Jeremie SC: The Judiciary of Trinidad and Tobago continues to operate as an independent arbiter to resolve disputes that arise in the society. The Government continues to work with the Judiciary to ensure adequate funding is provided for its operations, and to provide the necessary resources to ensure

targeted improvements in systems and processes that affect the administration of justice. There continues to be open lines of communication between the Judiciary and the Executive, inclusive of the various agencies, Ministries and Departments involved in the justice sector.

As a responsible Government, we recognize the need to carefully consider the limited resources of the State, and to balance the needs of the Judiciary against the needs of the other areas of the State. In doing so, I am pleased to advise that the Minister of Finance has been able to maintain the level of funding at 1.05 per cent of the national budget, more importantly, sufficient, as required, to meet the annual commitments of the Judiciary for the 2026 fiscal period. The Government continues to support the Judiciary in its transformation efforts and will also provide direct support to improve and expand physical court facilities and ensure expanded access to court services by all stakeholders.

The Judiciary has been allocated just over \$660 million for recurrent and capital expenditure for fiscal 2026, representing a decrease of \$48 million. This reduced sum can be accounted for under the Ministry of Justice, the agency now responsible for construction and refurbishment of court facilities. The sum of \$643 million has been provided to fund recurrent activities, and \$16 million has been provided for capital expenditure and development projects—sorry. I mean, I am trying to speak, but I am hearing my friend from Diego Martin North/East across there as I am speaking.

Mr. Chairman: Member for Diego Martin North/East, I am getting a complaint from the hon. Attorney General.

Hon. Jeremie SC: My ears have declined in value over the years. So it has to be—. In the context of ensuring a properly-resourced Judiciary, this Government is committed to revisit this budget allocation, if required, at the mid-year review to

further support any critical initiatives needed by the—and this bit was put in today—newly appointed Chief Justice, to advance the Judiciary's service improvement thrust. I will now take your questions.

Question proposed: That Head 03 stand part of the Schedule.

Mr. Chairman: This sum of \$517,004,850 for Head 03: Judiciary is comprised of moneys proposed for expenditure under the following Sub-Head and Items to be found in the *Draft Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure* and the *Draft Estimates of Development Programme*.

We shall now consider the *Draft Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure*. These Items are to be found in the relevant volume at pages 11 to 12 inclusive, Sub-Head 01: Personnel Expenditure; Item 001: Judiciary - Trinidad. Member for Arima.

Ms. Beckles: Thank you kindly, Mr. Chairman. Hon. Attorney General, at 23—are we at—just 001 or have we gone to 02?

Mr. Chairman: No, 001.

Ms. Beckles: Okay. Well, I am at 23.

Hon. Jeremie SC: Twenty-three.

Ms. Beckles: Yeah, 001.

Mr. Chairman: Salaries - Direct Charges?

Ms. Beckles: Yes, please. Hon. Attorney General, I know this is not normally appropriated. I see there is a decrease of 67.9 million.

Hon. Jeremie SC: Okay. So, the first answer, of course, is I should not be having this discussion at all. But, the fact is that the decrease is not extraordinary. The figure last year represented a figure which was inflated because of the payment of arrears I am told by the public servant in charge of these matters.

Ms. Beckles: Okay. So, if you are saying that in 2025 it was inflated, you are saying that this is basically a recommendation that would have come from the

Judiciary to deal with the inflated figure?

Hon. Jeremie SC: No. I mean, it is not—the figure last year was greater than—

Ms. Beckles: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. Jeremie SC:—it was budgeted for. So, if you go back—and I am no expert. I am a lawyer, as you are. But, that 150 million is in stark contrast to the Estimate which is 53million. It is greater than—that is for fiscal 2025. I am told that the difference between the Estimate and the actual Revised Estimate is the SRC report. It is what I am told. The 2026 Estimate does not, obviously, have that SRC report factor. So it is back down. And, to me, that makes sense as a lawyer. I am not an accountant. And, I do not think that Diego Martin North/East is an accountant either. He might have spent some time in the finance, but I do not know what he was doing there.

Ms. Beckles: So—

Hon. Jeremie SC: Many things, a contractor—

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Hon. Jeremie SC:—a lawyer.

Ms. Beckles: Attorney General.

Hon. Jeremie SC: I am sorry.

Ms. Beckles: So, therefore, the arrears would amount basically to almost about twice the salary? Based on what you have indicated.

Hon. Jeremie SC: Those are the figures which I have.

Ms. Beckles: Well, I am just asking, you know.

Hon. Jeremie SC: And I am just answering on the basis of the figures I have.

Ms. Beckles: Alright. I mean, it is something that I am sure the public would like to know, when you see that amount. So that is what I am doing.

Hon. Jeremie SC: Well, the Judiciary is here, thankfully, next to me, the Chief

Public Officer in the Judiciary—

5.45 p.m.

Ms. Beckles: Because there is no way I would know, unless—

Hon. Jeremie SC: Can I just finish?

Ms. Beckles: Yeah.

Hon. Jeremie SC: The Judiciary is here, thankfully, next to me, the Chief Public Officer inside there, and I think I am entitled to take her at her word.

Ms. Beckles: Yes.

Hon. Jeremie SC: Okay.

Ms. Beckles: So all I am saying is that—

Hon. Jeremie SC: It is from her lips to my ears.

Ms. Beckles: Yeah. I would not know just looking at it, that is why I am just trying to get the information.

Hon. Jeremie SC: I am not trying to be difficult, but that is the answer.

Mr. Chairman: Can I move on, 002: Judiciary Tobago; Sub-Head 02: Goods and Services, pages 12 to 14; Item 001: Judiciary Trinidad; Item 002: Judiciary Tobago; Sub-Head 03: Minor Equipment Purchases, page 15; Item 001: Judiciary Trinidad; Sub-Head 04: Current Transfers and Subsidies, pages 15 to 16 inclusive; Item 002: Commonwealth Bodies: Item 007: Households; Item 009: Other Transfers; Item 011: Transfers to State Enterprises.

Hon. Members, we will now move to the *Draft Estimates of the Development Programme*. Consolidated Fund, Item 005: Multi-Sectoral and Other Services; A. Administrative Services, page four. F. Public Buildings, pages 4 and 5. Hon. Members, we will now move on to the Infrastructure Development Fund. Item 005: Multi-Sectoral and Other Services page 238; F. Public Buildings. There being no questions, I propose to put the question to the Committee.

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Question put and agreed to.

Head 03 ordered to stand part of the Schedule.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Chairman: Hon. Attorney General, I thank you very much for taking time off your very, very busy schedule together with your staff to attend, and the staff of the Judiciary. Thank you very much.

Head 67: Ministry of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development, \$322,478,000.

Mr. Chairman: I will invite the Minister of Planning, Economic Affairs, and Development to make a brief opening statement not exceeding the usual five minutes.

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Thank you, Chair and Members of the SFC and thank you for the opportunity to be here today. I also want to extend gratitude to the hon. Prime Minister, especially for her wisdom in forming and working with a cluster which includes the Minister of Finance, the Minister of Trade, Investment and Tourism, and myself. I want to thank them for their collaborative work and especially the staff in the Ministry of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development, who have also worked assiduously throughout and I want to express my gratitude to them for their diligence and hard work and their contribution.

We at the Ministry of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development fully acknowledge the critical importance of deliberation surrounding budgetary allocation for fiscal '26, and we are committed to advancing the theme of this budget, which is T&T First: Building economic Fairness through Accountable Fiscal Policies. I also wish to thank the Minister of Finance for the tremendous work that he and his team have done in preparing this.

As a Ministry, we stand at the forefront of developing and driving policies,

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plans and programmes that foster social, spatial, political, economic and environmental progress across Trinidad and Tobago. Mr. Chairman, our portfolio includes several core responsibilities under the aforementioned, as well as oversight of the *Public Sector Investment Programme* working with other state agencies such as CARIRI, EMA, IMA and the CDA and we are resolute in our mission to build a more prosperous, fairer and stronger Trinidad and Tobago through accountable fiscal policies as stated in this year's budget by the hon. Minister of Finance. Take your questions, Chair and Members.

Question proposed: That Head 67 stand part of the Schedule.

Mr. Chairman: This sum of \$322,478,000, for Head 67: Ministry of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development is comprised of moneys proposed for expenditure under the following Sub-Heads and Items to be found in the *Draft Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure*, the *Draft Estimates of the Revenue and Expenditure of the Statutory Boards and Similar Bodies and of the Tobago House of Assembly* and the *Draft Estimates of the Development Programme*.

We shall now consider the *Draft Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure*, which is to be found between pages 362 and 365 of the relevant volume. Sub-Head 01: Personnel Expenditure; Item 001: General Administration; 003: Technical Co-operation; 004: Central Statistical Office; 005: Urban and Regional Planning Division; 006: Green Fund Executing Unit; 008: Project Planning and Reconstruction Division; 009: Environmental Policy and Planning Division; Sub-Head 02: Good and Services. Member for Arima.

Ms. Beckles: Thank you kindly.

Mr. Chairman: Environment Policy and Planning Division?

Ms. Beckles: No, next one, Good and Services. Sorry.

Mr. Chairman: Goods and Services, Item 001: General Administration.

Ms. Beckles: Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Go ahead.

Ms. Beckles: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Hon. Minister, 08: Rent/Lease-Office Accommodation and Storage. I see there is a decrease of just over \$1 million. Any indication as it relates to that decrease?

5.55 p.m.

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: That is 08? Thank you, hon. Member, for the question. Yes. We are actually in the process of moving some offices to more affordable accommodation.

Ms. Beckles: Okay. Can you, at the point in time, share what are those offices and where you are likely to move?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Well, we have some proposed locations and I am waiting for public admin to vet and to be able to confirm that we can accommodate moving to those accommodations.

Ms. Beckles: Okay. Thank you. Mr. Chairman, I have one more.

Mr. Chairman: Yes.

Ms. Beckles: Item 22, hon. Minister. I see that as it relates to short-term employment, there is a decrease of \$3.3 million. Can you say how is that likely to impact? What is the reason for such a large decrease?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Thank you. Some of these positions are now being moved into permanent, longer contract periods. So, currently, the number of persons employed in short-term will decrease as a result of the renewal of contract positions. As you know, we had a lot of short-terms persons—

Ms. Beckles: Yes.

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh:—in lieu of new contracts being—[*Inaudible*]

Ms. Beckles: Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: I propose to go to Item 002: Library Service Unit; 003: Technical Co-operation; 004: Central Statistical Office; 005—Member for Arima.

Ms. Beckles: Thank you kindly. Hon. Minister, as it relates to the Contract Employment under the Central Statistical Office—are you there or technical—sorry, my apologies.

Mr. Chairman: CSO?

Ms. Beckles: Yes.

Mr. Chairman: I came back to CSO.

Ms. Beckles: Thank you very much. Yes. Hon. Minister, are there any additional positions for that Central Statistical Office, or is this simply as it relates to increased payments of salaries?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Just now, let me just find out where we are. My apologies.

Ms. Beckles: It is 16. 1-6.

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Oh, page 16. Sorry.

Ms. Beckles: No, not page 16. Item 16.

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Oh, Item 16. My apologies. Oh, sorry, yes. Sorry. Do you mind, Member, repeating your question?

Ms. Beckles: I am just asking. I see there is an increase of \$373,000 for that. Is that some additional positions?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: At the CSO? Yes. Currently, as you know, CSO is one of the bigger areas where there are many vacancies—

Ms. Beckles: Okay.

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh:—and we want to fill that, given the work ahead next year.

Ms. Beckles: That is it.

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Laventille East/Morvant.

Mr. Birchwood: Thank you, Mr. Chair. To the hon. Minister, line Item 17, I am also seeing an increase in Training. Could the Minister specify what training? What type of training?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Of course. Thank you very much. So, there are areas in training identified, for example, sampling methods to improve sampling skills of statisticians, which is geared specifically towards accomplishing the vision and mission of the CSO, together with intermediate and advance statistics to enhance statistical techniques and data analytic skills that will enhance the CSO's data-gathering processes.

Mr. Birchwood: The agencies that—

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Sorry. Say that again.

Mr. Birchwood: The agencies that are doing this training were outsourced, right? External?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Yes, so the official training workshops, which are part of the TCs as well, that we were able to access both from UNDP and others agencies.

Mr. Birchwood: Okay.

Mr. Chairman: Item 005: Urban and Regional Planning Division; 006: Green Fund Executing Unit; 008: Project Planning and Reconstruction Division; 009: Environment Policy and Planning Division.

Sub-Head 03: Minor Equipment Purchases, pages 371 to 373; Item 001: General Administration; 002: Library Service Unit; 003: Technical Co-operation; 004: Central Statistical Office; 005: Urban and Regional Planning Division; 006:

Appropriation Bill, 2025
Head 67: Ministry of Planning,
Economic Affairs & Development (cont'd)

2025.10.24

Green Fund Executing Unit; 008: Project Planning and Reconstruction Division;
009: Environmental Policy and Planning Division.

Sub-Head 04: Current Transfers and Subsidies, pages 373 to 376; Item 001:
Regional Bodies. Member for Arima.

Ms. Beckles: Hon. Minister, I see the decrease of \$6.506 million for your Current Transfers and Subsidies.

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Sorry?

Ms. Beckles: Just under 04, just above Regional Bodies, I see there is a decrease of \$6.5 million. Page 373, 04, last one to the bottom, Current Transfers and Subsidies.

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: I think this may refer to the National Trust that I think may have been transferred. Sorry. I am not sure which number you are at.

Ms. Beckles: 04, right to the end, Current Transfers and Subsidies.

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: 04.

Mr. Chairman: It is at the bottom of the page 372, Minister.

Ms. Beckles: There is a figure, the Estimate is \$79.392 million, a decrease of \$6.52 million.

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Just now, Member. Let me find it, please.

Ms. Beckles: Sure.

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Anyway, for the total—what I can say is that National Trust has been transferred out of the Ministry to the Prime Minister's Office, so there is a reduction—

Ms. Beckles: That accounts for the—

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Yeah, for the \$3.2 million.

Ms. Beckles: Okay.

Appropriation Bill, 2025
 Head 67: Ministry of Planning,
 Economic Affairs & Development (cont'd)

2025.10.24

Mr. Chairman: 002: Commonwealth Bodies; 003: United Nations Organisations; 004: International Bodies; 005: Non Profit Institutions; 006: Educational Institutions; 007: Households.

Ms. Beckles: Hon. Minister, as it relates to 03, under Households, Settlements to Cane Farmers re-2007 transition, I see a decrease of \$3.645 million. Is it that most of the payments have been made now?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: As you know, there were three tranches, and so I think we have paid the majority of persons in tranche one, but there was a 53 per cent payment in tranches two and three, of which I think there is still a number outstanding. I can get the exact number for you. The number outstanding in tranche two would be 185,000, but we have a number of persons outstanding in tranche one with 373.

Ms. Beckles: Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Item 009: Other Transfers; 010: Other Transfers Aboard.

Sub-Head 06: Current Transfers to Statutory Boards & Similar Bodies; Item 004: Statutory Boards, page 376.

Hon. Members, we will move on to the *Draft Estimates of the Revenue and Expenditure of the Statutory Boards and Similar Bodies and of the Tobago House of Assembly*. 02 - Institute of Marine Affairs.

6.05 p.m.

Sub-Head 01: Personnel Expenditure, this is to be found at page 441 of that volume. Item 001: General Administration, Sub-Head 02: Goods and Services, Item 001: General Administration, Sub-Head 03: Minor Equipment Purchases, Item 001: General Administration, Sub-Head 04: Current Transfers and Subsidies, Item 007: Households.

UNREVISED

Appropriation Bill, 2025
 Head 67: Ministry of Planning,
 Economic Affairs & Development (cont'd)

49 - Chaguaramas Development Authority, page 450. Sub-Head 01: Personnel Expenditure, Item 001: General Administration, Sub-Head 02: Goods and Services, Item 001: General Administration, Sub-Head 03: Minor Equipment Purchases.

Ms. Beckles: Mr. Chairman, what page are you on?

Mr. Chairman: I am on page 450, I am about to move to 451.

Ms. Beckles: Okay.

Mr. Chairman: Sub-Head 03: Minor Equipment Purchases, Item 001: General Administration, Sub-Head 04: Current Transfers and Subsidies, Item 007: Households, Item 009: Other Transfers.

Hon. Members, we shall now move to *Draft Estimates of the Development Programme*. Consolidated Fund, Item 001: Pre- Investment, Line Ministries/Government Agencies Microzonation Studies in Trinidad and Tobago, Page 163. Item 004: Social Infrastructure, M. Central Statistical Office, page 164. A. Culture, page 165. Item 005: Multi-Sectoral and Other Services. Hon. Members, Item 005: Multi-sectoral and Other Services, spans five pages. I therefore propose to announce the project groups.

C. Caribbean Industrial Research Institute, page 166. D. Chaguaramas Area Development, page 166. F. Institute of Marine Affairs, pages 166 to 167. A. Administrative Services, pages 168 to 169. C. Foreign and Technical Assistance page 169. F—

Ms. Beckles: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Chairman: Sorry, do you have a question on—?

Ms. Beckles: Where are you, did you past 169?

Mr. Chairman: Well, C. Foreign and Technical Assistance at 169, and F. Public

Appropriation Bill, 2025
Head 67: Ministry of Planning,
Economic Affairs & Development (cont'd)

2025.10.24

Buildings at 169. So, I am still there.

Ms. Beckles: Okay, 169. Could I inquire hon. Minister, 118, Establishment of the Economic Development Board (EDB) /Council for Competitiveness and Innovation (CCI) which is a new project, could you share what that project is please? Thank you.

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: As you know the Economic Development Board was a board that was configured sometime in the first iteration of the Economic Development Board and was subsequently discontinued. We have revitalized the Economic Development Board, it has been approved by Cabinet. We are now going to be recommending board members if they are appointed by Cabinet.

Ms. Beckles: Thank you very much. At some point in time Minister when the board is established—well I guess, I can file a question then as it relates—so it is not officially established as yet.

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: No.

Ms. Beckles: The decision is taken to establishment?

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Yes, to re-establish the board. But note having been considered as yet.

Ms. Beckles: Okay, thank you.

Mr. Chairman: F. Public Buildings. B. Administration. Infrastructure Development Fund, Item 005: Multi-Sectoral and Other Services, page 294. F. Public Buildings. Alright, there being no questions, I propose to put the question to the Committee.

Question put and agreed to.

Head 67 ordered to stand part of the Schedule.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Chairman: Minister I thank you, and thank your staff for their kind, generous, and helpful assistant.

Hon. Dr. Swaratsingh: Thank you everyone, thank you for the questions and thank you to the staff as well. Thank you, Mr. Chairman, thank you colleagues.

Mr. Chairman: I now invite the Minister of Public Administration and Artificial Intelligence, whilst we await his staff.

Mr. Hosein: [*Interruption*]

Mr. Chairman: Barataria/San Juan could you stop disturbing the proceedings of this Committee?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Hosein: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Chairman: I am hearing you.

Ms. Beckles: What is he saying?

Mr. Chairman: Alright. Hon. Members for the sake of convenience and in keeping with the economy of time, and with the newly found conciliatory spirit on both sides—

Hon. Members: [*Laughter and desk thumping*]

Mr. Chairman:—and in accordance with Standing Order 126, there has been an agreement by both sides to examine Head 06: Service Commissions immediately after the examination of Head 31, as the Minister of Public Administration and Artificial Intelligence also bears responsibility, at least administrative responsibility for the Service Commission. So, I proposed to do the process with regard to the Ministry of Public Administration and Artificial Intelligence first, and then hopefully we shall, in short order, move to the Service Commissions. Minister, might I inquire as to your state of readiness? Thank you very much.

Head 31: Ministry of Public Administration and Artificial Intelligence,

\$1,570,513,513.

Mr. Chairman: I will now invite the Minister of Public Administration and Artificial Intelligence to make a brief opening statement, with the usual caveat that it not exceed five minutes. Thank you. Minister.

Hon. Smith: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Good afternoon to all Members present and to the listening and viewing public. Mr. Chairman, I wish to acknowledge the presentation of the 2026 national budget, by the hon. Davendranath Tancoo, MP, Minister of Finance, on October 13th 2025, a stellar job was done on that day. I wish also to recognize the hon. Prime Minister, in her leadership for this budget.

The inaugural budget themed T&T First: Building Economic Fairness through Accountable Fiscal Policies, is anchored by five strategic pillars for national development, and a firm commitment, Mr. Chairman, to the Trinidad and Tobago first policy.

Its primary goals are clear to restore good governance, to rebuild the economy, and of course, to improve the lives of all our citizens. We are in an era of technology, and standing still is no longer optional, but critical prerequisites for good governance, and of course, national growth.

The work of the Ministry of Public Administration and Artificial Intelligence is not solely centred on the formulation and implementation of systems and software, but is fundamentally focused on promoting transparency, harnessing the trust of citizens to utilize the technology, and creating opportunities to enhance delivery of public services digitally.

6.15 p.m.

Over the next five years, Chairman, the Ministry envisions a public service transformed by three core tenets: all government services fully online; increased

Appropriation Bill, 2025
Head 31: Ministry of Public Administration
& Artificial Intelligence (cont'd)

government efficiency with significant cost savings; and the realization of a truly digital and artificial intelligence enabled nation. The initiatives linked are designed and intended to modernize and transform the operations of the Trinidad and Tobago's public sector and prepare our workforce for a digital future. Our approach to artificial intelligence is indeed strategic and, of course, people centered.

We intend to build momentum by strengthening digital infrastructure, ensuring that AI becomes a driver of inclusivity and efficiency across the Government and expanding service accessibility for all citizens. We are therefore developing national strategies to ensure responsible AI adoption that enhances public service without replacing the human touch. Our focus is meaningful, inclusive and also will deliver tangible benefits to the everyday man on the ground in Trinidad and Tobago. As Minister of Public Administration and Artificial Intelligence I am resolute, together with all Cabinet Members, in building a stronger, more responsive, and deeply connected public service as we create an inter-connected nation where every citizen has access to government services with ease, efficiency, trust and confidence. Thank you, Chairman.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Question proposed: That Head 31 stand part of the Schedule

Mr. Chairman: This sum of \$1,570,513,513 for Head 31: Ministry of Public Administration and Artificial Intelligence is comprised of moneys proposed for expenditure under the following Sub-Heads and Items to be found in the *Draft Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure*, the *Draft Estimates of the Revenue and Expenditure of the Statutory Boards and Similar Bodies and of the Tobago House of Assembly*, and the *Draft Estimates of Development Programme*.

Appropriation Bill, 2025
Head 31: Ministry of Public Administration
& Artificial Intelligence (cont'd)

We shall now consider the *Draft Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure*. These Estimates are to be found in the relevant volume at pages 233 to 244 inclusive. Sub-Head 01: Personnel Expenditure; Item 001: General Administration. Member for Malabar/Mausica.

Mr. Romain: Thank you, Chair. Line Item 14: Remuneration to Members of Cabinet-Appointed Committees. The Estimate in 2025 was \$10,000, it is now \$250,800. Can the Minister indicate how many Cabinet appointed committees this applies to and what are the responsibilities of those committees?

Hon. Smith: Thank you for your question, Member. As it relates to that line Item, this is, as you said, an Estimate. We have already, through Cabinet approved several committees and so this allocation will go towards furnishing that.

Mr. Romain: Can you indicate what would be the responsibilities of those committees?

Hon. Smith: I will endeavour to provide that to you in writing.

Mr. Romain: Appreciated.

Hon. Smith: No problem.

Mr. Romain: Line Item 27: Government Contribution to Group Health Insurance - Monthly Paid Officers. Can the Minister indicate how many monthly paid officers that applies to?

Hon. Smith: Can the Member repeat, sorry.

Mr. Romain: Line Item 27: Government Contribution to Group Health Insurance - Monthly Paid Officers. Can the Minister indicate how many monthly paid officers that allocation applies to?

Hon. Smith: I am advised that that would account for 84.

Mr. Romain: Again I am assuming this is the UNIMED plan?

Appropriation Bill, 2025
Head 31: Ministry of Public Administration
& Artificial Intelligence (cont'd)

Hon. Smith: Yes.

Mr. Romain: Thank you. 01/001/01: Salaries and Cost of Living Allowance. Can the Minister indicate how many employees that applies to? How many permanent positions?

Hon. Smith: Member there are 135 positions, 84 have been filled in case you want that breakdown—

Mr. Romain: Yes.

Mr. Smith:—and 51 are vacant, expected to be filled to accommodate new positions.

Mr. Romain: Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Item 005: Property and Real Estate Management Services Division; Item 006: Public Management Consulting Division; Item 007: Public Service Academy. Member for Malabar/Mausica.

Mr. Romain: Thank you, Chair. 007: Public Service Academy. Can the Minister just provide a brief background as to what, what is the responsibility of that academy?

Hon. Smith: The Public Service Academy is meant to provide training for public servants so they would incorporate a wide range of skills and development training. And given the Ministry's new mandate the mandate for artificial intelligence and the use of artificial intelligence the mandate of the Government would be to utilize that particular unit to develop that trajectory.

Mr. Romain: Thank you, Minister. Is it that this academy is located at a specific place, is it done online?

Hon. Smith: It is a unit within the Ministry.

Mr. Romain: Located where?

Appropriation Bill, 2025
Head 31: Ministry of Public Administration
& Artificial Intelligence (cont'd)

Hon. Smith: Within the Ministry.

Mr. Romain: And the Ministry's office is where?

Hon. Smith: NALIS.

Mr. Romain: Is?

Hon. Smith: It is NALIS.

Mr. Romain: Okay. Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Sub-Head 02: Goods and Services, pages 235 to 240.

Ms. Beckles: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Chairman: This is with regard to Public Service.

Ms. Beckles: Sorry, Public Academy.

Mr. Chairman: I am sorry, Public Service, yes, go ahead.

Ms. Beckles: Hon. Minister as it relates to 01, under 007 which includes, "...for vacant posts with incumbents". Can you tell us how many positions and how many vacant post and how many bodies, please? Thank you.

Hon. Smith: Member can you just repeat the line Item for me one more time?

Ms. Beckles: Last one to the end, under 007: Public Service Academy; Salaries and Cost of Living Allowance. And the explanation: "Includes...vacant posts with incumbents". So I was asking how many positions—

Hon. Smith: In the Public Service Department?

Ms. Beckles: How many post they are referring to?

Hon. Smith: Member, if you would allow me to provide that in writing would be most appreciated.

Ms. Beckles: Okay.

Hon. Smith: Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Sub-Head 002: Goods and Services. Member for Diego Martin

West.

Mr. Des Vignes: Thank you very much for your acknowledgement, Chair. 02, let us go down to Item 27: Official Overseas Travel. I see a major jump here of \$690,000. I would like to know what is this overseas travel is associated with in terms of what specific intentions do we attend to achieve through these travel initiatives?

Hon. Smith: Member as you would know, we are part of several bodies, several bilateral agreements, and as a result of that, as an example, we are also part of the CTU. The Minister as the head of the CTU and the President, they are required to go to annual meetings, et cetera. We also have the International Telecommunications Union body. So it just happens that they have quite a number of conferences that would require our attendance.

In addition to that, as you can imagine this is a new Ministry in terms of its umbrella, which is artificial intelligence, and we are trying to gain as much capacity as we can and so it would require us to learn, observe and, of course, go to where these places are having these developments and by extension seek what learnings can be had. So that is the reason for the increase.

Mr. Des Vignes: Does this also include the bilateral agreements with West Africa and India that the Minister mentioned during his budget presentation?

6.25 p.m.

Hon. Smith: Specifically, Member, I would not want to speak to that. But I can tell you of what I can speak of which is as I mentioned the bilateral arrangements that we do have, the memberships that we are a part of, and of course the EU-LAC Digital Alliance, is also something that we plan to mobilize on. You would recall as well, that we have also just joined the 50-in-5 for digital public infrastructure.

Appropriation Bill, 2025
Head 31: Ministry of Public Administration
& Artificial Intelligence (cont'd)

So as you can imagine, we will be tasked with observing these requirements and as a result the Vote represents that.

Mr. Des Vignes: Thank you very much. Minister, is it possible for you to provide more details of some of the items in writing?

Hon. Smith: Happy to do so.

Mr. Des Vignes: Thank you very much. Going to Item 62: Promotions, Publicity and Printing, I see an increase of \$250,000, exactly what particular initiatives is the Minister planning?

Hon. Smith: I mean, it is a fairly standard Item—you know—promotional items. We plan to, as a part of the Ministry's agenda, promote the activities of the Ministry.

Mr. Des Vignes: I know but which—

Hon. Smith: In the past—[*Interruption*]—Member, if you will allow me. In the past the Ministry has engaged in a lot of activities and the public, quite frankly, were not aware of the activities of the Ministry. It is my priority that when we deliver a digital service—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Smith:—and when we deliver to the public, the public will know and understand what we are doing for them, so this can be accredited to that.

Mr. Des Vignes: So the Minister just said, “the Ministry in the past was involved in a lot of activities”. So that means in the past the Ministry was doing its duty—

Hon. Smith: Quantity does not often equate quality, my friend.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping and laughter*]

Mr. Chairman: All right. Just for the sake of the public record, we are dealing with Item 001: General Administration, okay. So I see, the Member for Arima.

Ms. Beckles: Thank you kindly, Mr. Chairman. Hon. Minister, Contract Employment: 16, I see an increase of \$16 million. Could you give us an idea as to what additional positions—whether there are any bodies or any incumbents?

Hon. Smith: Member, can you repeat the line Item you are referring to?

Ms. Beckles: Yes, line Item 16: Contract Employment, increase \$16 million. I am just asking for an idea as to how many positions are we talking about, whether you have any existing bodies and how many new persons.

Hon. Members: No problem, Member. I see what you are referring to here. We have 202 posts at the moment, 109 have been filled and 93 are vacant, so we plan to aggressively pursue these vacancies in terms of filling.

Ms. Beckles: Thank you, hon. Minister, and could you provide in writing the 93 existing positions? Thank you.

Hon. Smith: No problem, take care.

Ms. Beckles: As it relates too, you also have for Short-term Employment, an increase of \$5 million, could you also indicate how many outstanding positions and how many persons are already employed? Thank you.

Hon. Smith: Just as an extension of your question, as you could imagine, we are joining Ministries—

Ms. Beckles: I know.

Hon. Smith:—the Public Admin and we have joined MDT.

Ms. Beckles: So, that is why I am not asking for them right away.

Hon. Smith: Yes. Sure.

Ms. Beckles: But if you can provide the numbers in writing, because I know it is a new Ministry.

Hon. Smith: Yes but just to give you an answer, it is 77 total.

Appropriation Bill, 2025
Head 31: Ministry of Public Administration
& Artificial Intelligence (cont'd)

Ms. Beckles: Thank you kindly.

Hon. Smith: Sure.

Mr. Chairman: Member for Arima.

Ms. Beckles: Thank you kindly, Mr. Chairman. Hon. Minister, Fees: 23, there is a decrease, could you say what exactly that Fees applies to? Thank you.

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Ms. Beckles: I know you are ready to go. Today is Friday.

Hon. Smith: Member, this refers to licence support that is no longer required and so the decrease is a result of that.

Ms. Beckles: Okay, and just one other Item, which is Other Contracted Services, an increase of \$32.6 million. Could you give an idea of what exactly are those Other Contracted Services?

Hon. Smith: Member, there are a number of items as it relates to the quantum here. I can give you a few of them and if you would like, I can provide the balance in writing. But safe to say, strategic plans, national digital transformation roadmaps, items as it relates to smart cities and of course, digital solutions software and the like.

6.30 p.m.

Ms. Beckles: Are there any particular areas that you have identified to benefit from these contracted services?

Hon. Smith: Any particular, sorry?

Ms. Beckles: Any particular areas you have identified to benefit from these services?

Hon. Smith: Yes, certainly. So, the main pillars of the Ministry are really digitizing the economy, digitizing government services and, of course, digitizing

Appropriation Bill, 2025
Head 31: Ministry of Public Administration
& Artificial Intelligence (cont'd)

the societies. So, as a part of these main pillars, there are a lot of planned initiatives that would come as subsets of these. Also, there are a lot of managed services that the Ministry does on behalf of other MDAs, and so it would also incorporate some of those.

Ms. Beckles: Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: St. Ann's East. You forego your question?

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: Yes.

Mr. Chairman: Malabar/Mausica.

Mr. Romain: Thank you, Chair. 02/001/01: Travelling and Subsistence. Minister, I am assuming this solely for domestic travel?

Hon. Smith: Yes, Member, this is for domestic travel.

Mr. Romain: Can you indicate how many officers with travelling posts the Ministry has under this line Item?

Hon. Smith: I can say that it is senior officials and it is typically travel to Tobago, and this would encompass accommodation, meals, car rentals, et cetera. If you would like, I can provide in writing.

Mr. Romain: Please. Line Item 58: Medical Expense. Can you indicate who that applies to?

Hon. Smith: Member, can you indicate the line Item again?

Mr. Romain: Member, 58.

Hon. Smith: Yeah, 5-8?

Mr. Romain: Yes.

Hon. Smith: That line Item, Member, is for executive staff of the Ministry.

Mr. Romain: Okay, thank you. Line Item 37: Janitorial Services, I see there is an increase of \$375,000. Does this point to additional premises or—

Appropriation Bill, 2025
Head 31: Ministry of Public Administration
& Artificial Intelligence (cont'd)

Hon. Smith: A lot of these contracted services, they require retendering, so we will be going out to open tender for these.

Mr. Romain: Noted, thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Diego Martin Central first. You forego? Thank you. Diego Martin West.

Mr. Des Vignes: Thank you very much, Chair, for your acknowledgement. So, I want to go back to a little follow-up on the Member for Arima's question, the Opposition Leader. Item 28: Other Contracted Services, the Member mentioned the plan—it would be used to implement plans of the digital society. I was wondering from the Member, how long has this plan been in place?

Hon. Smith: It is a very, very new plan, as you could imagine.

Mr. Des Vignes: So, this has nothing to do with the previous plans by the previous Minister of Digital Transformation? Absolutely nothing?

Hon. Smith: I can say that there were plans, but none were executed and that is why we are in the situation that we are in today.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Des Vignes: So, the Minister is saying he came up with the master plan in six months?

Hon. Members: Correct. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Tancoo: Well done.

Mr. Des Vignes: In honesty—

Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]

Mr. Des Vignes: In honesty, in honesty.

Hon. Smith: Are you providing an answer for me?

Mr. Des Vignes: No, I just asked a question, Sir.

Appropriation Bill, 2025
Head 31: Ministry of Public Administration
& Artificial Intelligence (cont'd)

Hon. Smith: Member, you said it, so I take the point.

Mr. Chairman: Member for Diego Martin West, I think you do realize that the tone of that question is in itself unparliamentary, the imputation of dishonesty.

Mr. Des Vignes: Chair, just asked a question. I meant nothing by it. I am sorry.

Mr. Chairman: All right. Thank you. 002: National Information and Communication Technology.

Mr. Birchwood: Chair, I had my hand up before you moved on.

Mr. Chairman: Sorry?

Mr. Birchwood: Before you moved on, I had my hand up. If you would permit me?

Mr. Chairman: Laventille East/Morvant.

Mr. Birchwood: Thank you, Chair. Line Item 21: Repairs and Maintenance - Buildings, I am seeing an increase of \$1 million. Could the Member explain that increase?

Hon. Smith: Happy to do so. You see, what happened post-April 28th, when we took access to these buildings, we realized that most of them were in quite a bit of disrepair. So, as a result of that, we have had to allocate sufficient funds to treat with those matters.

Mr. Birchwood: Thank you. Have you identified any contractors to carry out these jobs?

Hon. Smith: We are in the process of assessing damages, et cetera, and once that is done, we will put it out to tender.

Mr. Birchwood: Okay, who is assessing the damages—

Hon. Smith: Well, internally first, because we do have quite a competent facilities management team within the public service.

Appropriation Bill, 2025
Head 31: Ministry of Public Administration
& Artificial Intelligence (cont'd)

Mr. Birchwood: Internally, thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Malabar/Mausica.

Mr. Romain: Thank you, Chair. Same line Item, the same question with respect to the persons who are doing the assessments now, are they the same persons who would have been responsible for managing these issues under the previous administration?

Hon. Smith: I think I mentioned that when we accessed these places, they were in a state of disrepair.

Mr. Romain: Who was responsible for managing that?

Hon. Smith: I am sure you can ask your colleagues on the right-hand side.

Mr. Romain: No, I am asking the Minister—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Romain:—because the former Minister of Public Administration is not here. So, who was responsible for that—for managing those issues?

Mr. Chairman: Minister, are you aware who was responsible for that?

Hon. Members: The PNM.

Mr. Gonzales: A point of order—

Hon. Smith: Chairman, through you—

Mr. Gonzales: A point of order, 48(6).

Hon. Smith: I think the learned public needs an answer.

Mr. Chairman: Minister, hold on. What is the point of order?

Mr. Gonzales: 48(6).

Mr. Chairman: 48(6) emanating from whom?

Mr. Gonzales: From the Minister.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Appropriation Bill, 2025
Head 31: Ministry of Public Administration
& Artificial Intelligence (cont'd)

Mr. Gonzales: Mr. Chair, he asked—

Mr. Chairman: All right, overruled. Overruled in a perfunctory manner. Minister, go ahead.

Hon. Smith: Member, happy to provide in writing as well, so there is no need for the back and forth.

Mr. Romain: Please also indicate if these persons are still employed with the Ministry, because if they were not doing their work before, then they should be reprimanded.

Hon. Smith: That is a statement or a question?

Mr. Romain: I am asking if you could please indicate if the persons who are responsible, if they are still employed with the Ministry, because if they were not doing their job, I would assume the Ministry would have reprimanded them.

Hon. Smith: Member, you are making quite a number of assumptions and insinuations—

Mr. Romain: Sir, could you—

Hon. Smith: Member, I am speaking.

Mr. Romain: Minister—

Hon. Smith: Member, I am speaking.

Mr. Romain: We are questioning you, Minister.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Smith: Member, I am speaking.

Mr. Des Vignes: Chair, 48(6).

Mr. Romain: You gave a commitment to indicate in writing who was responsible—

Mr. Manning: Mr. Chair, excuse me, has this Minister left his manners at home?

Appropriation Bill, 2025
Head 31: Ministry of Public Administration
& Artificial Intelligence (cont'd)

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Chairman: San Fernando East, it is a bit rich for you to complain for lack of manners. However, let us not let the last session—

Mr. Manning: Mr. Chair, I take exception to that comment, please

Mr. Chairman: Let us not let the last hour and a half—

Mr. Manning: Mr. Chair, I take exception to that comment—

Mr. Chairman: San Fernando East, turn off your microphone, please. Let us not let the last hour and a half degenerate into what was happening before.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Chairman: All right, silence, silence. Minister, pursuant to your answer, are you willing to give that information in writing?

Hon. Smith: Of course.

Mr. Chairman: Right, thank you. Let us move on.

Ms. Beckles: Chair, can I just—because I am just a little. Can I ask you where we are?

Mr. Chairman: We are at 002, page 236.

Ms. Beckles: Okay.

Mr. Chairman: We are now moving on to 236.

Ms. Beckles: 236?

Mr. Chairman: Yes.

Ms. Beckles: Thank you kindly.

Mr. Chairman: National Information and Communication Technology. Member for Arima.

Ms. Beckles: Hon. Minister, can I finally ask you what is the National Information and Communication Technology? Is that a new unit?

Appropriation Bill, 2025
Head 31: Ministry of Public Administration
& Artificial Intelligence (cont'd)

Hon. Smith: Member, it was a division under the former MDT.

Ms. Beckles: Okay, thank you. And under Other Contracted Service, which amounts to \$105 million increase, can you give an idea what is Other Contracted Services, please?

6.40 p.m.

Hon. Smith: Member, you would be aware that the Ministry is responsible for an item called GovNeTT.

Ms. Beckles: Yes.

Hon. Smith: We are also responsible for hosting all of the other Ministries' data and information and so this quantum resides mostly in that subset.

Ms. Beckles: Okay. Thank you very much.

Hon. Smith: Sure.

Ms. Beckles: And therefore can I ask whether, under 16, would those persons—well those persons fall directly under this particular section. Could you give us an idea as to how many—what are your positions? How many positions for that 7.5 million?

Hon. Smith: Member, you are referring to line Item 16?

Ms. Beckles: Contract Employment.

Hon. Smith: Line Item 16?

Ms. Beckles: Yes, thank you.

Hon. Smith: There are 55 positions, Member, 17 are filled, 38 are vacant.

Ms. Beckles: Thank you, hon. Minister, and as it relates to Short-Term Employment, which is 22, could you also indicate how many positions and how many vacant, please?

Hon. Smith: 37 positions.

Appropriation Bill, 2025
Head 31: Ministry of Public Administration
& Artificial Intelligence (cont'd)

Ms. Beckles: All vacant or—?

Hon. Smith: No vacancies at the moment.

Ms. Beckles: No vacancies. Thank you. Thank you, Chair.

Mr. Chairman: Item 003: Access Centre. Diego Martin West.

Mr. Des Vignes: Thank you very much, Chair. I would like to look at Item 04: Electricity. In the corresponding Item, in the Head for Digital Transformation, this figure was 15,000. I see it has jumped to 60,000. What is the reason for this jump?

Hon. Smith: Member, we are increasing the number of access centres, as a result, the electrical cost will increase.

Mr. Des Vignes: By how many and what areas will these access centres be in?

Hon. Smith: I can provide you that in writing at a later date.

Mr. Des Vignes: Thank you very much, Minister.

Mr. Chairman: Member for Arima.

Ms. Beckles: Thank you kindly, Mr. Chairman. Hon. Minister, under that same heading, Short-Term Employment, 2,750,000, could you tell us how many positions are vacant and where there are already existing bodies please? Thank you. Hon. Minister, that is Item 22.

Hon. Smith: Yeah, I am familiar with the line Item. One second. Member, I am advised that there are 53 positions and all are filled.

Ms. Beckles: Thank you.

Mr. Chairman: Diego Martin West.

Mr. Des Vignes: Thank you very much, Chair. Item 66 for the access centres, we see now there is a new figure of Hosting of Conferences, Seminars and Other. This figure of 300,000, does the Minister intend to do conferences and seminars at the access centres? Let us understand what this figure is for, please.

Appropriation Bill, 2025
Head 31: Ministry of Public Administration
& Artificial Intelligence (cont'd)

Hon. Smith: Member, we would like to sweat the assets as much as possible and so yes, we do have plans of utilizing the access centres. Some of the main items we want to conduct are obviously community sensitization sessions. This is specific to artificial intelligence, its use in the public service as well as in the communities. We want to expose persons across all communities to the possibility of the technology.

Mr. Des Vignes: Also I want to go back up to Item 22: Short-Term Employment, the figure was 3.5 million in the corresponding Item, it is down to 2.75. Can the Minister explain the reason for this decrease?

Hon. Smith: You are mentioning the Short-Term Employment Item?

Mr. Des Vignes: Yes.

Hon. Smith: Yeah, so we have a mandate to move persons to long-term employment and that will result in the change, the variance.

Mr. Des Vignes: Will these positions be recruited internally?

Hon. Smith: We will go through the typical HR process and recruit as needed.

Mr. Des Vignes: Thank you very much, Minister.

Mr. Chairman: Okay. I propose to move to Item 004: Information Communication Technology Division. 005: Property and Real Estate Management Services Division. Member for Arima.

Ms. Beckles: Thank you kindly, Mr. Chairman. Hon. Minister, under line Item 08: Rent/Lease - Office Accommodation and Storage, an increase of 338 million; Estimates, 583. Hon. Minister, could you provide us with a list of—is that one property, more than one property? Can you give any information on that please?

Hon. Smith: Member, this Item is a fairly complicated Item. It is an Item that stems from the bond related to the Waterfront property and so this Item actually

Appropriation Bill, 2025
Head 31: Ministry of Public Administration
& Artificial Intelligence (cont'd)

has a history, I believe since 2007 and it has continued to be part of the fiscal from year to year.

Ms. Beckles: Does this involve, hon. Minister, any loan repayments?

Hon. Smith: It is my understanding that it does.

Ms. Beckles: Okay. Are you able to give us any idea as to what portion of this is for loan payment?

Hon. Smith: I will endeavour to provide that in writing for you.

Ms. Beckles: Okay.

Mr. Chairman: Yes, Member for Arima.

Ms. Beckles: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Hon. Minister, 21: Repairs and Maintenance - Buildings, an increase of 60 million. Hon. Minister, are you in a position to provide us what buildings are referred to?

Hon. Smith: Member, as you know in terms of the public administration—the former Public Administration Ministry, we do have quite a cadre of properties and for the most part, there are a number of partnerships with UdeCoTT as well and so this would comprise most of those relationships. So it is a very interconnect line Item.

Safe to say that the quantum relates to a number of services under that particular Vote. Some of them are reimbursements to UdeCOTT, some of them are maintenance of properties, Flagstaff, et cetera. Some of them are also related to other vested properties, Prada Street among other areas and locations.

Ms. Beckles: Okay. I understand it is complicated, I am prepared to accept the information in writing.

Hon. Smith: Sure.

Ms. Beckles: Thank you.

Appropriation Bill, 2025
Head 31: Ministry of Public Administration
& Artificial Intelligence (cont'd)

Mr. Chairman: I think Diego Martin West had his hand up first. No? Malabar/Mausica.

Mr. Romain: Thank you, Chair. Line Item 08: Rent/Lease - Office Accommodation and Storage, can the Minister indicate—

Hon. Members: [*Interruption and laughter*]

Mr. Chairman: All right, okay, okay.

Mr. Romain: You all are free to go home, you know.

Mr. Chairman: Members, let us just let the Member ask his question.

Mr. Romain: “Nothing keeping yuh here, yuh not really serving ah purpose” other than to disturb. Rent/Lease - Office Accommodation and Storage, can the Minister indicate what portion of that is applicable to storage?

Hon. Smith: Member, none of it is actually attributed to storage.

Mr. Romain: Okay. Could you also indicate if any of this is for the rental of State-occupied premises and which State premises?

Hon. Smith: For the most part, Member, I believe that I shared with the Member for Arima that we will provide in writing, I can do so for you also but this line Item specifically relates to the Waterfront property.

Mr. Romain: Okay, thank you. With respect to line Item 21: Repairs and Maintenance - Buildings, would that also apply to the Magnificent Seven buildings?

Hon. Smith: Can you repeat the line Item?

Mr. Romain: 21: Repairs and Maintenance – Buildings, 60 million.

Hon. Smith: What is the question?

Mr. Romain: You mentioned a relationship with UDeCOTT, would that line Item also apply to repairs/maintenance of any of the Magnificent Seven buildings?

Appropriation Bill, 2025
Head 31: Ministry of Public Administration
& Artificial Intelligence (cont'd)

Hon. Smith: No.

Mr. Romain: No? All right, thank you.

Mr. Chairman: 006: Public Management Consulting Division; 007: Public Service Academy.

015: Strategic Services Division; 020: Modernization and Service Improvement Division; 021: Information and Communication Technology Services Division.

Sub-Head 03: Minor Equipment Purchases, pages 241 to 242. Item 001: General Administration. Malabar/Mausica.

6.50 p.m.

Mr. Romain: Thank you, Chair. Under 03: Minor Equipment Purchases; General Administration, you see an increase of \$1 million. Can the Minister indicate what is the purpose of that \$1million increase?

Hon. Smith: Member, one second, please.

Mr. Romain: No problem.

Hon. Smith: I am just trying to follow, Chair, I know you are speeding ahead. What is the line Item number?

Mr. Chairman: We are on page 241, Minister.

Hon. Smith: I am advised, Member, that we have had a significant depreciation of some assets and they are to replace those.

Mr. Romain: Thank you.

Hon. Smith: Sure.

Mr. Chairman: Item 003: Access Centre; Item 004: Information Communication Technology Division; Item 005: Property and Real Estate Management Services Division; Item 007: Public Service Academy; Item 021:

Appropriation Bill, 2025
Head 31: Ministry of Public Administration
& Artificial Intelligence (cont'd)

Information and Communication Technology Services Division. Sub-Head 04: Current Transfers and Subsidies—pages 243 to 244—Item 001: Regional Bodies. Malabar/Mausica.

Mr. Romain: Thank you, Chair. Line Item 04/001: Regional Bodies. We see there is an increase of some \$38 million. Can the Minister indicate what are those regional bodies, and can he indicate how much increase is applicable to each one of those bodies?

Hon. Smith: Member, I believe, you have read the figure wrong. It is not \$38 million.

Mr. Romain: The increase, it says, under Regional Bodies; it was 404, the Estimate in 2025, and it is now \$442 million.

Hon. Smith: Member, the Regional Bodies is 001, under it is the Caribbean Telecommunications Union, and then there is the Caribbean Centre for Development Administration.

Mr. Romain: Can you tell us what accounted for that significant increase of \$38 million?

Hon. Smith: Yeah, but the quantum is not correct.

Mr. Romain: Well, Member, I am just reading what is before me. It says that the Estimate for 2025 was \$404 million, and now I am seeing an increase to \$442 million.

Mr. Chairman: Member, I think what you are looking at is the compendium of Current Transfers and Subsidies, together—a compendious figure is then broken down into regional bodies and particular regional bodies. So the increase would be the compendious figure. I think that is what the answer is.

Mr. Romain: Alright. Can the Minister please provide us with the list of the

regional bodies?

Hon. Smith: Sure, you can have it now. It is the Caribbean Telecommunications Union and the Caribbean Centre for Development Administration.

Mr. Romain: So it is just those two?

Hon. Smith: Yes.

Mr. Romain: Thirty-eight million?

Hon. Smith: Again, the quantity that you are stating is not the correct quantity.

Mr. Romain: Alright, thank you, Minister.

Hon. Smith: Sure.

Mr. Chairman: Item 002: Commonwealth Bodies; Item 003: United Nations Organisations; Item 007: Households; Item 009: Other Transfers. Malabar/Mausica.

Mr. Romain: Thank you, Chair. Line Item 009/01: TT Connect Service Centres. I am seeing an allocation of \$9.58 million. Can the Minister indicate is it that there will be the establishment of new ttconnect service centres or additional centres?

Hon. Smith: Member, that line Item is broken down in terms of administrative expenditure, capitalization, et cetera. So, it is really to furnish and facilitate the operations of those TTConnect centres—

Mr. Romain: Will you be able to tell us how many TTConnect—

Hon. Smith:—of the current ambit.

Mr. Chairman: Will you be able to tell us how many?

Hon. Smith: The current utilization of TTCconnect services.

Mr. Romain: Yeah, how many centres?

Hon. Smith: I am advised there are eight.

Mr. Romain: Alright, thank you.

Appropriation Bill, 2025
Head 31: Ministry of Public Administration
& Artificial Intelligence (cont'd)

Hon. Smith: Sure.

Mr. Chairman: Item 011: Transfers to State Enterprises. Hon. Members, we will now move on to the *Draft Estimates of the Revenue and Expenditure of the Statutory Boards Similar Bodies and of the Tobago House of Assembly*. Sub-Head 03: Telecommunication Authority of Trinidad and Tobago, Details of Expenditure, page 203 of that volume. We start at Sub-Head 01: Personnel Expenditure; Item 001: General Administration. Sub-Head 02: Goods and Services; Item 001: General Administration. Sub-Head 03: Minor Equipment Purchases; Item 001: General Administration. Sub-Head 04: Current Transfers and Subsidies; Item 007: Households; Item 009: Other Transfers.

Hon. Members, we will now move on to the *Draft Estimates of Development Programme*. Sub-Head 09: *Development Programme Consolidated Fund*; Item 003: Economic Infrastructure; F. Financial Services, page 96. Item 005: Multi-Sectoral and Other Services; A. Administrative Services, page 96. F. Public Buildings, pages 96 to 97. Infrastructure Development Fund; Item 005: Multi-Sectoral and Other Services. A. Administrative Services, page 264; F. Public Buildings, page 264.

Question put and agreed to.

Head 31 ordered to stand part of the Schedule.

Mr. Chairman: Minister, can I just ask you to stay for the Service Commissions?

Hon. Smith: Yes, of course. Chairman, I just want to express thanks to the members, all involved parties: The public servants from the Ministry of Public Administration and Artificial Intelligence, and congratulate them on a job well done, and thank them for their trust and also for the delivery of such a stellar report.

Mr. Chairman: I, too, should like to express my gratitude on behalf of the Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago to the public servants.

7.00 p.m.

Head 06: Service Commissions, \$83,775,650.

Mr. Chairman: Minister, I now invite you, as the Minister with responsibility for the Service Commissions, to make a brief opening statement not exceeding five minutes, should you choose to do so. If you choose to do so, I think you will not find objection that you are free to dispense with the opening statement.

Hon. Smith: Chairman, I choose to do so only to honour the efforts of the service commissions.

Mr. Chairman: I invite you to make the opening statement.

Hon. Smith: Thank you, Chairman. Good evening, again. Thank you for the opportunity, it is my honor to introduce the Service Commissions Department, as we all know this Department plays a pivotal role in upholding the independence, integrity and meritocracy of human resource management across the public service of Trinidad and Tobago.

The Service Commissions Department provides critical, administrative, and operational support to four constitutionally established independent service commissions. To note: the Public Service Commission, the Teaching Service Commission, the Police Service Commission, and the Judicial and Legal Service Commission. These commissions are fundamental pillars of our democratic governance, ensuring that public officers across the respective services are appointed, promoted, disciplined fairly, transparently, and in accordance with the Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago.

Chairman, the Service Commissions Department remains an essential institution in preserving the principles of impartiality, professionalism, and service

excellence across the public sector. As we review the Department's allocations and programme outcomes for fiscal 2026, I reaffirm this Government's commitment to supporting the Department in delivering the commissions' mandate effectively. And also to ensure the public service continues to be a force for national development and, of course, public confidence. Thank you, Chairman. I welcome remarks.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Question proposed: That Head 06 stand part of the Schedule.

Mr. Chairman: This sum of \$83,775,650 for Head 06 Service Commissions is comprised of moneys proposed for expenditure under the following Sub-Heads and Items to be found in the *Draft Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure*, and the *Draft Estimates of Development Programme*. We shall now consider the *Draft Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure* on page 30 of the relevant volume.

Sub-Head 01: Personnel Expenditure, Item 001: General Administration. Sub-Head 02: Goods and Services, Item 001 General Administration; 002: Tobago Services; 003: Public Service Commission; 004: Teaching Service Commission; 005: Judicial and Legal Service Commission; 006: Police Service Commission. Sub-Head 03: Minor Equipment Purchases, Item 001: General Administration. Sub-Head 04: Current Transfers and Subsidies, Item 007: Households.

Hon. Members, we will now move on to the *Draft Estimates of Development Programme*. Sub-Head 09: Development Programme, Consolidated Fund, page 11. Item 005: Multi-Sectoral and Other Services, A. Administrative Services, page 11. There being no questions.

Question put and agreed to.

Head 06 ordered to stand part of the Schedule.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Chairman: I thank the public servants. Minister, I thank you and thank your hardworking public servants.

Hon. Smith: Chairman, through you, I would also like to thank the Public Service Commission and all of the important work that they do, thank you for the report and thank you for being here.

Mr. Chairman: Thank you. We now move to the Auditor General, which is Head 02.

Head 02: Auditor General, \$33,262,800.

Mr. Chairman: I will now invite the Minister of Finance to make a brief opening statement for a maximum of five minutes. Minister, again, I present the option to you—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Chairman:—should you choose to avail yourself of it, of dispensing with the brief oral statement. But if you choose to make your oral statement, you are free to do so. The choice is entirely yours.

Hon. Tancoo: Thank you very much, Chairman. Chairman, the Office of the Auditor General is an independent office that, in accordance with section 117(1) of the Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, is:

“...appointed by the President”—of the Republic—“after consultation with the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition and shall hold office in accordance with section 136.”—of the Constitution.

In serving the people of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, the Auditor General must audit and report on:

“The public accounts of Trinidad and Tobago and of all officers, Courts and authorities of Trinidad and Tobago...”

—and is also empowered to carry out audits on financial statements of all state-owned or controlled enterprises. The reports of the Auditor General must be submitted annually to the Speaker, President of the Senate and the Minister of Finance, sections 116(1) to (6) of the Constitution. The staff of the Office of the Auditor General are public officers who form the Auditor General's department and whose role is to ensure that the Auditor General efficiently discharges its function, thereby enhancing public accountability.

Mr. Chair, this current administration views the independence of the Auditor General's office and the importance of the Auditor General's office and functioning as critical to the accountancy, the accountability, and to the integrity of the Government of Trinidad and Tobago, and the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. Unlike the former Government, unlike the former administration, we propose to continue to work hard to ensure the respect that the Auditor General's—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Tancoo:—department is due, is provided to them. And in that regard, Mr. Chair, I turn over to the colleagues opposite for questions if they have any.

Question proposed: That Head 02 stand part of the Schedule.

Mr. Chairman: This sum of \$33,262,800 for Head 02 Auditor General is comprised of moneys proposed for expenditure under the following Sub-Heads and Items to be found in the *Draft Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure*. We shall now consider the *Draft Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure*.

Sub-Head 01—these are to be found at page 6 at the relevant volume—Personnel Expenditure, Item 001: General Administration; Item 002: Tobago Services. Sub-Head 02: Goods and Services, pages 7 and 8, Item 001: General Administration; Item 002: Tobago Services. Sub-Head 03: Minor Equipment Purchases, Item 001: General Administration. Sub-Head 04: Current Transfers

Head 02: Auditor General (cont'd)

and Subsidies, Item 001: Regional Bodies; Item 002: Commonwealth Bodies; Item 004: International Bodies; Item 007: Households. There being no questions, I put the question to the Committee.

Question put and agreed to.

Head 02 ordered to stand part of the Schedule.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Chairman: I am happy to announce that—I would like to thank the staff of the Auditor General for coming before us, and I apologize if we have kept you waiting unduly. It is regrettable but unavoidable. I am happy to announce that at 7.09, that concludes the scheduled business of the Committee for the day.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Chairman: And I want to thank all Members for their renewed spirit of conciliation, and I hope this bubbles over into tomorrow's proceedings. This Standing Finance Committee is suspended to Saturday, October 25, 2025, at 10.00 am. Thank you all very much, and good night, everyone.

7.09 p.m.: *Standing Finance Committee Suspended.*