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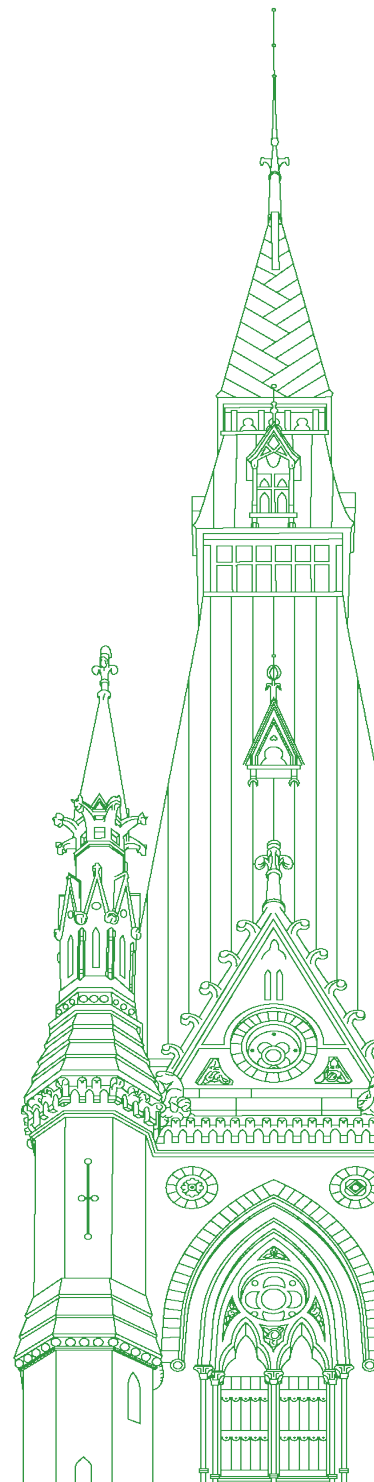
Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates

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Thursday, September 24, 2026

Chair: Kelly McCauley



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• (1530)

[English]

The Chair (Kelly McCauley (Edmonton West, CPC)): I call the meeting to order. Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome to OG-GO.

We have meeting number 50 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates. We are continuing our study of Motion No. 16, or M-16.

We have two witnesses today—

An hon. member: We have two online as well.

The Chair: Thank you for correcting me.

Why don't we start with you, Ms. Smith-McCrossin? The floor is yours for five minutes, please.

Go ahead.

Elizabeth Smith-McCrossin (Member of the Legislative Assembly of the Nova Scotia House of Assembly, Cumberland North, As an Individual): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My name is Elizabeth Smith-McCrossin. I'm the MLA for Cumberland North in Nova Scotia. I'm here to speak about the future of the Colonel James Layton Ralston Armoury in Amherst and M-16, a motion introduced by our local MP.

The motion recognizes the growth in Canada's military and asks her government to examine surplus federal properties for use in veteran services. Her government closed our armoury after 101 years of training soldiers. Her response was to propose another study.

Mr. Chair, I want to be clear that I support providing housing and services for our veterans, but I ask this committee to first consider a fundamental question: Before we dispose of a historic military facility, shouldn't we first determine whether Canada still needs it for military training?

Built in 1915, our armoury connects Amherst to the 85th Battalion at Vimy Ridge and the proud history of our North Nova Scotia Highlanders. The "North Novies" landed in Normandy on D-Day, June 6, 1944, and fought through northwestern Europe. Some never came home. Their motto was "No Retreating Footsteps".

The regimental museum that was housed in our armoury preserved that history. For generations, reservists and thousands of young cadets have trained in that facility, but in 2016, DND ended reserve use of the Amherst armoury. One year later, Second World War veteran Russell Clarke wrote to the Minister of National De-

fence about the armoury. The response informed him that DND intended to dispose of the building. This was the first time that our community learned of the plan.

Veterans, cadets and their leaders contacted me and wanted a public meeting. At the packed-house meeting, the public made it clear: They wanted our armoury preserved for military training.

For nine years, we have repeatedly asked for the decision to be reversed. During the pandemic in 2020, DND unexpectedly closed our armoury over "safety concerns". I organized another public meeting. Our MP at that time, Lenore Zann, joined our meeting and stated that she had talked to the Prime Minister and had explained the importance of the building. Within days, the armoury was re-opened. They started the needed repairs, allowing the museum and cadet training to continue.

Local veteran George Manthorne submitted an access-to-information request in 2021 to obtain the documents that led to the decision of the closure, and as of today, he has still not received any of those requested documents.

Then last year, in July 2025, the building was again shuttered with no notice. The regimental museum was closed, and the cadets lost their training facility and were locked out of the building. Our local military community was devastated again.

I want to be perfectly clear: I support safe, dignified housing for our veterans. A local organization has proposed converting our armoury into veterans housing, at a reported cost of \$20 million. However, DND owns land just outside of Amherst. The property is 222 acres. I ask the committee to consider whether that land could accommodate purpose-designed veterans housing. We can provide homes for those who have served without sacrificing our armoury, which could train those who want to serve now and in the future.

At this point, I'd like to also draw a parallel. The federal government has also announced plans to close the Nappan Experimental Farm, which has conducted agriculture research in our region for 139 years. In May, I met with federal agricultural department manager Geoffrey Mercer. He told me that he had not only advised that Nappan be closed but that he used to work for DND and that it was he who had advised that the Amherst armoury be divested.

I don't know who ultimately made those decisions or what information informed them, but I do believe that our community deserves to understand why it is facing the loss of the important functions of two long-standing federal institutions through the actions of this government. Does this government not value the people of rural Canada and their expertise in food security and military contributions to this country?

This government is making moves that will weaken our country rather than strengthen it. Why are we losing military training and agriculture research when Canada needs stronger defence capacity, food security and domestic research?

Canada's military recruitment challenges were noted by our Auditor General, who found that the Canadian Armed Forces had not recruited enough members to meet its strategic planned intake targets and that it needed to invest in training infrastructure to accommodate more recruits. Why, then, is DND preparing to dispose of historic military training facilities like the Amherst armoury when Canada should be expanding recruitment and training capacity? It does not make any sense.

• (1535)

I'm asking DND and this government to look to our community as part of the solution. We have people who want to serve our country. We have a proud and significant military history with the North Novies, and we want to contribute to Canada's military future. The North Nova Scotia Highlanders lived by the motto of "No Retreating Footsteps". Our community has not retreated from its commitment to Canada. As Canada strengthens its armed forces, we ask DND not to retreat from Amherst but to recognize our willingness to serve and to give our community a place in Canada's military future.

I'm asking this committee to recommend two things: first, that alternative federal properties be assessed for veterans housing; and, second, that this government restore reservist training to the Amherst armoury.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Ms. Blackburn, welcome to OGGO. I've worked a lot with your food bank in Edmonton. They are incredible people, so we're very proud to support them, and I'm very happy to have you with us today.

The floor is yours for five minutes.

[Translation]

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau (Laurentides—Labelle, BQ): I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

I just want to make sure of something. Yes, we try to maximize speaking time, and the interpreters do an amazing job, but be aware that by the time they finish, we are already on to the next intervention. I understand a bit of English, and you're doing a very good job, but please ask people to slow down. That would be great for everyone.

Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: That was just asking that we speak a bit more slowly, but the floor is yours, Ms. Blackburn.

Again, welcome.

Marie Blackburn (Executive Director, Veterans Association Food Bank): Thank you.

Thanks for the opportunity to speak about the use of underused and surplus federal buildings to help better serve our Canadian veterans.

Using vacant public buildings for affordable housing or building a community hub that could support veterans and families offers a unique economic and social advantage over traditional building from the ground up. A charity of any kind would find it difficult to purchase land due to the astronomical costs, and having a building reduces project timelines and creates a community.

Maintaining empty properties is a continuous strain on taxpayer dollars. If the buildings were to be transferred to not-for-profits, that would decrease costs for security, basic utilities and upkeep. Structurally sound buildings already possess the fundamental and foundational frameworks that are required for construction. Retrofitting can shave months or even years off the time it takes to get families into homes, compared to building from scratch.

Many government facilities are in central prime urban areas close to public transit, employment hubs, grocery stores and health care. Converting these structures would directly integrate low-income residents into a well-connected neighbourhood.

While the potential is vast, converting old buildings into viable, usable spaces is not without its challenges. Many public facilities are strictly zoned for institutional or commercial use, and this could present a significant roadblock. Even without land acquisition fees, retrofitting historic or neglected buildings requires significant up-front capital costs. Sustained funding programs such as low-cost construction loans, grants and assistance from all levels of government are critical to bringing these buildings to life.

Every empty government building represents a missed opportunity to offer someone a safe place to sleep and live. By shifting our perspective and viewing these vacant structures not as liabilities but as a foundation for the future of community infrastructure, we can create a community and fulfill the needs of our veteran community.

I would like to focus specifically on Calgary and a property with a very special connection to our military community. The former Canadian Forces Base Calgary, particularly Currie Barracks CFB, was not simply a collection of federal buildings. For more than six decades, it was part of the military and social fabric of our city. Thousands of Canadian soldiers trained and served there. Families lived there, and people deployed from there, returned home from there, retired from there and then built their homes in Calgary. These are not simply old buildings. They are part of our history.

Several historically significant military buildings remain at Currie Barracks. Rather than looking at these properties for only their commercial or redevelopment value, I believe we should ask what value they could provide for our veteran community with respect to affordable housing. Not only could this space provide affordable housing, but it also would serve as a community hub for many veterans and their families.

The Veterans Association Food Bank could use such a facility for food security and emergency assistance, but the potential goes much further. The Veterans Association provides many services for our veteran community such as the food bank, emergency services, a pet promise program, peer support, training, employment opportunities, a thrift store that benefits all of our veterans and many other services.

Working collaboratively with other organizations, we could provide a space for peer support, mental health and wellness programs, family support, benefits navigation, employment and transition assistance, and education and training. Private rooms could be available for counsellors, psychologists and peer supporters, while meeting and classroom space could be shared with other veteran-serving organizations. Most importantly, it could become a place where veterans know they belong. Redirecting half a million dollars or more from the rent we currently pay each year could go to supporting veterans and their families and could have a massive life-changing impact.

There is something particularly meaningful about providing those services at former CFB Calgary. We often talk about preserving military heritage through plaques, monuments and museums. Those are important, but there is another way to preserve military heritage: Allow these buildings to continue serving the people they were originally built to serve. A building where soldiers once prepared for service could become a building where veterans now are supported after service, and the underused federal property could once again have a mission for the entire country.

● (1540)

I'm not suggesting that every former military building should become a veterans centre. I'm suggesting that before historically significant federal military properties are disposed of, we should ask whether they can continue serving Canadian military and veteran communities. Calgary would be an excellent place to demonstrate this approach.

I therefore encourage this committee to recommend that qualified veteran-serving organizations be given the opportunity to access suitable surplus or underused federal properties—particularly former military properties—before these properties are permanently disposed of.

CFB Calgary served Calgary for many generations. Perhaps part of it can now serve Canadian veterans for generations to come.

The Chair: Thank you very much. We appreciate all the work you do in Alberta for us. It's wonderful.

We're going to Mr. McKay, please. The floor is yours for five minutes.

Go ahead, sir.

Justin McKay (Veteran, As an Individual): Good afternoon. Thank you, Mr. Chair and committee members, for the opportunity to be able to appear in front of OGGO.

I am the current chair of the Nova Scotia Highlanders Community Council and Regimental Museum. We have just moved the museum into a new facility, as my MLA, Ms. Smith-McCrossin, said.

There are other projects I have worked on that would pertain to this study. We've had a lot of inquiries over the years, and I've had to ask people where to go on veterans housing issues in our county. Any surplus federal land that could be reutilized in our area would be greatly appreciated. Having wraparound services in these properties—whether they be psychological, physiotherapy or even organizations like Echelon Wellness—would serve us well, because they would offer wraparound services to our veteran community and members of the RCMP.

I once trained in the James Ralston armoury here in Amherst, so it holds a special spot for me as well. If possible, I would like to see it saved for some use for veterans, whether it be for housing, for wraparound services or to be used as an armoury again. It's a very important building in our community.

I look forward to getting any questions from the committee members. Thank you.

● (1545)

The Chair: Thanks, Mr. McKay.

We'll finish with our special guest, the mayor of Amherst.

Before he begins, the mayor provided the committee with some documentation. Unfortunately, it has not been translated in time, so it will be sent out in a few days.

Mayor Small, please go ahead.

Robert Small (Mayor, Municipality of Amherst): Good afternoon, Chair and members of the committee.

Thank you for pointing out the presentation slide show that goes with this. Certainly the words will be along with it.

Thank you for inviting the Town of Amherst to contribute to this study. The Amherst armoury, officially known as the Colonel James Layton Ralston Armoury, can become veteran housing, offering on-site support services while preserving a nationally significant military landmark. With a coordinated federal pathway, this Amherst-based project can also serve as a practical pilot for similar properties across Canada.

I will begin by explaining why the Amherst armoury matters and how the veteran housing proposal emerged. I will then outline VETS Canada's concept, the issues that must be resolved and a potential federal delivery model. I will conclude with four recommendations that could move the Amherst project forward and help create a repeatable pathway for other suitable federal properties across Canada.

The armoury has stood in Amherst since 1915. Parks Canada recognizes it for its association with the 85th Canadian Infantry Battalion, the Nova Scotia Highlanders; for its architecture; and for its importance in our community. DND declared the building surplus to military needs in 2016. In 2024, the federal government announced the armoury would be divested, with a focus on housing development and the budget plan to unlock surplus postal and defence lands. Amherst now faces a choice between managed renewal and continued deterioration.

When the federal government identified the armoury for housing in April 2024, VETS Canada co-founder Jim Lowther saw a natural fit. VETS Canada brought the concept to the town. Council supported the direction, committed \$50,000 to early project work and heard strong support at community meetings. The current council remains engaged. The idea now needs a durable federal process.

VETS Canada has developed a concept that combines housing, support and a continuing public purpose for this historic building. The design remains preliminary and will require technical, financial and heritage review. VETS Canada envisions approximately 20 apartments for veterans. The concept includes a drop-in centre to connect residents and other local veterans with support. A living Highlanders museum would retain the building's military story. A satellite recruitment presence and a veteran-run coffee shop have also formed part of the concept. The strength lies in their combination: housing beside support, community connection and a continued military presence.

The Amherst proposal creates value across mandates that government often manages separately. It could provide affordable homes and support to veterans, preserve a recognized heritage building, respond to strong community attachment and give DND a responsible route to divest a property it no longer needs. That alignment makes the project worth testing. The barriers are real but identifiable. A non-profit cannot design and fund a building without clarity about transfer terms and timing. It needs complete information about the building, structural work and environmental liabilities. Heritage requirements must inform design early.

Finally, renovation, affordable housing and veteran services sit in different funding systems. The project needs a federal lead and a coordinated table. We recommend a pilot with clear roles. DND would complete and disclose due diligence, settle responsibility for structural and environmental issues, and establish the transfer route. CMHC and federal heritage partners would help fund feasibility, adaptive design and housing capital. Veterans Affairs Canada would help shape and support the service model. VETS Canada or another qualified non-profit would own or lease the property and operate the housing and services.

We ask the committee to recommend four actions: Designate Amherst as a pilot with one accountable federal lead. Fund the pre-development work needed to determine technical and financial viability. Perform flexible transfer terms when a non-profit delivers sustained public benefit. Then use the lessons from Amherst to create a repeatable pathway for other suitable federal properties. The results would extend beyond Amherst. A historic building remains in use. Veterans gain housing and support. DND gains a responsible path to divest a surplus property. Canada gains a model that other communities can adapt.

Amherst and VETS Canada are ready to continue the work. The Amherst armoury was built for service. It can serve again by providing homes, support and belonging to veterans while preserving a landmark that matters deeply to our community. We ask the federal government to give this project a clear path and to learn from it.

Thank you. I welcome your questions.

● (1550)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll start with Mr. Bragdon.

Colleagues, because we have two here in person and two online, could you please be very clear whom you're asking your questions of?

Mr. Bragdon, go ahead for six, please.

Richard Bragdon (Tobique—Mactaquac, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, witnesses, for being here and for your service. I appreciate hearing your testimony today.

I'd like to address my first question to both the MLA for the region, Ms. Smith-McCrossin, and the mayor. I'd like it if they would both weigh in on this first question.

Were you consulted regarding the closure of the armoury, or how did you find out about it? Could you speak to that?

I'll start with you, Ms. Smith-McCrossin.

Elizabeth Smith-McCrossin: The first time, in 2017, I found out from Ray Coulson. The second time, when they closed it suddenly during the pandemic, I found out from Ray Coulson, and the third time, last year, I found out from, again, Ray Coulson. Ray Coulson is a veteran in our community. He's 90 years old. He's been running our regimental museum for a long time. He's very well respected. He only found out the last time when he went and the doors were locked. There was absolutely no communication from the Department of National Defence with anyone in our community.

Richard Bragdon: How about you, Mayor? Were you consulted? Did you have prior knowledge?

Robert Small: No, I did not. I found out from a phone call—Ray Coulson, of course, is one of those people Elizabeth spoke to and I spoke to him as well—and, sadly, Facebook.

Richard Bragdon: This is also for both of you: What has the reaction of the community been to the announced closing of the armoury? What is the expectation you're picking up from the constituents you represent?

I'll start with you, Ms. Smith-McCrossin.

Elizabeth Smith-McCrossin: No one has ever been supportive of the government's decision to close our armoury, right from the very first time when veteran Russell Clarke received that letter in 2017. He has now passed on; he lived to be 100. There's never been anyone in our community who supported that. We've asked for the evidence, what led to the decision. We've never been able to get that information.

One of our veterans, George Manthorne, did an access to information request in 2021. I contacted him this week. He still has not received any of the studies, documents or reports that the government used to make its decision.

I will add that the North Novies played a significant role in Canada's history and at Vimy Ridge. We have an incredibly proud community, not just in the town of Amherst but also in northern Nova Scotia. We actually had the largest reservist regiment in all of Canada—now the Nova Scotia Highlanders.

Our veteran here, Justin McKay, recently organized for Amherst to have a monument to honour those who served in Afghanistan. He recently organized an event to commemorate 9/11. People come out in our community to honour those who have sacrificed their lives for our country. No one in our community wants it to be only historical. People want to continue to serve. They want our armories to be reopened, and they want to be able to contribute to Canada's military.

Richard Bragdon: Thank you.

Mayor.

Robert Small: Yes, I think it's a disappointment. It's a see-saw case, in my opinion. One minute they're going to fix it, and everybody's glad to see that happening after a long period of time. Then it's closing and is closed. There's a lot of disappointment. People are hopeful that we'll find a way forward. We believe that the project we proposed does provide a way forward. As far as the community goes, as indicated by Elizabeth, we have a very strong presence of military here, and they want to see it open up.

Richard Bragdon: Thank you, Mayor.

I would like to ask Mr. McKay the same question.

From your vantage point and perspective as a veteran, what has been the feedback from your fellow veterans and others in your community? What is their sense of how this has happened and where it's going?

● (1555)

Justin McKay: A lot of the former unit members and the veterans in our community I've talked to about it are quite upset that it's being closed. The status right now is very unknown, as we've all talked about here in the last couple of statements. They would like to know what's happening one way or the other.

Like Ms. Smith-McCrossin and Mr. Small have said, we have a proud military heritage in northern Nova Scotia and in Amherst, and we want to see that preserved. The best way to do that is to keep buildings like this around and repurpose them for better uses if they're not being used properly.

Richard Bragdon: Thank you.

Ms. Smith-McCrossin, what do you feel is the best path forward? What would you request that the government consider as a plausible way of finding a way to make it work for the armoury and, obviously, for tackling the challenge of veteran homelessness and housing?

Elizabeth Smith-McCrossin: Let me start with housing and our veterans. There's no question that our government needs to do a better job of providing support to those who have served our country—full stop.

We have plenty of land. We're in rural Nova Scotia, in rural Canada, and land is in abundance. We don't need to put a housing project for veterans.... We don't need to use the armoury for that, especially if it's going to cost \$20 million. I know that money is in silos in the federal government, but if we're going to spend \$20 million for 16 units, I think most people in our community would say to use that money to fix what needs to be fixed in our armoury, and then use the rest of the money to build housing on land where you don't need to demolish or take down a heritage building that has contributed to Canadian history. Absolutely, we need to build housing and support our veterans.

I will also add a little note for those who are here from Veterans Affairs that I do not agree with their decision to take away.... We used to have, in Nova Scotia, designated long-term care beds for veterans. My grandfather, who served our country, was in one for 10 years before he passed at the age of 90. They no longer have that guarantee, so housing is important for our veterans.

I will add, with regard to our armoury—

The Chair: We're a bit past our time. I'm going to have to cut you off, but I think we'll probably find some time in our next round for you.

Ms. Hirtle, please go ahead for six minutes.

Alana Hirtle (Cumberland—Colchester, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Welcome to all of the witnesses today.

I will start with you, your worship, Mayor Rob. Thank you for being with us again.

Amherst is in northern Nova Scotia.

Robert Small: Yes, it's very north.

Alana Hirtle: It's very north, just under the border. What is the population of Amherst, please?

Robert Small: It's just over 10,000 here at Amherst.

Alana Hirtle: How would you characterize the community?

Robert Small: I would say that we're a mixed population. We've been growing, with 10% to 15% growth in the last five years. I would characterize us as a heritage town that wants to make sure we're taking care of our people.

Alana Hirtle: Well said.

What challenges does the community face regarding affordable housing?

Robert Small: We have many challenges. We have a considerable number of homeless, and even within those homeless there are veterans who are dealing with that issue.

If I were to break it down, I would say that the challenge is to ensure we have affordable housing not just for veterans but for anyone who needs a place to stay. That is our largest challenge from a public perspective. Maybe the second part of it would be that our fiscal challenge to cover the cost of development is very high.

Alana Hirtle: Thank you.

What do you think would be the impact of a revitalized armoury for the community of Amherst?

Robert Small: It would be nothing but positive, of course, and the project that has been proposed, based on the assumption that DND does not want to reinstate a presence here in Amherst for the Highlanders to do proper reservist training, would be to convert the property into 20 units for veterans. By the way, I know that Elizabeth mentioned 16, but it's a 20-unit facility.

To me, the project would be a success story, not just for Amherst but for the federal government and for DND, and a way to see things become a success instead of a sad story.

● (1600)

Alana Hirtle: Absolutely. Thank you.

In July, I hosted a meeting in the riding with the Minister of National Defence, David McGuinty, to talk about the future of the armoury. You weren't able to be there, but your CAO attended on your behalf. What would you say is the value of having ministers come to the riding to see first-hand what the needs are?

Robert Small: It's invaluable, because they can see for themselves what's really happening. When they closed the building.... I was in that building a week before that and I couldn't see what was being discussed or stated as the problem. Yes, there were things that had to be fixed but, quite frankly, for whatever reason, the decision was to close the building.

I think by having a minister see the site hands-on, understand the problem and understand the solution, you can make an appropriate decision.

Alana Hirtle: Absolutely. Thank you. I appreciate your support throughout this last year as we've tried to come to some reasonable solutions.

I think you've outlined much of what the framework could look like, and I appreciate the thought you've put into that. Can you share with me a bit more about what role you think the municipality could play to support the transition of the armoury to housing and wraparound services for veterans, etc.?

Robert Small: We started off by putting some money forward just to get things kicked off in terms of a proper presentation that we could present to the government. The role I think Amherst would play is one of a partner in the project. What that partnership would be.... We have the contacts and we have the people who can make things happen, so I think we would play an important role in the project. However, because of the combination of federal silos, as Elizabeth pointed out, it would need someone who has a handle on how to deal with the federal government.

Alana Hirtle: The point is well taken. Thank you for that.

In my last 45 seconds, I'll ask Mr. McKay this quickly: How do you see a revitalized Amherst armoury? How would it support veterans and address local housing issues?

Justin McKay: I'd like to see it hopefully have, like I said, wraparound services, so psychological, physiotherapy and massage therapy services. It's hard in our area of the province to get even proper psychological treatment because we're in such a rural setting. I'll give you an example. When I was dealing with some of my service-related issues, I had to travel to Halifax to see the proper psychologist, or do it over Zoom. It's not easy for some guys to travel like that.

If we have more services in a rural setting like this, it would make life for those veterans easier.

Alana Hirtle: Thank you so much.

The Chair: Thanks.

We'll go to Madame Gaudreau for six minutes, please.

[Translation]

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: It's nice to hear music that makes us smile. That's important.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all the witnesses.

This is our second meeting, and I'm now realizing that the study is becoming very specific. Unless I'm mistaken, here at the Standing Committee on Government Operations and Estimates, the objective is to look for guidelines. I can talk about this, because my colleague is well aware of the issues we studied at the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs. Public Services and Procurement Canada, at this committee, is really a broad issue.

At our last meeting with the deputy minister, we were told about a request for proposals regarding what would be done with the available buildings. Here, there are obviously many opportunities to express dissatisfaction. I can tell you that at every meeting of the Standing Committee on Veterans Affairs, it is unfortunately obvious that the department is not considered an important one.

That said, we will take this opportunity to offer the deputy minister the committee's help and to really question what we can put in the report to help him. We could all say that there could be a pilot project in each province.

Now, Mayor, I would like to take advantage of your presence here. If the federal government transfers a piece of land, the municipality

will obviously inherit needs that include water systems, streets, sewers, sidewalks and snow removal.

What do you expect from the federal government regarding these costs? That's what we want to know.

• (1605)

[English]

Robert Small: The short answer is that those would be shared costs with the municipality. We would decide what those costs would amount to. I'm sure that we'd come to some agreement on some shared responsibility for those costs.

[Translation]

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: What would you like to see in terms of upstream consultations? The municipality could be involved in the consultations before the federal government comes up with a preplanned and orchestrated project. I'm giving you an opportunity.

[English]

Robert Small: I would like a coordinated effort that includes representation from the Town of Amherst and the proposed developer to firm up the costs associated with the development that we discussed—or any development, for that matter, that supports the concept of improving housing for veterans and making this a real success story for DND and the federal government.

[Translation]

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Thank you, Mayor.

Mr. McKay, you are in daily discussions with veterans. What are the most common requests, the ones that come up most often, regarding a potential contract and the rules it would contain?

[English]

Justin McKay: A lot of it is the wraparound services. It is hard to find services in our area for various health-related needs, specifically for veterans. The company Echelon Wellness, as an example, is out of Halifax, Fredericton, Ottawa and Kingston. It's around only the bigger bases and bigger centres. We would benefit from a company like that providing a satellite office in our area for services.

[Translation]

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: From what I understand, this is a request for decentralization, in particular to make mental health, support and other services accessible.

Did I understand correctly?

[English]

Justin McKay: I wouldn't say decentralization but maybe a more concerted effort in rural areas for those services. Even on the public health side, we struggle with those services in our area because we are rural. It could be a concerted effort on both sides as well.

[Translation]

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: In the few seconds I have left, I'm going to ask Ms. Smith-McCrossin a question.

As members of Parliament, how can we prevent a department from presenting a ready-made project? What would keep you from being left out of the loop? These are dealings where, for decades, people in the community were abandoned. That's how it works.

What should we include in the report to avoid what you've been going through for so long?

• (1610)

[English]

Elizabeth Smith-McCrossin: Thank you. It's a great question.

I think the very first thing is to consult with veterans. Even before this motion was brought forward.... Have a conversation with veterans in our community, because veterans have been telling me ever since I was first elected provincially that they were not happy about reservists being taken away from our community. They were never consulted, but even our local politicians and federal members of Parliament were not told. Back in the day, in 2017, this letter that came to Russell Clarke.... I have a copy of it in case anybody wants it. The member of Parliament at that time was blindsided as well. Even in 2020, when Lenore Zann was our MP, she was blindsided. They weren't even communicated with.

Start with communication at the local level, specifically about housing and support services. Talk to people like Justin. They're the people we should be having the conversations with first.

[Translation]

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Yes, we would like to get the document that Ms. Smith-McCrossin mentioned.

[English]

The Chair: If you could provide that to our clerk, that would be great.

We'll now go to Mr. Mazier, please, for five minutes.

Dan Mazier (Riding Mountain, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Welcome, guests.

Ms. Smith-McCrossin, I have the letter here that you were referring to earlier from the federal government. It's dated June 27, 2017, and it was signed on behalf of the Liberal defence minister at the time. It was sent to a local veteran, Mr. Russell Clarke, who wrote to the minister about the future of the Amherst armoury.

The letter states, "critical repairs were undertaken in 2010 to stabilize the building". It also says, "There are no plans to undertake further repairs as the intention is to dispose of the property."

In 2017, the Liberal government told your community, in writing, that it was done fixing the building. It was done in 2017. For some unknown reason, the Liberal government decided that. Is that how you read this?

Elizabeth Smith-McCrossin: Yes.

Dan Mazier: You and your local veterans reported water coming through the roof into a steel drum that was overflowing. Did the federal government ever fix that?

Elizabeth Smith-McCrossin: Let me back up a little bit. That's something that happened in more recent years. As our mayor referenced, back during the days when this letter was written, in 2017, if you were to go into the building, you would not know there were any problems. It was a strong, structurally sound, beautiful armoury.

Back in 1993, a caretaker from the armoury told us that work was done by DND to the sandstone. It was well known by the community and the department that the wrong mortar was used. That was never fixed. I have a draft condition assessment that was done in 2011. That's the only document we have. It talked then about work that the department needed to do on the armoury. That work was never done. When they shut it down during the pandemic without any notice to anyone, our MP at that time was not happy. She let the department and the Prime Minister know that. The armoury, even though they said it was unsafe, was opened up within days. They made a commitment to do work, and repairs were—

Dan Mazier: I'll just bring you back to the line of questioning. Obviously, this has a legacy. Even the work done in the 1990s was not up to par. Meanwhile, they gave you notice in 2017. There were no more repairs. They were just going to watch it rot.

As a follow-up, they never did fix the leak into the barrel. Is that right?

Elizabeth Smith-McCrossin: That is correct.

Dan Mazier: I think you've answered this already, but in July 2025, when the building was closed again—this time for mould, surprisingly enough, with a barrel leaking with water—was the community given any notice on that?

• (1615)

Elizabeth Smith-McCrossin: No.

Dan Mazier: Okay.

Let's make sure we have this right as a committee. The federal government says it won't fix the Amherst armoury. The roof leaks for years—not just a little bit, but for years. Water gets in. Then Ot-tawa closes Amherst armoury because of mould.

Is that an accurate summary?

Elizabeth Smith-McCrossin: Yes.

Dan Mazier: Ms. Smith-McCrossin, in April 2024 the Liberal government listed Amherst armoury in the federal budget as a property with potential for housing. It's been years since the announcement. Since then, has anything happened?

Elizabeth Smith-McCrossin: No, nothing has happened since then.

Dan Mazier: In 2026, the Liberal MP for Cumberland—Colchester introduced a motion not to fix the armoury or to reopen it but to hold a study. That's exactly why we're here today. When this study wraps up, it will lead to a report. Earlier this week, the Liberal MP who sponsored this study stated that she hopes the study will lead to—be ready—“the creation of a framework”. How very action-oriented.

We have a budget with an announcement. Then we have a motion for a study. Then we have a study for a report, and now maybe a framework to follow the budget, the motion, the study and the report. You wonder why nothing's getting done by this government. I find it quite puzzling. Now all of a sudden there are more ideas. There seems to be lots of talk, but no action.

What do you think about this approach?

The Chair: I'm afraid there's no time left for an answer, but perhaps in the next round....

We are going to Mr. Danko now for five minutes.

John-Paul Danko (Hamilton West—Ancaster—Dundas, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

To start my remarks, I'd like to thank MP Hirtle for bringing this important issue forward and using all the levers available to her to try to find a solution for the community that works for everyone. As the mayor said, I think it could be a really positive space in the community for veterans. It's something the community can be proud of, and it can also provide important services, including housing.

Ms. Blackburn, maybe I'll start with you and try to broaden this discussion a bit to the big picture from your experience of what veterans need when they come out of the service. You have a lot of experience in providing emergency food services. You also spoke very eloquently, I thought, about your vision for what housing services are required. We also heard Mr. McKay, I think it was, talk about the need for wraparound supports and mental health care treatment for some of the issues that veterans may have when they're in the community.

I'd like to give you the opportunity to talk about the big picture and what it is that we should be helping veterans with in terms of housing.

Marie Blackburn: We're still at the point where we have so many veterans who just can't afford housing. We're working with the federal government right now with the veteran homelessness program, where they're funding us so that we can situate veterans from homelessness into housing. They have given us \$1.4 million a year, but that's to support four provinces, which isn't really.... It works, but it's not addressing all of the veterans' needs.

With our programs through the VHP—and prior to that when we had our own without any federal money—we always provide food

services and getting veterans from homelessness into homes, but the biggest thing is preventing homelessness. We spend hundreds of thousands of dollars on rent, on wraparound services such as utilities and on whatever kinds of bills are going to stop them from being in a situation where they'll be struggling. We've worked on this for eight years now, and we're seeing a lot of headway, but at the end of the day, we are spending so much money with the increased amounts in the rents for our rental properties, rents for veterans, utility bills, food costs—everything.

Then, on this idea that Alana and I talked about at one time, if we had federal government buildings that could be donated, wouldn't that be nice? We could utilize those for, as Mr. McKay said, the full wraparound of services. In our organization right now, we have pretty much everything. We have the food services and all the emergency funding services. We have the pet promise program. We have a thrift store where we can put veterans back to work, and anything veterans need in the way of clothing or housing items they can get from there. We have an in-house acupuncturist, an in-house therapist, an in-house dentist, a hairdresser and a massage therapist, who all share an office.

There are just so many resources, and the gentleman up there who was speaking says that in the smaller regions they don't have that kind of access. If they could have a building donated by the federal government that they could utilize to make sure veterans are getting the services they require, that would be an absolutely amazing gesture.

● (1620)

John-Paul Danko: Thank you.

I have a follow-up question for Mayor Small. I don't have a lot of experience with federal surplus lands, but I do have quite a bit of experience with surplus school properties and surplus municipal properties and building those, for adaptive reuse, into housing projects.

One of the challenges, as you know, when we're talking about wraparound services—and I think we've just heard about how important those services are and how extensive they can be—is how important they are to making sure that a housing project is successful. A lot of people have the perception that if we want to solve homelessness or provide housing for veterans or whomever it is...it's not just the building. If you have an empty school or a vacant city property, an office space or whatever it may be, sometimes the public perception is, “Well, if we just had the physical space, the problem is solved,” but it's really the services, the wraparound supports, that are the key to a successful project.

I'm speaking as an Ontario representative. Our experience here is that in those wraparound supports are health care, which makes them a provincial responsibility, so when we are delivering projects, there's also a provincial partnership. Would you be seeking that here as well?

The Chair: Please give a brief answer if you can.

Robert Small: Yes.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Robert Small: You can't get more brief than that.

The Chair: That's perfect. Thanks, Mayor.

We're going back to Madame Gaudreau, please.

[Translation]

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Let's continue the discussion.

Mayor, in urban planning, people talk about “spatial segregation”. Do you want a project that's exclusively for veterans or, on the contrary, do you want there to be a mix that integrates the city, families, seniors and businesses?

You briefly referred to it, but since you're talking about a pilot project, I'd like to know your perspective. I would also like to know what Mr. McKay thinks.

[English]

Robert Small: I'll start.

What would I like to see in this facility? First of all, of course, it's homes for veterans. As I'm listening to this committee, I'm thinking about the types of services that.... There are those wraparound services for veterans, but I'm thinking about other opportunities so that the public can enjoy the facility as well.

We'd like to have it as a satellite recruitment site for veterans and potential reservists. Amherst has always been a big supporter of that.

I don't see why we would want to restrict it to just veterans. I think if there's an opportunity there for the public to use the facility as well, why wouldn't we do that? To me, that just makes sense.

[Translation]

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: The concern is isolation, as we've mentioned. It's clear that veterans need to be together. However, to avoid having a project where the concept is to designate an environment reserved for veterans, do you agree that it should become an integrated living environment?

• (1625)

[English]

Robert Small: The short answer is yes.

[Translation]

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: Thank you, but I'm speaking to Mr. McKay.

[English]

Justin McKay: I agree with the mayor. In a lot of ways, it would help the general population if it were integrated.

[Translation]

Marie-Hélène Gaudreau: That completes my questions, but there's just one thing I want to say to all the witnesses.

There must be other things you would have liked to tell us. Please don't hesitate to send us that information, including the document referred to earlier. It will be incorporated into the report.

Thank you for being here.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're going to Mrs. Cobena, and then we'll finish with Ms. Fancy.

Sandra Cobena (Newmarket—Aurora, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

My questions are for Mr. McKay.

Mr. McKay, you're a veteran. Thank you for your service, sir, and for being with us today. As you may already know, \$3 million was transferred out of a program to aid homeless veterans after it was claimed that it couldn't find ex-military personnel in need.

Could you please give us your reaction to that, and what the veteran community feels about the announcement?

Justin McKay: I'm very surprised by them saying they couldn't find veterans in need of that money, because two years ago, I worked on a file with a veteran here in town who was homeless, and we had trouble finding somewhere for him to live. Last year, I had a case manager reach out to me, looking for resources for two senior veterans who were at risk of becoming homeless, and my resource at that time was reaching out to Mayor Small and using the Hillsdale community, which is through the United Way here in Amherst.

Sandra Cobena: Of course, the explanation that the department couldn't find enough veterans in need to spend the money is contrary to what we see in our communities. Is that the reality? Are there not enough veterans in need who could have used this funding?

Justin McKay: I think there probably are veterans in need who could use the funding, but some of them, as they say, fly under the radar as well. They don't want to be helped or they don't want to be seen. That's also a problem that has to do with the veteran community and the homeless population.

Sandra Cobena: When you look at the decision and how it was made, it was, of course, made confidentially because of the concerns around stakeholder reactions. What are your thoughts on how this decision was made, and how veterans and veterans organizations were apparently not even openly told about the transfer?

Justin McKay: At all levels, there needs to be more communication with veterans on needs. Some guys or gals won't come forward when they're having a hard time. They need to be prodded. I think something we all could be better at doing is putting it more out there if someone is looking for help. Some people just don't want to come and ask for it.

Sandra Cobena: What message do you think transferring this money sends to veterans who are currently struggling to find stable housing?

Justin McKay: I think it makes them question the department's decision. Why would they do it? There are ways to find people who are homeless. You can find them.

There needs to be more consultation with organizations like VETS Canada and Homes For Heroes, to see if they could use that money. I watched some of the previous testimony about that, and those shareholders should be reached out to, to see if that surplus money would benefit those organizations.

Sandra Cobena: I agree 100%.

We think about this broadly too. What message does it send to our youth when they see the government giving up on veterans at the end of their careers? What incentive is there for youth to join and serve?

Justin McKay: It's funny you ask me that today, because this morning, when I opened up the regimental museum for a work party we had there for the unit, that is pretty much exactly what one of the newest, youngest members said to me: "People don't care anymore." When they see that, it makes them want to serve even less.

• (1630)

Sandra Cobena: Absolutely. Thank you for that.

I have a couple of questions for Ms. Blackburn, if I may. They're along the same lines of this news that \$3 million intended to help homeless veterans was transferred out.

What is your reaction? You run the food bank for veterans.

Marie Blackburn: I find it rather disgusting, to be honest with you.

Like Justin said, did they reach out to anybody and ask, "Can anybody use this surplus?" I can guarantee you that our organization—which has four offices in Alberta, and we service Manitoba, Saskatchewan and B.C.—could certainly have put that money to good use, whether it was for homelessness, food on the table or counselling services.

Hearing what our veterans already feel about the government and how unsupported they feel, I think if they knew this, there would be a lot of public outrage about it. I don't think it's fair that proper due diligence wasn't utilized for that money to go to the people who truly need it.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Fancy.

Jessica Fancy (South Shore—St. Margarets, Lib.): Thank you very much, Chair.

Being a fellow politician from Nova Scotia and coming from a small rural community as well, it's really good to see here a small rural community, with all three levels of government across multiple different parties, to talk about rural issues, in particular on the theme of veterans. I really want to get that out there. It's an absolute privilege to serve, and it's a joy to see all three levels of government from Amherst, Nova Scotia, here today.

That being said, I know that with our framework, report or whatever we want to call this in terms of action items, there are some good-news stories out there that sometimes we don't get to talk about. I'm a new member here in OGGO and also a new member of Parliament. I have heard stories from our colleague Terry Sheehan from Sault Ste. Marie about what their local Legion has done with local developers, building a Legion with then housing above the Legion and wraparound services. Those are the types of good-news stories, frameworks and templates that we should be replicating throughout the whole country. From our colleague Mr. Danko today, I've heard what they've been able to do, not particularly with veterans but with a lot of unhomed people, with their development in Hamilton. It's created a community hub with shelter services, transitional housing and different clinicians within this development.

These are the types of good-news stories that I think we as a government need to be amplifying and growing.

I'm sorry. I just wanted to take a little bit of breadth and depth within the line of questioning there. I don't want to be Miss Polly Positivity here—

Voices: Oh, oh!

Jessica Fancy: —but I wanted to say that it's an absolute privilege to be here and to help figure this out, because it's been way too long in terms of what the deal is here.

That being said, outside of Nova Scotia, we have Ms. Blackburn here in terms of good-news stories that we would love to hear.

Ms. Blackburn, what difference does it make when a veteran has access to wraparound services alongside stable housing rather than receiving housing support in isolation? As well, from your perspective, being out west in Alberta, do you have any good-news stories that you can maybe provide for us today?

Marie Blackburn: There are so many good-news stories. I think the bottom line for us is that our mission was simple. We just wanted to prevent homelessness, hunger, isolation and ultimately veteran suicide. That was as simple as we made it. I can tell you, because we have a new system now where we can track things better, that in the last two years, we've helped over 1,900 veterans with food, housing, making a car payment, paying for a dog's surgery or whatever the case may be.

I can tell you about a veteran in the RCMP who called about a month ago. He said, "Today is my last day. I'm done." I said, "What is it you need?" He said, "I'm living in a tent in Fort St. John and I have nothing. I'm done." I said, "What's the most critical thing you need today?" He said, "They're going to repossess my truck." That cost our company \$4,700, but that was okay. Winter was coming, and that was the only other option he would have had if he'd refused to get help from us, so we paid his truck payment. We got him out of the tent.

He was living in a hotel—I'll tell you that hotels are not cheap; they run about \$3,500 to \$4,500 a month—but he is now in stabilized housing. He calls us every day. He sent me a letter the other day. I think the most powerful thing about that letter was that he said, "Marie, my kids may never meet you, but they will know that you saved their dad's life." Those kinds of things are so important to us. It was a truck payment. It was a vehicle, but that was all that man had left.

Mr. McCauley has seen how our Edmonton office runs and has heard from different people at Tuesday coffees about how we've saved their lives or changed their lives. When we're talking about surplus housing, that's just one small part of it. The more we can gather together to support our veterans, that's what we need to be doing. Yes, we have lots of great stories, but we have a lot of tough ones too.

• (1635)

Jessica Fancy: Thank you very much, Ms. Blackburn. I think it's the narrative that we have in telling those stories of people.

For our final question today, I think I have less than a minute left.

Ms. Blackburn, let's do the wish list question. If you had a wish list outside of.... We've had communications issues, and we know that the federal government.... You want that capital funding. What else do you feel we can do to help shrink some of those gaps?

The Chair: Before you start, I think our questions have run their course. I was going to turn it over to the guests to offer parting thoughts.

Perhaps each one of you can have a turn, Ms. Blackburn and Ms. Smith-McCrossin. Are there any final thoughts you might have?

Ms. Blackburn, you can go first.

Marie Blackburn: Our wish list, for the sake of the veterans, mostly, is that the government pays better attention to what their needs are. We are continually fighting with the government over their denials of Veterans Affairs claims. We fight and we get them, so why is it that the veterans are not getting the claims when they ask for them? Why are we the ones who are actually getting the claims settled for them?

I would like to see a little more community engagement from politicians like all of you. Come and check out some of these organizations that are doing good things for veterans so you can understand that when we say we need additional funding or we might need one of these buildings or something, you understand and see the people we work with. I think that would be my greatest wish list item: Just pay more attention to these veterans who have served this

country. They deserve a lot better than some of them are getting. That's my wish list.

The Chair: Thanks.

Ms. Smith-McCrossin, we cut you off in an earlier reply. Feel free to fill that in as well.

Elizabeth Smith-McCrossin: Thank you.

I'll finish off my comments, first of all, by thanking you for being here and being able to bring these concerns.

Thank you, MP Fancy, for recognizing rural parts of Nova Scotia and all of Canada.

Our veterans do deserve better. They do deserve support for housing, as well as the supports that our veteran here today, Justin McKay, has talked about. That's who we need to talk to. Those are the people.

I will add a comment on one of your questions from earlier. There was a group of veterans who met every week in our armouries for coffee and provided support to one another. It was already being used a little bit, and that was taken away from them. A lot of them have since reconvened at the Legion.

I also want to mention two more points, if I may. One is with regard to MP Fancy's comment about rural areas.

One of the reasons our people were so upset in 2017 by DND's decision to remove the ability for our Canadian military to train and to divest our armoury is that at the exact same time, they made a decision to invest \$130 million into restoring an armoury in Halifax. That's gone over budget by \$30 million, so they're up to \$160 million. Meanwhile, they shut down or tore down—whatever—our armoury in rural Canada.

The men and women from our area who serve our country are just as valuable as anyone from urban parts of the country who serve. Four hundred and eighty-six men who trained at our armouries lost their lives—North Novies. Those 486 men should mean something. We just want the same treatment. We just want to be treated equally to those from other areas across the country.

I hope that we can do more for our veterans, for people like Justin, who have served this country. We can build housing and we can provide those supports, but we can do it without tearing down and removing the ability to train reservists in our armoury.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

• (1640)

The Chair: Thanks.

Mr. McKay, go ahead.

Justin McKay: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to thank you all for the chance to appear in front of you today and speak on these issues.

To help see an end goal with this study, all levels of government need to be involved. I know veteran stuff is not under provincial or municipal purview. However, we're in their constituencies, and in the sense of the word "health care" provincially....

When I was doing my first part of my PTSD treatment, I went to Nova Scotia Health. It was a self-referral. They told me they may see me in six to nine months. When I called Veterans Affairs, I was in the OSI clinic in probably three weeks. That's the difference in the services. We need to be able to have the same service level all around for everyone in that matter. That shows the need for the mental health part of it when they say "wraparound services", because for a lot of it, if your mental health's not good, your own health is not going to be good at the end of the day.

I hope we can come to a conclusion on saving our armoury and getting some meaningful work out of it at the end of the day.

I'd like to thank you all.

The Chair: Thanks.

Mayor Small, we'll finish with you.

Robert Small: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'll bring back into the focus of this standing committee the use of underused and surplus federal lands and buildings for services for veterans. We've made a proposal that we believe would be a success story for everyone. I've heard comments made that would allow us to rethink the project to allow for more wraparound services, which we could partner with Nova Scotia Health on and our federal partners as well.

I'd like to see the committee make a recommendation to proceed with the project we've proposed, because I believe it would become

the success story for application across all of Canada, especially in the rural areas.

On a side note, I thought Ms. Fancy was going to make a "small" joke because my name is Robert Small and we were talking about small communities, but as it stands, I guess that wasn't the purpose of her making that chat about Nova Scotia.

The Chair: I'm regretting giving you extra time now.

• (1645)

Robert Small: You're welcome. Thanks very much.

The Chair: Thanks. Was there anything else, Mayor Small? Okay. Wonderful.

Witnesses, thanks for being with us today.

Ms. Smith-McCrossin and Ms. Blackburn, thank you for coming all the way to Ottawa. We sincerely appreciate it.

We will dismiss you, and the report will be public relatively soon, especially compared to what we normally do.

Colleagues, thanks for allowing us a rather unorthodox meeting and allowing the extra time for our witnesses to speak from their hearts.

Quickly, our next two meetings will finish off M-16. We've set aside the 20th for the report stage. Hopefully, we can finalize it in one day. We will send out a reminder after the final meetings. We will be asking for recommendations back by noon on October 13. We will do our final two, and then we'll need our recommendations by the 13th. We'll then be back on the 20th to hopefully finalize the report.

Thank you very much, everyone. If there's nothing else, we are adjourned.

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