

EVENING SITTING

COMMITTEE OF FINANCE

General Revenue Fund
Health
Vote 32

The Chair: — I would ask the minister to please introduce his staff.

Hon. Mr. Cline: — Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Beside me is Glenda Yeates, who is the senior associate deputy minister of Health. And beside her is Cathy Langlois, who is the director of finance and management services in the Department of Health. And immediately behind Ms. Yeates is Steve Petz, who is the associate deputy minister of Health. And also with us this evening, in the back, are Maureen Yeske, who is the executive director of policy and planning; Jim Simmons, the executive director of community care; Carol Klassen, the executive director of acute and emergency; and Dale Bloom, who is an assistant to the deputy minister.

Item 1

Mr. McLane: — Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Mr. Minister, officials, welcome here this evening. It's been about a year I guess, since we last talked in this forum, and we still see health care in this province under some duress. We still see people on massive waiting-lists. We still see people suffering; letters continue to come in daily.

Mr. Chairman, this just a small example of what has come in today to our office, and people are wondering where we're at in health. So it seems to me that the government has learned little over the course of the last year and I'm wondering where to start tonight.

I think, however, I would just like to clarify a few things in the budget, Mr. Minister, if I could. And I'll ask you a couple of questions in that regard.

The first one is, could you please tell us the actual increase in spending in Health this year over last year?

Hon. Mr. Cline: — Mr. Chairman, I'd like to thank the hon. member for the question. And I'll certainly be interested in answering the question in a bit more detail. I can tell the member that specifically — and I'll elaborate on this in a few moments — the increase to the health care budget in Saskatchewan this year is \$70.8 million. That's \$70.8 million or 4.5 per cent over last year.

I'm going to say a few words about that figure in a few minutes. I don't want to belabour this but the member of course prefaces his question by saying that the system is under duress and there are long waiting-lists and so on. I want to say to the member and the House, Mr. Chairman, that any health system will be under duress at any given time. And if you went back 20 years or 30 years in the legislative records and read *Hansard* you'd have people — usually Liberals — saying that there's a

problem with our health care system.

Of course in any system there will be problems. But I want to say to the member and to the House, and to anyone who happens to be watching tonight, that we should be very careful to listen to whether the member will answer this question. And the question I would pose to the member is this: since the member and other members of the Liberal Party, not to mention the Conservative Party, like to get up and run down our medicare system here in Saskatchewan, I'd like to challenge both of those parties, and that member in particular, to name a place in the world where they have a better health care system than the province of Saskatchewan. And my prediction, Mr. Chair, is that that's not going to happen because there is none and the member isn't going to take me up on that challenge. The member's going to get up and say this and that about our medicare system, which of course the Liberal Party has been opposed to since its inception unfortunately.

I want to say, in terms of the waiting-lists, the waiting-lists in Saskatchewan are no longer than in any other province. They're well within the national average. We're doing more surgeries than we've done in the past and providing more services. That's something that the Liberals won't tell people, but that's the truth and that's what I'm duty-bound to share with the public, Mr. Chair.

To get back to the specific question, as I said to the member earlier, the increase to our Health budget is \$70.8 million, which is a far, far cry, Mr. Chairman, from what we see out of Ottawa and the Liberal Party. The Liberal Party likes to talk about how much we're spending on health care. We constantly have to remind ourselves that the federal Liberals have cut, last year, \$47 million out of our health care budget. I don't know if I've ever mentioned that to the opposition in the past but it is the truth, Mr. Chair. The Liberals last year cut \$47 million out of health care; this year \$53 million.

And our response is not to complain about what the Liberals are doing, Mr. Chair. Our response is to put the money back in — that's what New Democrats customarily do. We build the medicare system; we sustain the medicare system over Liberal opposition, over Conservative opposition. That's what we're going to do.

But I want to say to the member in answer to his question that the \$70.8 million increase from the New Democrats, on behalf of the taxpayers and the people of the province into our health care budget this year, is actually a net increase, Mr. Chair, of \$56 million. Because \$14 million of the \$70.8 million increase to health care from the provincial government this year, \$14 million dollars of that, is to replace the 2 mill levy which, as the member knows, we've taken off the municipalities. They no longer have to put \$14 million into the health care system from the municipal taxpayers.

So we're replacing that and adding an additional \$56 million. And I know that all members opposite support us in our efforts to put more money into our health care system and to sustain it for the next generation.

Mr. McLane: — Well, Mr. Minister, you covered a fair bit of ground there, and still health care in this province isn't any better just because you say it is. Your Premier continually talks about the Saskatchewan way -- we'll do things in Saskatchewan by Saskatchewan people.

And I don't care whether we have less beds or more beds in this province compared to Alberta or compared to North Dakota or compared to anywhere. This is Saskatchewan; we have unique needs in Saskatchewan and we have unique ways of doing things here. So let's not compare ourselves to everybody else and say hey, we're doing such a wonderful job because we're better than province A or province B.

Now the figures on the budget, Mr. Minister, I just wanted to ask you about those, and you did touch a bit on it in the 14 million that you added to offset the removal of the hospital revenue tax. However, I don't know where you find that you increase the budget this year \$56 million in that, the emergency money that you pumped into the system last July was actually part of last year's budget. So according to my figures the budget's increased about 18 million and if you take out the 14 million you're down to 4. Maybe you'd care to comment on that.

Hon. Mr. Cline: — I regret to tell the House, Mr. Chair, that the member does not have those figures correct. There was \$70.8 million new money put in by the provincial government in the face of quite massive federal cuts this year. Of the 70.8, \$14 million represents money that replaces what the municipalities used to put in. That amounts to \$56 million new money.

Now the member subtracts the figure \$40 million from 56 and comes up with 4, which everyone watching will know is simply incorrect arithmetic on the member's part. The reality is — I'll repeat for the member — the provincial government in the face of a \$53 million cut-back from the federal government, from the Liberals in Ottawa, has put \$70.8 million new money into the Saskatchewan health care system this year. Of that \$70 million, \$14 million replaces the municipal 2 mill levy. That amounts to \$56 million, new provincial dollars, net new dollars into the system.

From the \$56 million the member subtracts \$40 million and says that leaves \$2 million. Actually it's \$56 million new money. The member refers to a \$40 million figure that was put in last year. I want to tell the member, as I think he understands, \$3 million of the \$40 million was put into a new air ambulance plane for the province; \$4 million was put in to pay off debt. The amount of money that went into the health districts as new money last year was \$34 million. The amount of new money that goes to the health districts this year will end up being about \$5.6 million at the end of the day . . . I'm sorry, \$56 million at the end of the day. The difference between \$34 million and \$56 million is \$22 million new money that will go to the districts.

In specific terms I want to say to the member, in anticipation of other questions because I know the member is interested to know where all of the new money is going, \$38.8 million new money is going to hospitals and nursing homes, \$3 million new money to improve emergency services like ambulance in the

province, \$8.5 million new money to strengthen rural and northern health services, and \$6.3 million new money to enhance home care and community services.

I noticed, Mr. Chair, incidentally, before I sit down, that I had in my first question asked the member who likes to — along with his Liberal colleagues and Conservative colleagues . . . indicate to the House where there was a place in the world that had a better health care system than the province of Saskatchewan. We certainly are not without our problems, but I maintain that we have among the best systems in the world. And I challenge the member to get up and name the place that has a better health care system than the province of Saskatchewan. The member did not do so after my first challenge. We will see if the member does so presently.

Mr. McLane: — Almost makes me think that we're at the AgriDome tonight, and the fights are going to be coming on. But that's not the purpose that we're here.

Mr. Minister, could you please tell us then what the total Health budget for 1997-98 estimated is?

Hon. Mr. Cline: — Yes, the total Health budget this year will be \$1.63 billion, which is the largest single expenditure of our government and represents well over 30 per cent and I think close to about 35 per cent of provincial operating spending. Health care is the single most important, number one priority of the New Democratic government, as it always has been for our party.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. McLane: — And, Mr. Minister, could you tell us then what the actual health budget for '96-97 was.

Hon. Mr. Cline: — The estimated budget for last year was \$1.56 billion.

Mr. McLane: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. I didn't ask you what the estimate was. I asked you what the actual Health budget was for that year.

Hon. Mr. Cline: — The member asked, Mr. Chair, for the actual budget. The budgeted figure was, last year, as I said, \$1.56 billion. This year the budget is \$1.63 billion. Spending on last year actual was \$1.61 billion. As the member knows, an additional \$40 million was injected into the system last August. The member has already referred to that.

(1915)

Mr. McLane: — Yes, I realize that you injected that money, and that was a point I was getting at. And that money was injected because . . . from the pressure from the people of Saskatchewan. You were pressured into putting that money . . . and recognizing that your health district legislation isn't working, and certainly your wellness model isn't working. So I would ask you then, Mr. Minister, if the budget for this year is 1.63 billion and last year you actually spent 1.61 in your own figures, what's the difference of those two numbers.

Hon. Mr. Cline: — As the member indicates, Mr. Chair, last year we put extra money into the health care system. The federal Liberals cut back our health budget by \$47 million. We actually put \$87 million new money in, and this year we are doing even more. And I've given the member the numbers already.

Mr. McLane: — Mr. Minister, not quite — you didn't answer the question I asked. I ask you what the difference was in dollars from this year's budget to what you actually spent last year in health.

Hon. Mr. Cline: — I've given those figures to the member already, Mr. Chair.

Mr. McLane: — Mr. Chair, Mr. Minister, could you please repeat those -- I seem to have not heard you or misunderstood you -- the difference between this year's budgeted plus last year's expenditures.

Hon. Mr. Cline: — Yes, this year's budget, as I've said, Mr. Chair, is \$1.63 billion. Last year the budget was \$1.56 billion, and in addition \$40 million was spent. In addition, there were other supplementary estimates and a total of \$1.61 billion were spent.

Mr. McLane: — So, Mr. Minister, could you tell us the difference then of this year's budgeted and what you spent last year then, please . . . dollars . . . (inaudible) . . . difference.

Hon. Mr. Cline: — Last year, Mr. Chair, we put in \$40 million additional money to the \$1.56 billion that was budgeted for health care. This year we are putting \$70.8 million in addition to the 1.56. I think what the member is getting at is that last year we put in \$40 million extra as well.

The member's point is well taken that we did put extra money in last year. We're putting extra money in this year. We're back-filling all of the Liberal cuts to health care; plus we're attempting to put additional money in as well because of the fact that the economy of the province is doing quite well.

Mr. McLane: — Well, Mr. Minister, what you're back-filling is a mistake that your government made in the wellness model, is what you're back-filling. And if you're misleading the people of this province and saying you've put in an extra \$70.8 million into health care this year, you're misleading the folks. It's not that. It's the difference between 1.63 and 1.61 of what you spent last year. Be upfront and tell the people of the province you only put 18 million in, and if you take away the 14 that you took to replace the municipalities, you've got 4 million extra. That's all you've increased it, \$4 million, Mr. Minister.

Hon. Mr. Cline: — Mr. Chair, I don't agree with the member's numbers. As I said earlier, in last year the Liberals took out \$47 million out of the health care budget. We had to put in 47 million last year plus we put in an additional 40 for a total of 87 million new provincial money. This year, as of April 1, the Liberals took out another \$53 million from health care in Saskatchewan contrary to the advice of their own National Forum on Health chaired by the Prime Minister.

So last year we put in \$87 million new money when the Liberal cuts are considered. This year the Liberals are taking out \$53 million from our province and of course they're cutting every province in health care. And in addition to the \$53 million we're putting in, we also are putting in \$70.8 million new money.

I think that most people listening to this would realize — and most people across the province, Mr. Chair, and I've been around the province and talked to a lot of people — realize that the provincial government is pouring a lot of new money into health care contrary to what the federal Liberals are doing. And I think most people agree that we're doing a good job of funding health care, contrary to the Liberals.

The member can continue on his line of questioning but if the member is going to expect me to say that somehow the New Democrats are doing a bad job funding health care, and that somehow the Liberals are funding health care, I have to advise the member that I'm going to have to take issue with that because the facts simply do not bear that out.

Mr. McLane: — Well, Minister, if you'd simply answer the question, you wouldn't have a problem. And the questions that I'm raising here tonight are . . . the people out there that are watching tonight are asking these same questions. They're the ones that are calling me. They're the ones that are writing me. They're the ones that are coming to see us. They're not fooled. You're not fooling them. They recognize that you've put in \$4 million extra into the budget this year into health care, and maybe you could elaborate on that.

What do you think you're going to do with the \$4 million of new money that you put into the Health budget?

Hon. Mr. Cline: — As I indicated to the member, Mr. Chair, in light of the Liberal cut-back to health care, we put in \$87 million new money last year. In light of the federal Liberal cut-backs to health care this year, with the back-fill of \$53 million that the Liberals are taking out plus the additional \$70 million we're putting in in this budget, we're putting more than a hundred million dollars new provincial money into health care this year.

The member does not have to take my word for it, Mr. Chair. I would advise him to have a look at what the Liberal's own committee said. The Liberals set up a committee a few years ago called the National Forum on Health, which was chaired by the Prime Minister. And what did the National Forum on Health say? The National Forum on Health said that the federal government, the Liberals, should stop taking money out of health care and freeze the level of funding from the federal government to the provinces for health care at 1996-97 levels.

The federal government, Mr. Chair, has refused to take that advice. That advice would mean that the Liberals would have to put \$53 million back into our province this year, and they'd have to put money back into the health care system in every province in the country.

The Prime Minister and the Liberal government are ignoring the advice of their own committee. But I have to say to the member,

who wants to somehow say that the Liberals want to properly fund health care system, that its own committee, the National Forum on Health chaired by the Prime Minister, has said in effect that the Liberals owe Saskatchewan \$53 million this year, and they owe money to every province in the country for health care. Notwithstanding what the Liberals have done, notwithstanding the actions of the federal government, we are going to put that money back into the health care system. We did that last year, \$87 million more provincial money; we'll do it this year, over \$100 million new money.

Now the member is going to stand up and say it's not enough. It's not enough; we want more. The member is going to have to explain to the taxpayers what taxes he wants to increase for even more money to be put in to undo the damage the federal Liberals are doing.

Mr. McLane: — Mr. Chairman, the minister keeps wanting to raise the issue of the health forum, the federal health forum. The issue that I would like to raise along with that — and it's a topic for discussion for another evening; it's not where we're going to go tonight with it — is two or three years ago the Premier of the day and the minister's predecessor decided that we needed a health council in this province.

They went to great length and great pain to set up a health council to advise the government as to what the people in this province wanted. Oddly enough, that council was terminated last year by this government. I don't have all the recommendations in front of me, but one of these nights when we're here I will have them, and we'll go through them -- a lot of recommendations to the Minister of Health and to this government on what the people of this province wanted.

The minister and the government were not prepared to go that route, and so they disbanded the health council. So health forum, federal health council, provincial . . . I wouldn't pat myself on the back too much, saying that the provincial government here has really done anything much better than the federal government.

I just want to go back to the statement of expense in the budget again, Mr. Minister. Last year you did estimate \$1.56 billion for that budget. As I said last summer, with a lot of pressure from the folks around the province and realizing that you've made a mistake in health reform in this province . . . you've gone the wrong way. You're causing massive suffering, waiting-lists, and what have you all across the province. The pressure had to be immense for your cabinet to inject that type of money into it.

However, the money was injected into last year and that brings your budget up to \$1.6 billion. There's only a very little difference between what you're doing this year with Health dollars and what you put in last year. Why don't you admit to the people of the province you're not putting any new money in this year? You did it last year. And the budget is about the same this year as it was last year.

So I ask you once again — I'll give you credit for \$4 million increase — what are you planning on doing with the \$4 million?

Hon. Mr. Cline: — The members figures are incorrect. I regret to advise, Mr. Chair, that they simply are not correct. I've already explained to the member that the federal Liberals have taken \$100 million out of our health care budget in the last two years, which we've back-filled. In addition to that, last year we put in 40 million new dollars into the health care system; this year \$70.8 million new money.

I've explained to the member that this year we're putting new money into hospitals and nursing homes to the tune of \$38.8 million. We're putting new money into emergency services, like ambulance service, to the tune of \$3 million. We're putting new money into rural and northern health services to the tune of \$8.5 million, and new money into home care and community services to the tune of \$6.3 million.

I think it's very sad actually, Mr. Chair, that in view of the fact that the Liberals' own committee recommended that the federal government should give us in the province, in every province, more money — Saskatchewan's share is \$53 million — that the member continually gets up and denies that the Liberals are cutting money to health care and denies the simple fact that most people in the province understand that the provincial government has had to back-fill for the federal Liberal cuts, as every provincial government has had to do, Mr. Chair.

The member raises the Provincial Health Council, which came up with about 80 recommendations. It was never the intent that that council would be a permanent council, nor was the national council on health to be a permanent council.

But I want to say to the member that one of the members of the member's own party, David Collenette, the federal MP — used to be in the cabinet as minister of Defence; had to step down — but at his own nomination in Toronto a few months ago, got up and said that really the federal Liberals have gone way, way too far in cutting back funding to health care. We certainly agree with that. And the Prime Minister's own committee, the National Forum on Health, said to the Liberal government and the Liberal Party, stop your cuts to health care.

We know that the Liberals have always been opposed to medicare. The member questioning me tonight came out in favour last year of privatizing medicare; the leader of the member's party has come out in favour of privatizing medicare — that's not the way our government operates, Mr. Chair. We're going to keep putting money into medicare; we're going to keep the system public.

What the member really wants to do — what the Liberal Party wants to do -- is undermine faith in the public system, to bring in the two-tier, private system that that member has talked about and that the Leader of the Liberal Party, Dr. Melenchuk, continually talks about.

I want to say to the member as well . . . You know, I've asked the member twice now this evening, to get up and tell us where in the world they have a better health care system than in the province of Saskatchewan; he won't do that. But I want to ask him also, how come, the way he's talking tonight, he said on . . . The Leader of the Liberal Party said on CBC to Costa Maragos shortly after he was elected Leader of the Liberal Party, that he wanted to cut out hundreds of millions of dollars

from the health care budget. That's what he said. I've got the transcript, Mr. Chair — not with me — but I've got the transcript in my office.

And just last week, do you know what the Leader of the Liberal Party said about funding for health care and other things? He said that he didn't like our provincial budget. He wanted a conservative budget. Those are his words quoted in the *Star-Phoenix* last week. He wants less money to be spent on health care because he wants a private system. That member spoke in favour of the private system last year, and I've got the quotes, and I've referred to them in the House. Now why is it that the Leader of the Liberal Party goes around saying we should have a private medicare system, scrap the system we've got, make people pay, and that member says we should make people pay? The leader says we should cut down on the amount of money in the health care system and yet the member comes in tonight and says we should spend more. It doesn't add up, Mr. Chair.

We're going to do what this province has done for a long time. And that's have a public medicare system and properly funded, whether or not we have support from the Liberal Party.

(1930)

Mr. Bjornerud: — Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'd also like to welcome your officials tonight, Mr. Minister. In one of your attempts at answering the member from Arm River's question a few minutes ago, did I hear you say that you back-filled the \$17.6 million . . . the 2 mill health levy?

Hon. Mr. Cline: — It's actually \$12 million plus there was a public health levy. There's a total of \$14 million I believe, that used to be paid from municipalities to health districts. Municipalities will no longer give that money to health districts but the Department of Health will provide the health districts with that sum of money.

Mr. Bjornerud: — Mr. Minister, I can't believe what you're saying — the 2 mill health levy was the \$14 million, my numbers are out, that was removed, and you back-filled. What you're forgetting to say is, on the other hand, the Minister of Municipal Government took the \$14 million out of the municipal government revenue-sharing pool. So who picked up the tab but the farmers and the urban taxpayers of Saskatchewan. You back-filled absolutely nothing. Would you care to comment on that?

Hon. Mr. Cline: — Yes. Unfortunately, Mr. Chair, the member does not have his facts correct. In so far as the health districts are concerned, the removal of the 2 mill levy was revenue neutral. In other words a total of \$14 million, which is 2 mill levy and public health levy, is no longer paid from municipalities to the health districts. But that money is now paid by the Department of Health to the health districts. And every penny of that is replaced. If the member believes that that money is not being put into the health districts I can only say that the member is simply mistaken.

Mr. Bjornerud: — Mr. Minister, that's not at all what I said. What I said was the 2 mill health levy — which by the way was

supposed to be temporary when it was first put on — was removed on one side from the municipalities. They didn't have to put the 2 mills on. But on the other side they were cut \$14 million from the revenue-sharing pool. That money was returned to general revenue which in turn went around, and you say you're back-filling the \$14 million for health care. So you didn't back-fill nothing. You took their money, took a circle, put it around, and put it right back in.

So, Mr. Minister, do you agree that \$14 million was cut from the municipal revenue-sharing pool? Let's get that straight before we see where the money came from, where it went.

Hon. Mr. Cline: — No I don't agree, Mr. Chair. The 2 mill levy issue is revenue neutral to the health districts in the sense that the money isn't paid to them by the districts but is paid to them by the province. They end up getting the 14 million. The member is confused and incorrect in so far as what he's saying about the municipalities because the municipalities used to pay the 14 million. The effect of the removal of the 2 mill levy is they don't pay it any more. So naturally revenue sharing to them may be decreased by 14 million, but on the other hand they're not paying the money out. So in so far as the 2 mill levy and the public health levy goes, it's revenue neutral to them as well. The member is simply incorrect in what he's saying.

Mr. Bjornerud: — Mr. Minister, all they were doing was collecting money for you in the first place; now they've lost it on the other side. So I don't see how you can stand up and say you're adding money to the health care budget when the taxpayers of Saskatchewan were the ones that actually covered the loss.

Mr. Minister, Mr. Minister, I'd like to go on a little bit different direction here. And my counterpart from Arm River had mentioned before the many problems in the health care system and a couple of them have come to my attention out in my constituency, and I've brought them to yours awhile ago, and that was to do with the dialysis machine and so on.

There's a number of areas, not just East Central Health District; I believe you mentioned there's two or three others. Many of the places that I'm still getting calls . . . in fact more now because they're quite curious to know if there is a chance of this dialysis machine being up and operating in the East Central Health District, and I believe Tisdale and some of the other areas. Could you give me a figure what it would cost to get a professional into the East Central Health District, which I believe is a funding from a different part than the normal health expenses, would be?

Hon. Mr. Cline: — Mr. Chair, I cannot give the member an exact figure, or even a good approximation right at the moment, of what it would cost to have kidney dialysis centres in more regions than the . . . or centres than the four we do now.

But I want to say to the member that I am not . . . I am quite sensitive to what the member is saying except I disagree with something he implied at least, when he was questioning me about this on another day. And that was, I think the member by now may agree that there are many people who can have home dialysis, and to the extent that people can have dialysis at home

as opposed to travelling to Saskatoon, Regina, Prince Albert or Lloydminster, we should try to encourage that. And in fact in the last few years we've put in, I believe, an extra \$1.7 million to increase home dialysis.

But the member has a very valid question and that is, what about the people for whom home dialysis would not be appropriate? And I think that includes the people that the member brought to the legislature before. And instead of coming to Regina, they'd like to have dialysis at Yorkton, and I sympathize with that.

And obviously what we need to do -- and we're doing this presently and have been doing it for some months and hopefully pretty soon we'll bring this to a close -- we need to analyse how many people there are in areas like Yorkton that are now travelling to Regina or elsewhere for dialysis and see if there's a big enough group of people that we could have dialysis centres set up in Yorkton and perhaps other places. And I am actually ... unfortunately I can't give the member those numbers tonight because I haven't been provided with them. But I want to say to the member that I am as anxious as he is to find out if we can get sort of critical masses of people that need dialysis identified that would make it sensible to take hospital dialysis out to more people and to do that.

So although I don't have the numbers, I'm sure we'll be in estimates many times before the session is over and the member will be up asking me this again. And at some point obviously, I want to get this information clearly for the member. If I don't verbally, then if I can do it earlier I'll send some written information to the member to answer the question.

But it's a very good question because anybody that's getting dialysis, and I know actually some people that are and I've met them at some of the dialysis centres in Saskatchewan, live a very difficult life in some ways. They have a lot of courage because they can't live without dialysis, and I think we all really feel for them. And if there's any way we can make their lives more comfortable, we want to. And I would like to join with the member in a very cooperative way to say we are examining that and I'll encourage the department to get me some answers as soon as they can about improving dialysis.

As I said, we put in extra money into dialysis services the last few years. Maybe we can even do more. And if there's anything we can do to help kidney dialysis patients, we're certainly in favour of doing that.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Bjornerud: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. I agree with you that some people can have the dialysis treatment at home, but there is many, many more out there that can't and are making this two times ... once, two time, three times a week to Regina or Saskatoon, if it happened to be closer. And it's hard to justify to these people why they are spending upwards of \$1,500 a month, like Mrs. Olm was from Churchbridge, to receive this treatment. And I would say that that's about as close to being a two-tier health system as we are going to get to or ever would want to get to.

So I guess my question, Mr. Minister, then is, in the near future can we see some of this \$4 million of new money? At what point will we see places like Yorkton have this? Like are we looking at a long time span here or are we looking at two months, one month? A lot of people after that we had Mrs. Olm in here would call in that have the same problem and ask, how long will it be before maybe we can see Yorkton with a dialysis unit up and operating. So is there a time limit or a time on this that you may be able to give us an answer?

Hon. Mr. Cline: — Well certainly I would hope to give the member a more specific answer in a relatively short period of time as I said, Mr. Chair. But the matter is under review now. The member is incorrect in terms of referring to \$4 million new money for health care this year. There's \$70.8 million new money for health care.

But if the member has some problem with the figure of \$4 million, then I want to say this to the member, that in last week's *Star-Phoenix*, Dr. Melenchuk, the leader of the member's party, said that there should be \$3 million new money put into the health care system over the next five years. That's what he said. He said \$.6 million new money each year.

So however you cut and slice it, what we're doing is a lot more than the Leader of the Liberal Party says we should do, and in fact he's been critical of the amount of money we're putting into health care. He's done that more than once in the media.

Now I want to say to the member also that the member likes to get up like other members of the Liberal Party, and I don't like to be partisan, Mr. Chair, but he talks about problems in our health care system. And what I have to say to the member from Saltcoats, as I said to the member from Arm River, that if they want to get up day after day and run down the Saskatchewan medicare system, our model for delivering health care, would they please take me up on my challenge to name the places in the world that have a better health care system and take care of their people with more care and compassion than the province of Saskatchewan.

And, Mr. Chair, the member's not going to do that because there aren't a lot of places in the world that have a better health care system than we do. I've put that challenge to the Liberals five times now. They don't get up and answer it because they know there is no such place.

Do we have some problems in our health care system? Yes, we do; we always will. There are problems in every system. Do we have a good health care system? Yes, we have a very good health care system. We're going to try to fund it to make it better. And once again I appeal to the Liberal Party to cooperate with us in that venture rather than advocating private medicine and rather than supporting the federal government in its social cut-backs in our country.

Mr. McLane: — Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I think the folks at home are more interested in some facts and figures than continued rhetoric from the Health minister and criticizing people that aren't in the House and don't have a chance to defend themselves. The Minister is able to say things, take them out of context, and really the person that he is referring to is not

here to defend himself and set the facts straight. And there will be a day; there will be a day, Mr. Minister, when that will happen and that will come in the course of two or three years in what is called a provincial election. That is when you'll have your chance to criticize the Leader of the Liberal Party in an open fashion. At the same time he'll have a chance for rebuttal and set the record straight and deal with facts instead of myths as well.

I wanted to get back to the budget itself if we could. And I'm not sure we'll be able to get any straight answers from you, Mr. Minister, but I'm going to ask you anyway. In the *Estimates*, under the grants to Saskatchewan Aids to Independent Living, this year you have about 15.4 estimated there and last year you estimated at 15.4 — exactly the same numbers. Can you tell us what you actually spent in that area?

Hon. Mr. Cline: — No, I can't provide the member with that number right at the moment but I will undertake to send that number to the member tomorrow.

(1945)

Mr. McLane: — Well assuming, Mr. Minister, that those figures are correct and what you estimated is actually what you spent, and it's the same for this year, I'm wondering how you are planning on addressing people like the folks that called me today that are on oxygen, and now are going to have to pay. And they're on a very fixed . . . low income group. How will this budget address their needs?

An Hon. Member: — Two tier, two tier oxygen.

Mr. McLane: — Yes, certainly we're right back to your same game of two tier health, what you've gotten us into — your NDP (New Democratic Party) government — over the last number of years.

And here's another example of it. A person that can afford oxygen, fine he's going to have to buy; the fellow that can't, I guess he does without. And to quote another lady that writes us, she says:

Needless to say, if they have many 67-year-old people waiting like this, mother nature will take care of them.

Is that the NDP's philosophy, is if we let them go, let them get old enough, then we don't have to worry about them? They will pass on, unfortunately. The very people that founded this great country, this great province of ours, and now you're willing to just let them go their own way because through no fault of their own they can't afford the high cost of today's living, and here's another example.

So, Mr. Minister, please tell us how people like these two gentlemen who are on oxygen will be able to cope because of your budget?

Hon. Mr. Cline: — Well it's a bit ridiculous, Mr. Chair. The member gets up and says that because of the way we run the health care system we just want people to die. Well I want to tell the member, if he doesn't know, Saskatchewan has the

longest life expectancy in the country.

So if the member's test of whether we run health care correctly or not is how long people live, then we must be doing a pretty good job, because people live longer in Saskatchewan than they do anywhere else.

So obviously the member is just completely wrong in that line of argument. We have the longest life expectancy in the country because we have one of the best health care systems in the country.

I want to say to the member . . . the member also tries to mislead the public by saying that people are paying more for oxygen than they used to. Actually as a result of changes made to the oxygen plan under SAIL (Saskatchewan Aids to Independent Living) last year, most people pay less for oxygen than they used to. And I'm advised by people in the industry that most people are quite happy with the oxygen supply they get and with the cost.

Now is everybody happy? No. Everybody isn't happy under the new system; everybody wasn't happy under the old system. But I want to tell the member (a) that we have the longest life expectancy in the country; (b) that most people pay less for oxygen than they used to.

And if the member wants to talk about two tier medicine, I have to remind the member that it is that member and the Leader of the Liberal Party that advocate a private health care system. I want to make it clear to the member that our party and our government support the public medicare system.

And I think if the member really looks at the information available — there have been studies done in terms of the U.S. (United States) system — that when you really analyse it, if you're fair-minded and reasonable, you will conclude that the Saskatchewan medicare system, with any problems we may have, is much better than U.S. style medicare.

And you ought not, with all due respect, to get up in the House and make statements in the media that we'd be better off with some other type of system, namely U.S. style Medicare, because we really wouldn't be.

Mr. McLane: — Thank you, Mr. Minister, for that. I'll try and get you back onto the question if I can, and it's regarding oxygen. And certainly some people are paying less for oxygen now, because it's probably those . . . because of your two-tier health policy that has prevented them from having the drugs that they need, and they probably unfortunately passed on. So yes, their costs are less. And that's pretty poor reasoning that you use, and the people listening tonight aren't going to fall for that argument — it makes no sense at all.

So I'll ask you again: what does your budget do for these people that now are going to have to pay for oxygen and, through no fault of their own, are on a fixed income and cannot afford it. How will you address that problem?

Hon. Mr. Cline: — There is no change to the oxygen program as a result of this year's budget. There were changes made last

year which for most people mean that they pay less for oxygen than they did before.

Mr. McLane: — Well certainly there is a result of this year's budget because if it's flat and the same as last year . . . and these people evidently have a problem. They're having to pay for their oxygen. They now have to pay, and I'll quote you. They say, "never have we had to pay before. Never have we had to pay before until your government came into power."

Now because of your backward health reform policy, your wellness model — stay well or farewell — these people are suffering. You can't get the services that they need or the drugs, in this case oxygen. So tell us. How are you going to address the problem for these folks that can't afford to buy the oxygen?

Hon. Mr. Cline: — Most people, Mr. Chair, pay less for oxygen than they did before as a result of changes we made last year. And Saskatchewan has the highest life expectancy in the country. We have very long life expectancy. We have a very good oxygen program. Not everyone likes it. There are always critics of any system, but people pay less for oxygen, most people, than they did before.

Mr. McLane: — Mr. Chairman, Mr. Minister, let's get on record here. What should we tell these folks? Do you want me to quote from *Hansard* tonight of what you said, that they're paying . . . yes, he's probably going to pay less because he can't afford to buy it, so he won't have it. And this person most likely won't survive. And I hope that if this does indeed happen that we will get a letter from this gentleman's family saying hey, our dad or our grandfather or our brother or our uncle passed on because he couldn't afford to buy oxygen.

So let's go on record, Mr. Minister. You tell us tonight what you want me to tell this gentleman who can't afford to buy oxygen.

Hon. Mr. Cline: — It's very difficult for me to answer these questions in this sense, Mr. Chair. The member is standing up saying that people are dying because they can't have oxygen. Mr. Chair, that is simply incorrect. That is fearmongering on the part of the member. The member is saying that people are dying at younger ages when we have the longest life expectancy.

I've explained to the member that changes made to the oxygen program have meant that for most people oxygen is cheaper than it used to be. I don't know how I can put it more simply for the member than that.

The member is a member of the Liberal Party, an opponent of medicare, is going to want to get up and tell people that somehow people are dying because they can't get oxygen and so on and so on. And it's the sort of thing that unfortunately the opposition Liberals will do. I can only say, Mr. Chair, that what the member is saying is simply not true.

Mr. McLane: — Mr. Chairman, Mr. Minister, well in this case it's not true yet because this gentleman is still alive. What are you going to do to prevent him from dying if he doesn't get the oxygen that he needs. How in the world is he supposed to survive if he can't get the oxygen? He says he can't pay for it.

You're asking him to pay because of your change in policy last year. There's no increase in spending in this area.

So what do we tell this gentleman? Of course he's still alive — this one is. Maybe there's others that aren't. I don't know.

Let's give him an answer that he wants to hear. What is there in your policy that will help a gentleman like this out?

Hon. Mr. Cline: — Mr. Chair, if the member has the name of an individual that cannot have oxygen, which frankly I have a great deal of difficulty accepting — I do not believe it — I would ask the member not to give that name publicly because I don't think that would be fair to that individual. But the member knows that he can certainly give me that name of that person that can't have oxygen and can't afford it, and I would look into it.

But the member has not given me such a name, has not approached me about this matter. And if the member is sincere and wants to actually help the person instead of just being political, then the member should give me the name of that person in private and we will follow it up.

But I can assure the House, Mr. Chair, that the member's allegation that people are going to die because they can't have oxygen and that they won't be provided with oxygen when they need it, is simply false.

Mr. McLane: — Mr. Minister, you bet your boots I'm sincere about this, and you can count on it that people, because of your two-tier health system, are going to die, are suffering and are dying now.

Surely you can't stand here tonight and tell us that you're going to deal with every individual case across the province. Isn't there a plan in place? Doesn't your Health department have a plan in place to deal with people like this that are on low income, that can't afford this type of a drug — oxygen — so that you don't have to deal with everyone individually? Surely you must have policy, and if you have, tell us about it tonight and I'll relate this on to this gentleman.

Hon. Mr. Cline: — There is a plan, Mr. Chair, under the Saskatchewan Aids to Independent Living. Every person is dealt with individually; every person is dealt with as an individual.

There are people that work for the Department of Health, and also the Saskatchewan Lung Association cooperates with the department to meet the needs of those who need oxygen. Those who need oxygen get oxygen. And if the member was sincere, instead of trying to play politics, and the member truly had the name of a person who can't have oxygen, the member would give me that name in private, Mr. Chair, and have that matter checked out, because that's what properly should be done.

And I say to the member that if it was true that he had the name of a person denied oxygen, he should meet with me after this question session is done and give me that name, Mr. Chair, and we would certainly look into it.

Mr. Belanger: — Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I guess just to summarize some of the comments made throughout the past couple of minutes in reference to the health care system, there's no question about it that the health care system is under attack in Saskatchewan. If you look at 40 per cent of the rural hospitals closing in the province as a whole; look at some of the bed closures that began before the federal cuts -- the assumed federal cuts that terrorize the hospital situation and the health care situation in this province -- was apparent. There was other cuts made by the province before the federal government came along with their own perceived plans to reduce their federal deficit.

However, Mr. Chairman, several days ago we spoke about all the fine issues associated with the budget. We looked at some of the retail sales going through the roof. We looked at some of the natural gas exploration. We looked at some of the, you know, some of the home sales. Everything was positive in the budget. We seen millions upon millions of dollars generated.

And, Mr. Chairman, you look at some of the costs that the minister speaks about — and let's assume that his figures are correct — 4 to \$6 million extra spent on health care. Well, Mr. Chairman, after all the different dollars that came into the provincial government coffers, including \$110 million in VLTs (video lottery terminal), how is it that we still can talk about all the fine things that we've done as a provincial government, that we have 40 per cent of rural Saskatchewan hospitals closing? Why are we making all the money yet all the closures are happening? Simply because the commitment is not there.

And several days ago, we questioned the Minister of Health in this very House about the La Loche hospital, and his comments were simple, that there is an announcement forthcoming. Well, Mr. Minister, in spite of all the rhetoric, people of the North are still waiting for a new facility. St. Martin's Hospital is in very, very poor shape.

And the reason why I'm bringing up all the million of dollars that were made over the past several years is that, while I sat in this House and I spoke about all the positive things that the budget . . . your members were applauding every positive effort that was made with the provincial budget. Every positive thing we said, you guys applauded. So in saying all those positive things and all the applause, why are we still continuing to have cut-backs at the provincial level? And why isn't there a definite day on the reconstruction or new construction of St. Martin's Hospital?

Hon. Mr. Cline: — Well I said to the member the other day actually, that in terms of a new hospital in La Loche, an announcement will be made in the very near future and the member and the people from northern Saskatchewan should have every reason to be optimistic about an announcement in that regard.

But I want to say to the member that our provincial government has never cut health care spending. We have maintained health care spending in the face of Liberal cuts. I also want to say to the member, who talks about closing or actually converting rural hospitals in the southern part of the province, Saskatchewan has twice as many hospitals per capita in

southern Saskatchewan as any other province in the country, Mr. Chair.

(2000)

I would agree with the member about this: that in the North we don't have very many hospitals or health centres at all and we're trying to do something about that. We've built a new health centre in La Ronge. We're starting construction in cooperation with the first nations and the federal government on a new health centre near Stony Rapids on the Chicken Reserve and we're in the planning phase on the west side.

And the member has spent more time in this House since he was elected — and I say this with all due respect — talking about southern hospitals and rural hospitals than he ever has talking about the hospital situation in the North. And we've been looking at that situation and we've got a committee looking at it. I'm glad that the member has decided that this is an issue for him too because he is the member for Athabasca.

But I want to say to the member that he should join with us in wanting to replace some of the facilities in the North instead of going along with the usual Liberal line, which is that you shouldn't make any changes in southern Saskatchewan. I want to say to the member that most of the changes to our hospital system in southern Saskatchewan are actually done. I don't think you're going to see a great deal of change in the future. Does that mean that there will never be any change? No. There will always be some change but most of those changes have been done.

I don't apologize for the fact that we've built a new health centre in the North, we're building another one on the Chicken Reserve, or that we're looking at replacing the facilities in northern Saskatchewan because those facilities should be looked at. There should be some changes made up there. I only say to the member that if we could get cooperation from the Liberal Party in terms of funding health care it would make it a lot easier to proceed with those needed changes in northern Saskatchewan, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Belanger: — Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I guess the biggest point that we want to make here is in reference to a lot of the problems . . . you talk about health care and some of the reasons. And I hear the minister's challenge to the Liberal caucus in terms of saying, okay, name me one area that has better health care than Saskatchewan. And we can sit here all day without answering the question, as he has done on numerous occasions when we've asked questions about certain health-related issues.

But I'll say one thing and challenge the minister back. You name me one health area, one provincial government or territorial government, that has a hospital like St. Martin's. Name me one jurisdiction in this country of Canada, that when you walk down the main hallway of a hospital they have seven or eight buckets collecting water. That, Mr. Minister, is the challenge back to you. If you can name me a jurisdiction that has that type of facility, then I'll name you a jurisdiction that has a better health care than Saskatchewan.

Hon. Mr. Cline: — Mr. Chair, I could name many places in the world that have a worse facility than St. Martin's. But I want to say to the member that our plan, as the member knows, is actually to build a new facility in La Loche to replace St. Martin's. And I've already said to the member last week and again tonight that we're going to be making an announcement in the very near future. The member has every reason to be optimistic about that announcement.

We'll be proceeding to do the right thing, and I know that when that happens, we can count on the member for his support and encouragement in that regard.

Mr. Belanger: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. And the other point I want to make very clear is that in terms of the cuts that he supposedly has been speaking about, the \$51 million in cuts from the federal government, almost every day we get up here and ask questions in reference to health care, and the typical answer is, had your federal Liberal cousins not cut back, we would not be in this predicament.

And, Mr. Chairman, the people of Saskatchewan know very well, know very well that answer is not good enough. After the first few weeks, maybe they'll accept it, but two years and counting, Mr. Chairman, we have to have a fresh, new approach.

If there is a reason, if there is a reason for us to continue blaming the federal government, we can certainly do so. But, Mr. Speaker, after two years of non-action, then sooner or later we have to stop blaming Tory mismanagement and federal cuts, and simply start owning up to the fact that it takes the provincial government . . . has a provincial responsibility, a provincial department and a provincial minister that will make a provincial decision on whether they should replace St. Martin's hospital or not.

And I ask the Minister of Health once again, is there a date in which you're going to announce the reconstruction of a new hospital or the construction of a new hospital named St. Martin's?

Hon. Mr. Cline: — As I've indicated to the member, Mr. Chair, we'll be making an announcement within the next very short while, within a matter of a very small number of weeks, about St. Martin's.

And I want to say to the member that we will take responsibility for what we do and the level of funding we provide to the health care system because we do a better job than any other province in the country. And we certainly do a better job than the federal Liberals.

Now a few minutes ago the member from Arm River said I'm not supposed to ask questions about what Dr. Melenchuk says because Dr. Melenchuk isn't in the House to defend himself. Well Dr. Melenchuk is the Leader of the Liberal Party and the Liberals have to be prepared to debate what Dr. Melenchuk says. And when he says that he's going to privatize medicare, we're entitled to raise that in the House. When he says he's going to cut health care spending, we're entitled to raise that in the House.

Now the member from Athabasca says we're not entitled to talk about what the federal Liberals are doing. Well if I was a Liberal I'd be embarrassed about what they're doing too, Mr. Chair. But the unfortunate reality is that the federal Liberals — as Canadians from coast to coast know — are cutting health care and in some ways gutting health care. And their own committee recommended that they should stop doing it. And I think that instead of criticizing us for questioning federal Liberal priorities, it would be useful if the member and the opposition joined with us in encouraging the federal government to properly support the provinces in health care.

Mr. Belanger: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. A couple other questions we have in reference to the actual operation. I guess in essence we're not here to defend nor are we here to promote what the federal Liberal government is trying to do with health care. I think the key thing we're trying to ask is, what is the province going to do about the situation of health care. And again I go back to this very same point: that you talk about figures of 46 million, 47 million, or 51 million in which the federal government's cut back in health care but one year alone you made \$110 million in VLTs. Could you not use some of the monies you made from VLTs to recover some of the costs needed to improve the health care facilities in northern Saskatchewan? Isn't that making common sense?

Hon. Mr. Cline: — This is smoke and mirrors and a shell game from the Liberal Party. The member from Melville was trying to make the same point before. I want to say, Mr. Chair, the amount of revenue the province gets from gaming is — I don't know the exact figure — but it's between \$100 million and \$150 million I believe. The amount of money the government spends on health care is \$1.63 billion. The amount of money the government spends on education is about \$1 billion. The members want to get up and say that the money from gaming doesn't somehow go to health care and education. But where does it go? Where do the members think the \$1.63 billion for health care comes from? It comes from money that it earned on gaming, the sales tax, some of the gas tax money -- which they object to by the way -- some provincial income tax and so on. All of that money goes into the General Revenue Fund, and half of the money that comes into the province goes to health and education. When the Liberals get up and say that somehow there's money there that isn't being spent on health and education, that simply is not the case. The money goes into the General Revenue Fund.

Our number one priority is health care, on which we spend \$1.63 billion, the biggest expenditure of the government. The second highest expenditure is education. That's where that money goes. It goes to health and it goes to education, and we're going to keep it that way. We're going to keep having health as the number one priority, education as the number two priority, and I disagree with the members when they say that there's somehow some money being earned that isn't going to those priorities. We're doing more than any other provincial government, certainly more than the federal government, to support health and education, and we're going to continue to do so.

I want to say to the member that some of the things we've

added to the health care system in the last number of years are: more home care services that serve thousands and thousands more people; more options for seniors needing long-term care; more palliative care at home and in the hospital; and the list goes on -- respite care for people; the new hospital in La Ronge; MRI (magnetic resonance imaging) coming to Regina; CT (computerized tomography) scan going to Prince Albert; many, many things are being done in the health care system.

I could go on at some length describing all of the new community initiatives, Mr. Chair. That money is supported by gaming . . . Those programs are supported by gaming revenue; they are supported by other tax revenue, and that's as it should be, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Kowalsky: — Mr. Chair, we will now proceed to Highways estimates, so I move that we report progress.

General Revenue Fund Highways and Transportation Vote 16

The Chair: — I would ask the minister to please introduce the staff who are with him tonight.

Hon. Mr. Renaud: — Well thank you, Mr. Chair. Firstly, to my far left is Barry Martin. Barry is the executive director of engineering services division, Department of Highways. Next to me is Brian King, deputy minister of Highways and Transportation. Behind Brian is Lynn Tullock. Lynn is the executive director of corporate and information services. Behind myself is Mr. Bernie Churko, executive director of logistics, planning and compliance, and to my right is George Stamatinos, executive director of preserve and operate, southern region.

Item 1

Mr. Aldridge: — Thank you, Mr. Chair, and good evening to the minister and to all of his officials here. Mr. Chair, and, Mr. Minister, if I could start out the evening by asking you, Mr. Minister, to provide us a list with all of the out-of-scope personnel in your department who are appointed by order in council and who are subject to the Crown contracts Act. And could you also provide us with a listing of their salaries as well?

Hon. Mr. Renaud: — To the member's question, there is one . . . there are three actually, including the deputy minister, one on secondment. And we would send those names over to you if you would like that.

Mr. Aldridge: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. And, Mr. Minister, if you could send those names over and also with a listing of salaries as well, as I mentioned, I'd appreciate it. With respect to individuals who are employed through the orders in council and who are governed by the Crown employment contracts legislation, there are certain requirements in terms of when these individuals should report any salary increases or changes in position — promotion, things of this nature.

Are you aware at this time of anybody in your department who may have not yet made any reporting in compliance with the

legislation, the Crown corporation . . . or contracts Act, sorry.

(2015)

Hon. Mr. Renaud: — The only one I'm aware of would be my deputy this evening — to the member opposite — and I know that he has complied.

Mr. Aldridge: — Well thank you, Mr. Chair. And, Mr. Minister, I've just got a few of these formalities by this evening. I'm sure you thought I was going to get right into the pothole matters. And those are yet to come, you can be assured.

I have taken the opportunity to do some rather extensive consultation with my constituents in the matter of the highways in my constituency and the number of potholes, and it's been quite an interesting exercise, and certainly I've enjoyed the level of participation of my constituents to date. And certainly brings awareness to the dire need for some highway maintenance in my constituency, and I'm sure indicative of province wide . . . I know I've had some interesting comments made to me by constituents. And if I would be able to, I wouldn't mind just mentioning a few of these.

I see one constituent who quoted to me here, "I don't have anything specific to report about the roads, but I can tell you I've needed major repairs to the suspension of my car a couple of times in the last three years." And I'm wondering if the minister might make some comment in this regard. Have you logged the number of complaints that your department may have received concerning damages to vehicles of any nature on this province's highways as a result of their deterioration?

Hon. Mr. Renaud: — Well I want to thank the member for the question. And certainly the department take calls all the time, some certainly when a person hits a pothole and damages their vehicle. We have a policy to deal with that, and the policy of course includes the signing of the particular area that there is a problem with the road.

And I know that the member opposite understands that we live in Saskatchewan. We live in a province that has more roads than any other jurisdiction likely in the world, certainly more roads than Manitoba or Alberta put together. We have more roads in this province, and yet we have a population of a million people. And we've done very, very well I think with our road structure.

We have a weather situation in the province of Saskatchewan. If the member would look out today, out the window, and see exactly what the weather is like, I mean it's minus 17 or 18 degrees. A few days ago it probably was plus 8 or 9, and it continues to vary especially in the spring and fall . . . and very, very hard on our road infrastructure so there are going to be potholes.

Our job is to try and manage that with the resources we have as best we can, and I think we do a pretty good job, and most people in Saskatchewan would agree. Certainly I complain when I hit a pothole, as does the member opposite, and I'm sure some of his constituents. Some of my constituents also complain and rightly so. But they are very understanding, and they know that this government is doing its utmost to have a

good transportation system.

Mr. Aldridge: — Mr. Chair, and Mr. Minister, I appreciate the comment that we have a rather extensive road system in the province, and certainly it's subject to a lot of environmental factors that many people across this country would consider extreme. But some in my constituency would suggest that perhaps some of the approaches that have been taken by this government have not been as far-sighted as perhaps they could have been. And I have another quote from a constituent who will say, and I do quote:

Mr. Romanow whines that we have more roads per capita than any other province. So does that mean we should do nothing? Doesn't it rather suggest our highways should be more of a priority than they are? To let things deteriorate to the present state is an indication of poor management. To leave them that way is an evidence of poor judgement, and promising to do something someday is not enough. We all know the road that's paved with good intentions.

Well, Mr. Minister, would you care to make any comments about what many constituents across the province I'm sure are saying, that perhaps the policies of the Highways department with respect to reconstruction of roads is not as far-sighted as what the people in this province would have it.

Hon. Mr. Renaud: — I want to thank the member for the question. I know it's very easy, and I notice that the Liberal government is doing this quite often lately, is saying we should spend more in health care; we should spend more in education; we should spend more in whatever you can imagine — we should spend more, including highways. We'd like to spend more in all those areas, but you can only spend what you have.

And I know that about 6 or 7 or 8 years ago, we had a government that promoted the ideas you're promoting, which is we'll borrow some when we need some and we'll just spend it, and we'll just borrow a little more and we'll spend it, and we'll borrow a little more and we'll spend it. And you know what happened? We got this huge debt. And now we have to pay \$800 million of interest each and every year, on that debt.

Well the people of Saskatchewan say yes, we would like more into health care and education and highways, and they see by this budget that we're trying to do the best we can. But still considering fiscal reality, because they don't want us to go out and borrow to spend money that we, you know, spend money that we don't have, so they're very reluctant to listen to people that suggest we spend more here and more here and more here when we haven't got those dollars.

So I think the people of Saskatchewan are very realistic. And they're very understanding of the circumstances that the province is in. And yes, they would like to see better roads. But they're willing to wait, and they're willing to allow us to spend as we can afford.

Mr. Aldridge: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. Well, Mr. Minister, the process you've just described to us sounds a lot like how you're treating the highways right now in this province. You borrow a little and you spend it, and the debt keeps

accumulating. Because a lot of the constituents that I talk to these days are saying that there is a debt accumulating in the failing infrastructure of the road system in our province. Every time a road is not properly kept up, it leads to further needs for more monies to be invested in them in the future in order to bring them back up to standard. And in so doing you're increasing what is in effect an accumulated debt.

Fine, it's not on your books currently, but nonetheless it is a debt and it has to be dealt with. And I think that's what some of my constituents are getting at when they make reference as they have here.

Another good example here. A constituent of mine says, and I quote:

Our highways are an essential means of contact and communication between the people of our great province. With the reduction of railway usage they have become primary commercial links as well. They also bring tourists to our province. And make no mistake, visitors who damage their vehicles plunging into our potholes will have long memories about it. It'll be some time before we can coax them back.

So I'd ask the minister in this regard as well: could you let us know how many people they may have complaints from in the way of tourists who enter our province, who encounter the abysmal road conditions, and in turn launch complaints to the Department of Highways?

Hon. Mr. Renaud: — Well I don't have a number of complaints from tourists. I do know that we get complaints from the general public. We get complaints from tourists — people that are touring the province — when they hit a bad road, and that's very understandable, as do I'm sure other provinces.

But I want to say to the member opposite that the one good thing is that tourism numbers in the province of Saskatchewan are way up the last two years. And the province, as it increases in economic activity in the oil sector, as it increases in economic activity in the forest sector, as it increases in the tourism industry, the province does better and certainly can . . . then we can pay down the debt and then we can have a little extra money for things like roads.

And of course you've seen that in this year's budget where we committed an extra \$30 million to roads this year, and committed — can you imagine? — \$2.5 billion to roads over the next 10 years. Now that is a commitment that no other province that I can recall has done in recent budgets. And it's because we were able to -- as the people of Saskatchewan all tighten our belts a little, sacrifice certainly over the last five or six years -- get our debt under control, have balanced budgets so that we can have a little extra money for the important infrastructure. And I agree with the fellow that you talk about in regards to the importance of transportation.

(2030)

Mr. Aldridge: — Mr. Chair, Mr. Minister, it would seem to me that two and a half billion dollars over 10 years sounds like a

heck of a lot of money. But then when it comes to the annual budget for Highways in this province it doesn't quite compare as well. Would you be able to stand before us this evening and say with every degree of confidence that that two and a half billion dollars expended over the course of the next 10 years is going to be enough to meet the needs for rebuilding the highways system in this province?

Hon. Mr. Renaud: — Well I want to mention to the member opposite that there is a commitment, I guess . . . or we need or we should have a commitment from the federal Liberals in Ottawa in regards to some of the actions that's happening in transportation. You talk about the stresses on our roads, and certainly there are major stresses on the roads.

One of the things that the federal Liberal government did recently was pass a new transportation Act. And the new transportation Act, what it did was allow railways to abandon its branch lines a lot quicker than what they were able to do in the past. And what that has done, to the member from Thunder Creek, is move the transportation from rail to road — the transportation of bulk commodities like wheat and barley and canola. And so what happens when you do this, of course it has a major, major effect on roads.

What also happens is the elevator companies then consolidate their elevator structures. And so when that happens, farmers have to haul for further distances on roads. And many of those roads were built in the '50s and '60s. They were a road that had very little surface, a thin membrane surface what we call a thin layer of pavement over a non-structured road. And it was not built for those heavy loads.

(2030)

But did the federal government consult with us or try to stretch that over a length of time so that municipalities and provincial road authorities could deal with that? No, they did not. They went ahead and were very friendly to the railways, suggesting that it was the railways' turn to now make a profit, and that they were going to have some railroad-friendly legislation. And certainly it is. But does it consider producers? Does it consider road authorities? No. So there is a large responsibility by the federal government here.

Another area is the national highways program. I know that I met with the other provinces and territories in 1994 and we talked to then minister of Transport, Mr. Young, and tried to convince him how important it was to have a national highways program where we would cost-share in the national highways network. If we could do that, that would give each province a little extra to spend on other roads in the province, in each province. And certainly there was a responsibility, we felt, by the federal government to participate in at least the national highways network.

Because you see, in other industrialized countries they do; in Canada they refuse. In 1994 they refused as well, so we still struggle with that. We're still trying to convince them that they should participate with us. The commitment of \$2.5 billion over 10 years certainly means that our money is on the table, and we just await theirs.

So if we could get that little bit of help from your cousins in Ottawa, and maybe with your help, it sure would be beneficial to the people of Saskatchewan and I would encourage that.

Mr. Aldridge: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. Mr. Minister, we can assure you that we have put our concerns to the federal government, and we will continue to do so, in terms of how much money is needed to be reinvested into the transportation system in this province. And you do have our commitment that we'll continue to do that.

If I could ask for a little bit of a clarification. I'm looking at a document here now, "Provincial Highway Upgrading Benefit/Cost Analysis." Could you give me somewhat of an overview of this schedule and explain to me the various columns here in terms of how you go about establishing the benefit/cost in the process of arriving at the ranking here that I see over on the extreme right-hand corner from 1 through 148. This was a document dated August 7 of 1996.

Could you also let me know in terms of where we're at in highway projects at this point in time? Where we may be on this particular list or ranking?

Hon. Mr. Renaud: — To the member from Thunder Creek, if you would notice on the BCA (benefit/cost analysis) project ranking, there's of course the length — it's got the kilometres. We'll just take number one for instance, which is Highway 361, Lampman to the junction no. 47. It's 13.29 kilometres long. Today's daily traffic is 616 vehicles per day. The maintenance cost per kilometre is about \$5,000 currently. The capital cost to upgrade is \$1.5 million. The value of the asset is \$3.743 million. And then the capital cost, it's the NPV (net present value) divided by the million dollars, and that gives you that figure. And that gives you a per cent rating on investment, which is 23 per cent, so that moves it to number one priority.

It's a formula that's there which includes daily traffic; it includes maintenance costs; it includes safety. And it takes a look at the infrastructure cost, or the asset, and the worth of the asset, and makes a judgement on that.

Certainly I could send you that formula in writing so that you would better understand it. And then you rate it. But the rating of the roads also changes often, because what happens maybe is a grain company may put a new terminal up in a particular area and there would be more maintenance costs and more traffic and so everything shifts then.

So the BCA project ranking is, you know, continually evolving and so . . . but it's good for us to sort of have a road map or a plan, to basically have a strategy. This year there are 5 projects in the top . . . let's see, in the top 12 that will be done this year. So it gives us that direction. It gives us that plan to work toward.

Mr. Aldridge: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. Mr. Minister, you were mentioning that this type of an analysis is I guess a continuum, if you would have it. It's constantly being re-evaluated. And would you be able to advise us, is there a document such as this that now supersedes this one that was

dated as August 7, 1996, and would we be able to have a copy of such a document so that we could get a little bit more up to date perhaps too in terms of where you're at in ranking these projects. So I just ask if that sort of a document is available at this time.

Hon. Mr. Renaud: — Yes, there is one that's dated March 19 and I will make sure that you get a copy.

Mr. Aldridge: — Mr. Chair, Mr. Minister, it certainly is of great concern that while the document I'm looking at right now anyway, that only 5 out of the top 12 ranking projects are ones that will be able to be undertaken during the '97-98 fiscal year. Since the whole process has been re-jigged, so to speak, are there more projects in the top rankings that will now be undertaken during the course of the year, or has that number stayed constant, five projects and that's it?

Hon. Mr. Renaud: — I'll send you a list. I think there are . . . you may have received even a list of the projects that we're contemplating doing this year. But what I want to say to the member opposite is that if we had all kinds of money, we could do them all. But we don't have that luxury. And I know the Liberal government would spend and borrow I suppose, to spend more on this or that or whatever. But we are not going to do that. We are going to only spend what we have and we're not going to go into debt ever again.

Mr. Aldridge: — Well, Mr. Chair, I think it has to be of great concern to someone who represents a constituency whose highways are so low on the list of priorities here. And I'm looking in terms of a number of highways here — 43 we're speaking of, 363, that are rather far down the list, I guess if you might say.

In terms of what we hear from people out there when they're returning some of my pothole memorandums here, with respect to Highway 363 from Shamrock to Hodgeville, this is a bus driver who tells me, I drive a 48-passenger school bus and always seem to be dodging potholes; 363 from Moose Jaw and on out — narrow driving lanes with bad, bad, unpaved broken shoulders plus broken holes too numerous to count. Highway 363 from Coderre to Moose Jaw, this particular constituent mentions over that 90 kilometres of highway, there's too many potholes to count. I can go on here. From Old Wives to Moose Jaw, over that 60 kilometres, 103 potholes.

So there's certainly no end of concern on these particular stretches of road. And I do see that perhaps certain portions of Highway 363, as an example, are going to be resurfaced during the course of this fiscal year.

Would you just outline for us this evening which particular stretches and how many kilometres we're speaking of out of the total kilometres on Highway 363 that may be undergoing a certain amount of repair during the course of this year.

Hon. Mr. Renaud: — Well I want to thank the member for the question. I remember last year the member from Wood River said you know, we should fix the Highway 4, everything in the Wood River constituency. And now the member from Thunder Creek says we should fix all the highways in Thunder Creek. I'm wondering when we're going to get to Carrot River Valley.

It would be nice to be able to fix all the roads right away and I understand that, but of course we can't do that, and I think the member knows that.

The 30 extra million dollars that we're getting this year, and I would expect that somebody from that side of the House would get up and commend us for putting more money into highways, but the \$30 million that we're going to be receiving this year, the majority will be going into preservation work to try and preserve the existing infrastructure. As we save money from preserving the existing infrastructure, we will be able to put more money into new projects.

And I have some good news for the member opposite, that 363, there's some kilometres, I believe seven kilometres from Moose Jaw west will be resurfaced this year, and I believe the total cost is \$850,000.

So there is also in his constituency Highway 19, Hodgeville to Highway No. 1, surfacing, \$1.691 million; and north to Hodgeville to south of Highway No. 1, surfacing, \$997,400.

There's also preservation work on No. 2 junction. On No. 43 to 20 kilometres north-east of Mossbank, \$223,000. Highway 334, section 6 kilometres to 15 kilometres west of Corinne, surface improvements \$80,000. Highway 334, sections north of Kayville to Avonlea, surface improvements, \$80,000. And on 363, as I mentioned earlier . . . or no, there's also some resurfacing at \$610,000.

So total capital \$3.5 million in the constituency of Thunder Creek. Total preservation, 993,000, for a total of \$4.5 million in that constituency.

Now I know that the member from Arm River is not happy with that because he isn't getting probably as much in his constituency. But I haven't heard a thank you yet.

(2045)

Mr. Aldridge: — Mr. Chairman and to the minister, if you do insist that we get up and ask you about every stretch of highway in the province traversing every one of the constituencies, I guess we could oblige you. But I don't think that you'd have the stomach for it nor your officials.

I notice that a couple of these surfacing projects that you mention here are in fact courtesy to a good extent to the federal government. They're under Canada-agri infrastructure program. So certainly I think we'll all be more than happy to acknowledge the assistance of the federal government in those projects too.

When I'm looking at these construction projects for the fiscal year '96-97, as an example, versus the '97-98 that I have here, would you be able to outline for us . . . Are all of these projects ones which were actually completed in the '96-97 fiscal year, or are some of these hangovers that are going to carry on into this current fiscal year? I notice at the bottom of these lists there is a number of projects that are only tendered depending on the season and a number of other factors that might come to bear. So would you be able to just at this point let us know how many of these projects might still be hanging on?

Hon. Mr. Renaud: — To the member opposite, each year, if you will note, our construction projects at the very end will have a list of projects that will be completed only if there is money available. So if, for instance, one of the projects can't be done on the list because of weather or because of some reason, we would move to that list and do some work there.

I haven't got the amount from last year, if any of those jobs in fact were done, but what I will do is I will get that information to the member opposite.

So each year we have the list of construction work that we're going to tender. We also have a secondary list that we will get to if weather permits and money permits. Okay?

Mr. Aldridge: — Mr. Chair, and to the minister, it's just that I don't see in terms of . . . Like the projects that we talk about here that are perhaps carry-overs, I don't see them transferring over. You'd think they would end up from this portion of this list into a more priority position in terms of the '97-98 projects.

So it was just a little bit concerning to me that it seems like perhaps a good portion of these lists that are subject to all the undetermined factors could in fact end up being nothing more than just a means of trying to placate certain individuals who may make the request of the department: well can we see what you're doing to fix highways in the province?

I guess people in the province would like to have some degree of comfort that that isn't the case and that in fact it is a genuine attempt in terms of prioritizing and reprioritizing the programs as we go on.

I also notice a number of projects that are in the Thunder Creek constituency for the '97-98 fiscal year, but they are in fact in that portion of this document that is suggesting they might only be additional projects, you know, if they're able to get to them, I guess. I would just like to, at this time, because I know that the . . . well for example the Kalium access acceleration lane on No. 1 Highway is a source of a lot of concerns in terms of safety, where there's a good deal of traffic at peak flow times when there's shift changes from the plants. And we'd like to know, well is this a project that is with a high degree of likelihood going to occur during this fiscal year, above and beyond what little bit of comfort we may get from this document I'm looking at here this evening.

Hon. Mr. Renaud: — To the member opposite there, we have a safety improvement program and a list of safety projects that are on the list. They are also prioritized, and as we get to them we will do those projects.

Certainly the Kalium access lane is on the project list, but it hasn't been able to be done yet. Certainly when we have the dollars to do that work, we will certainly do it.

Mr. McPherson: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. Mr. Minister, I guess earlier you were dealing with some of the pothole patrol questions, and I know how anxious you are to get into some of that with me. In fact I would think that we've got probably a couple of hundred that we'll, in some form or fashion here

whether it's tonight or at a future trip back here, that we'll have to go over it and have you explain why in fact you either don't feel you should upgrade the highway or fix it or rebuild or pave or service it or whatever, because I'm sure you're well aware of the situation throughout this province.

And in fact I know you are, Mr. Minister, because when I invited you to come along on a bit of a road trip with myself into the south-west to look at some of the terrible condition of the highways there, and your response back, by way of letter, was that you're very familiar with the situation throughout the province in highways.

So of course then I think it's only fair, if you're so fully aware of the situation of the highways in the province, you'll be able to answer some of the questions that of course some of these people would like answered. And I'll go through a few of these, Mr. Minister.

Now the one response we have back deals with Highway No. 18 from Claydon to . . . (inaudible) . . . And I just happened to pick one that's in the south-west. They've got 25 kilometres and it says there's thousands of potholes. And you and I both know that that stretch of highway is in terrible shape. In fact the RM (rural municipality) of . . . oh, where is it? It's in your riding. It's in Frontier . . . (inaudible interjection) . . . No, it's in Frontier — the RM of Frontier. That RM, in fact, were going to disallow any heavy truck traffic or oil truck traffic to travel some of that road.

And I was wondering from your point of view, Mr. Minister, and if you've travelled it as well as I have and the member from Cypress Hills constituency, what you think of that road. And do you actually feel that that road is safe? Is it safe to travel on? And given the condition of the road, do you think you have enough warning signs? Do you have enough flags up?

Hon. Mr. Renaud: — Well it's quite interesting. I don't know where the member was, Mr. Chairman, when the member from Thunder Creek was asking similar questions, when he wanted all the highways in Thunder Creek to be fixed. And now we're getting all the highways in Wood River.

But I want to tell the member opposite that I have Mr. Stamatinos here, who is the executive director of preserve and operate, southern region. We have the province divided in three regions, Mr. Chairman — the southern region, the centre region, and a northern region. And we have a system of feeding in the information to the directors of each region. Certainly the directors stay in touch with the minister through the deputy minister, and so we are fed the information on road conditions across the province on a continuing basis. That's why we were able to be ahead and in control and able to advise people in regards to the flooding in the south-west where you're from. And certainly I appreciate that.

So it's almost virtually impossible to travel on every highway every week. But certainly with the way we have the department structured, certainly beneficial to keeping on top of the road information across the province.

I guess it's a matter of how much money the province has to put

into roads. And I do know that the Liberal opposition would like us to spend more on roads as they would like to spend more on everything else. But where would you get it from? And I was thinking, well Mr. Melenchuk, I think, was suggesting we take it from health care, but I don't think the people of Saskatchewan would like to take it from health care.

We're putting \$30 million more this year. We're spending as we can afford. We've committed \$2.5 billion over the next 10 years. And we're going to have, along with a new transportation strategy, I think the best roads in the Prairies. And I'm looking forward to that date. Certainly I think it's just around the corner.

Mr. McPherson: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. You touched on so many things I barely know where to begin. I sense we're going to be doing this for days.

However I will make mention that you didn't answer my question. But you opened up so many more questions we'll have to come back to Highway 18 in a little while because I'll want your opinion as to whether or not that's safe.

But you did mention about how you . . . and I'm going to say you, as in your department, because, you know, you're at the head of the department and the buck stops with you, Mr. Minister.

But you made mention that in fact you were kept abreast and able to supply the people of this province early warning as far as any of the water or flood damage that were coming about. Yet in the House — what, a week ago? — not even . . . well about a week ago, I raised some concerns about a bridge that was out in the community of Ponteix where in fact there was an ambulance with two attendants that got rather roughed up in the vehicle, and there was also another vehicle that was almost totalled off by hitting this bridge, and there were no warning signs.

Now if you are so up to speed on the condition of the highways and bridges in the province . . . and of course you knew there was flooding, I mean Sask Water had to have told you that we had 200, 250 per cent more snowfall than average. It's not like the government didn't know there was a problem coming, yet no flags, no warning, and no one out there to keep an eye to see what was going to happen.

Now can you tell me by what means, because perhaps I'm just missing that point you're making, by what means did you warn the people in Ponteix to look out for that bridge?

Hon. Mr. Renaud: — Well thank you, Mr. Chairman. First I want to answer some of the question on Highway 18 since I overlooked it in my response earlier. Highway 18 is a very important road to the people of Saskatchewan; there's no question about it.

But you have a priority list, and a lot of it deals with traffic count. And I know that the traffic count on Highway 18 is 80 vehicles per day, and I know that those 80 vehicles per day need a decent road, and there's no question about it. But we have highways in this province, Mr. Chairman, that has 8,000

vehicles a day, and so you have to sort of judge with your limited finances which one will come first. And so we understand the concerns with Highway 18, but you know you just have to prioritize the need as best you can.

In regards to the bridge at Ponteix, certainly we lost the bridge there. Signs were put up as soon we were able to get there. A flood can happen very quickly, and certainly as soon as the crew were able to, certainly looked after it, and the bridge was put back into service within a week, I believe, Mr. Chairman. So the crew did a very, very good job in reacting to the problem.

But people in the province understand, I mean, that if there is a flood, if there is an act of God that happens very, very quickly, a bridge goes out or something like that, you can, you know, react as quick as you can, but you can't prevent the bridge from going out.

(2100)

Mr. McPherson: — Mr. Minister, I'll allow you to finish what I think you should have answered because in your earlier response you had said, to me, that in fact the people were well aware of the road conditions prior to the flood and you had aided them in, I guess knowing the highway conditions prior to the flood.

What my question was: can you tell us what preventative measures you took — or you and your department took — to ensure that no damage would happen when people were crossing these bridges? You of course knew very well — and I sensed that by what was in your letter to me regarding the situation of highways — you knew what the condition was like so what did you do? How do you warn the people about this?

Hon. Mr. Renaud: — Well to the member opposite, you know to let people know prior to a flood that a bridge is going to be washed out is a little bit difficult. I haven't any experience with the spiritual world yet so I'm not sure if I could do that. But certainly I had lots of opportunity during question period to allow people to know highway hot line numbers, for an example, so people could phone in about information regarding the flood. But that was during and not prior because we had no knowledge of some of the flooding that would occur prior to it happening.

We did not know that the flood would take the bridge out. And so when we reacted to the bridge going out we did that very quickly, and with dispatch, and I was very pleased with how the crews reacted to the situation.

Mr. McPherson: — Mr. Minister, did you have some sense that the bridges in Moose Jaw, for an example, were going to be taken out by the ice and such, or some of the other bridges or other communities that were affected?

Hon. Mr. Renaud: — The Department of Highways has a contingency plan. We'd certainly be prepared to share that with you if you have any spare time. The contingency plan is set with concern about flooding; however if the temperature shoots up immediately or there is, you know, some . . .

An Hon. Member: — An ice jam.

Hon. Mr. Renaud: — Ice jams might be an example. Thank you to the member of the third party. Those things will play a role in a flood situation. It may even play a role in the destruction of a bridge.

So I believe that we have a good contingency plan. We're ready for the circumstances. We can't be ready for all circumstances — I wished we could. And I think the crew handled it quite well.

Mr. McPherson: — Mr. Minister, the question had to do with did you know of other bridges in other communities that were going to be taken out by flood waters? It's a simple yes or no. Either you knew or you didn't.

Hon. Mr. Renaud: — Certainly we'd never know if there's another bridge that's going to be washed out. I mean you prepare for road detours in case of flooding here or whatever, but you don't know if a bridge is going to go out. The department has . . . You anticipate possible flooding conditions, but you can't be prepared for everything. I mean you just don't know if it's going to happen or not.

We have a Crown corporation that looks at the water situation, and I'm going to give you the Internet number for Sask Water so that if you run into this situation again, you could probably just contact this: www.saskwater.com — dot com, I guess it is, sorry — www.saskwater.com.

But Sask Water also has a strategy in regards to flooding, and so we try and work together in a coordinated approach to protect the people of Saskatchewan as best we can.

Mr. McPherson: — Well just a few comments I guess, from your answer. Firstly, is there something better than perhaps an Internet address where people could get warned whether bridges or highways are washed out? I don't think everyone's up and running on the Internet yet.

But also the phone number that you gave to this House in questions a week ago, I had people phone that number and couldn't get through on that. So I'll warn you your phone line isn't much more use than your Internet address.

But getting back to the bridges, Mr. Minister, and obviously you're not going to answer the question, and the reason I ask it is not to try and put you or your department on the spot. And clearly I'm not putting the crews out there in a spot either, because everyone knows in this province the cut-backs that have occurred in rural Saskatchewan in your department and service depots out there. In fact the . . . well I think it was two years ago it became quite a problem for you when the crews had quite a tough time getting rid of the snow and ice in this province because you had cut back, and I would hate to guess how many it was, a dozen or perhaps 20 depots — which leads me to another question which I'll put quickly so your officials can perhaps pull out whatever paper they need.

But I would like to see the number of depots that we have today

versus last year and the year prior to that; so I can see sort of what's happened over the last three years as for service depots, number of employees at each depot, whether it's up or down, and kilometres that they're having to travel. But of course we're getting way off the track of where I wanted to go.

The question is, Mr. Minister, on the bridges and as far as their getting washed out or not, do you feel you have enough money allocated to take care of these kind of disasters and problems? And are you comfortable that it's not the response time that people are worried about. You were talking about how well your department took care of the situation after the bridge is gone. Well that's like saying we hurried over to the barn and closed that door, and we almost saved a horse.

What we want to know is what can you do to help prevent . . . even if it's a barricade across a road, having your department people there before the bridge is gone. What happened is that there was a lady that had a very young boy, taking her son to school in Ponteix. And there could have been a serious accident here, Mr. Minister, so really that's all I'm getting at. Do you feel you have enough money to ensure the safety of these people?

Hon. Mr. Renaud: — Well here we go again. More money. More money for this. More money for that. I think the Liberals think it grows on trees. I'm not sure, but I think they think money grows on trees. I think what they're saying, Mr. Chairman, is that really it would be fine for us to go into a deficit position and in doing so increase the debt of the province and in doing so increase the amount of interest we have to pay on the debts. We have less money for bridges in the end result.

Well we're not prepared to do that, Mr. Chairman. Whether we have enough for bridges or not I don't know. We have a budget. Hopefully it will be enough. That's all we can do, is hope. If it isn't enough, we'll have to take some from some other place and put it into bridges. That's what we do when we manage the Department of Highways, and I wish the member opposite could understand that but he . . .

I get a charge out of his concern over is there enough money for bridges when he didn't say a word about his Liberals in Ottawa when they decided that the railways could abandon rail lines — not one word. And that's millions of dollars to producers in the province, millions of dollars of road damage to the province of Saskatchewan. Not one word.

But is there enough for the Ponteix bridge? Yes there will be enough for Ponteix bridge, if we have to take it from somewhere else. Hopefully it's not from the road that the member from Thunder Creek wants us to build, but if we have to take money from somewhere to put into the Ponteix bridge, we will.

Mr. McPherson: — Mr. Minister, I think you and I are backing up further rather than making any progress here tonight. So I guess to get to the point that you're trying to make . . . And you're being more than political here tonight, Mr. Minister, and if you continue, I'll enjoy it. But you're going to spend a long time here.

So you talk about getting a charge out of, you know, whether we're spending enough money or not, and I guess you find this humorous. Frankly I don't, because my concern is whether or not you view the debt or the need for more money for highways and bridges in the province . . . is that more of a concern to you than the life of a young child?

Hon. Mr. Renaud: — It's getting pretty low, Mr. Chairman, when we get those kinds of questions, you know. He knows the answer to that. I don't have to answer him. He knows the answer to that.

What I'm wondering about the member opposite is about his lack of pressing the Liberal government in Ottawa for a little bit extra for the province of Saskatchewan. That would allow us to certainly do a lot more to roads and bridges elsewhere in the province. If the federal government would help us with the national highways program — all provinces, not just Saskatchewan — just to share with us like they do in the United States, like they do in other industrialized countries, certainly would free up some other money that we could use on other roads and bridges. So I would like the member to certainly participate with us in that request. And I do know that I believe he did write in fact to his federal member, which I appreciate, and I wish that other members from his side of the House would do the same. It certainly would help us.

Mr. McPherson: — Mr. Minister, just so I guess we both get it out on the record, you're hoping that there's a national transportation plan, highway plan. So do I. So do we.

But now that that's behind us and we're all on the same page — we all agree we need some national money to help with highways — that doesn't take you off the hook, Mr. Minister, because with your department, you over the next 10 years will have a three and a half, perhaps a four and a half billion dollar surplus that's over and above what you spend on highways in this province, highways and bridges, compared to what you bring in from fuel tax and motor vehicle licensing fees. So we can talk . . . and I know tomorrow you have a motion coming forward dealing with national transportation plan. I think it's great. I'm going to be here to speak to it and support it, let me tell you up front. Well let's put that federal issue behind us because I think you're going to find that we're all on the same page here.

But what I have to know from you is do you feel that the highways that are under your control are safe for the travelling public? And we can take it either bridge by bridge and highway by highway, or we can talk in more general terms. Now do you feel, Mr. Minister, that the highways in Saskatchewan are safe?

Hon. Mr. Renaud: — Well I want to tell the member opposite that the \$30 million extra that this government committed to roads this year, the \$2.5 billion over the next 10 years, is a real commitment to roads in this province, and that includes safety, Mr. Chairman.

But on the other hand, we have a federal government that does not share — a federal Liberal government — that doesn't share in a national highways network program and a national

highways program. They receive a lot of money in fuel tax, and I know that they can't dedicate taxes because dedicating taxes just does not work, but they could certainly spend a lot more. The member says we should dedicate our fuel tax to roads, so that would be spending another \$100 million on roads. Great, I like that idea. But where would we get that \$100 million, Mr. Chairman? I don't think he will tell us. The Liberal government has a real . . . how do I say that . . .

An Hon. Member: — Lack of commitment.

(2115)

Hon. Mr. Renaud: — Is it a lack of commitment? Is that the word? I'm not sure if that's the word, but they have all these wonderful ideas that need all this money. But they never can tell us exactly where that money is going to come from. Is it going to come from health care like Mr. Melenchuk says or is it going to come from somewhere else? Where is the \$100 million going to come from to put into roads? I don't know.

We're doing it in the balanced approach. Whatever little extra cash we have, we're paying down the debt. We're giving some tax breaks — and you notice that the sales tax dropped from 9 per cent to 7 per cent. And we're also adding into service enhancements like roads — \$30 million this year and \$2.5 billion over the next 10 years. That's a real commitment. And we will see, certainly, safety improvements to our roads. We'll see better roads in the province over time. And it's not going to happen overnight. I may as well be very clear with you now. It's a first step, and it will happen, but it will take time. The damages were not caused overnight; they took time to happen.

Certainly with the Liberals in Ottawa, their decisions to allow the railways to abandon line — grain-dependent branch lines — is certainly going to have an effect. But nevertheless it's a start and it's a good start.

Mr. McPherson: — Mr. Minister, I guess we'll have to stay on that federal issue for a little while longer. I was hoping you would sort of put that to rest since I thought we were on the same page. But in fact . . . now this is a document I have, December 31, 1996, the provincial taxes 15 cents a litre; federal taxes 14 cents a litre. So just to further your point — hey, we agree. They pull in a fair amount of money out of this province in fuel tax. But, Mr. Minister, you do also. In fact you pull in more than the federal government in fuel taxes according to this Petroleum Communication Foundation report.

So let's talk about your share. I agree that once, Mr. Minister, the federal government gets their financial house in order the way that Saskatchewan now has their financial house in order — and I believe that will take another two, three years and perhaps we'll hit some balanced budgets — I will be at the head of the line. And I'll ask you to be with me to ask the federal government to put in a good deal more of the fuel taxes they collect from Saskatchewan motorists back into our highway system.

Now I think we've went over that plenty, Mr. Minister. I want to talk about the money that you collect. Now you're collecting . . . well let's have a look here. Canadian Automobile

Association research study that was, I guess last July — you're collecting in the neighbourhood, I think it's 400, \$430 million in this fiscal year. And you're going to spend \$168 million back.

Now you can say, well where are we going to get the money from? Well I see \$262 million that you're going to have a surplus this year alone on fuel taxes. Now I wish we could get that extra money from the federal government now. But the people of this province were more than willing to allow your government time to get your fiscal house in order before they started asking for things that perhaps could be put down a year or two. They've done that. Now we have to allow that for the federal government as well, I think. That's only fair. Do you not think that, Mr. Minister, that it would be only fair to give them exactly what you people asked for and received?

So what are we going to do then with the surplus money, the 262 million that you have in one year? You talk about some \$30 million increase. That's 10 per cent of your surplus. How can you sit there and say that you can't go ahead on your own as a government, and fix any of the highways — fix, put in proper bridges and such — unless there's a national transportation plan, a national highway plan.

Hey, we're all going to agree there's got to be one at some point. But what about all those hundreds of millions of dollars that you have, that you and your department should have. We're not saying take it out of Health — take it out of the fuel taxes.

Hon. Mr. Renaud: — Well I'm sure glad the member opposite isn't the Finance minister, Mr. Chairman, because we would certainly be in big trouble.

First of all I think that — and I'll disagree with the numbers that the Canadian Automobile Association has set before you — and I think if you checked with the Department of Finance you would find that we collect a little more than \$300 million, and we're spending this year \$198 million on roads. But that's neither here nor there. The federal government collects, I believe in the neighbourhood of \$4 billion in fuel tax, spends little to none on roads, and that's the problem, Mr. Chairman. That's a major problem.

Canada spends probably about 6 per cent of the cost of the highways network across Canada or puts that kind of money into roads. The next industrialized country that puts, I guess as little dollars, or few dollars in is the United States, but that's about 40 per cent. They cover 40 per cent of their national highways network. And it would certainly be nice if we had some kind of an arrangement like that.

But I want to tell the member opposite, with or without the federal government, we are going to have good highways in the province of Saskatchewan. All we're saying is that if the federal government did participate in a national highways program, that it would speed up the process. We committed \$2.5 billion in this last budget and we're going to use that \$2.5 billion over the next 10 years to have good roads in the province of Saskatchewan. But it would certainly be helpful and it would be responsible for the federal government to participate with us.

Mr. McPherson: — Mr. Minister, I guess we're probably

going to finish out this evening on just the federal financing argument. And it's one you're not going to win because, Mr. Minister, other provinces are able to keep their highways in, I guess, near to excellent condition. And why? Because they spend . . . well I think in Manitoba it's up around 90 per cent of their fuel taxes and motor vehicle licence fees back into their highway system. And you're sitting somewhere around 32 to 34 per cent. And Alberta, we all know if you go across the border into Alberta the highway systems are so much better, so much better.

Well you can give me the argument about how many more miles we have, but, Mr. Minister, you don't have any highways to brag about — not one. I mean if you had one or two highways, we could say yes, you got thousands of miles of highway and sure we can't have them all nice. But can't you have one highway proper? I can show you all kinds of pothole patrol calls that we've had from people that travel No. 1 Highway. Ambulance drivers — we've probably had a half a dozen calls from ambulance drivers in regards to Highway No. 1.

You have nothing that you can be proud of. And Mr. Minister, it's only because while you are making some federal argument that they don't put enough money into it, what happened to the other provinces? They are in debt. In fact Saskatchewan was leading the way as far as having balanced budgets. The others aren't up to speed yet. I mean your Finance minister makes that argument continuously. So they should be the ones at 32 per cent of their fuel taxes into their highways, and you should be at 90 per cent. So what's the problem, Mr. Minister?

Hon. Mr. Renaud: — Well, that's exactly right; somebody mentioned, well where do you answer that question, and I'm not sure.

I do want to mention, Mr. Chairman, the member opposite mentioned the pothole patrol; that's a phone number that they've set up for people to call in. And I had asked the member opposite if he could forward any calls that he would receive so that we as a department could look at some of the concerns that people had. I've received five, Mr. Chairman. I've received five from the members opposite. Now I'm not sure if that's all the calls they have; I would presume so. But that's what I received, five.

So if they're not interested in . . . If they're just playing politics with this hot line, well they should tell the people of Saskatchewan that. If they're going to in fact be helpful, send us over the information; that would be very helpful. Then we could answer those letters if in fact there's an address, and carry on like that. So we would appreciate to get those names.

I notice that the member opposite criticizes us. You know, we never do enough. That's exactly the Liberal lines. We never do enough. It doesn't matter if it's health care or education or social programs or highways — we never do enough.

But he, on the other hand, has a federal government that is allowing the CN (Canadian National) and CP (Canadian Pacific) to close down branch lines in the province as they wish. Don't hear a word; don't hear a word, Mr. Speaker . . . or Mr.

Chairman.

That's going to cause more damage to the roads than anything else we've seen in the near past. But we don't hear a word, Mr. Speaker. It's going to cost millions and millions of dollars for producers — extra costs in getting their product to market. It's going to cost municipalities millions of dollars on damages to municipal roads. It's going to cause millions of dollars to thin membrane surfaced highways in the province of Saskatchewan. That's okay because it's a Liberal government in Ottawa that's doing it.

Well we would like the member opposite to work with us, use this 30 million extra dollars that we have this year as wisely as we can; the \$2.5 billion that we have over the next 10 years to upgrade our roads; to work with area transportation committees; to work with our short-line advisory unit so we can set up short-lines or help the communities set up short-lines where appropriate — where they're economically viable — to work with us to find solutions to the problem instead of complaining that there's not enough for this and not enough for that; join with us.

Mr. McPherson: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. Well we're trying to join with you as best we can but every time I ask a highways question you want to answer it with a federal government answer, and turn it into short-line rail. I don't know how you moved from, all the way from the number of potholes on Highway 18 all the way into short-line rail and the federal government.

As far as the calls that we have gotten from the pothole patrol hot line, while you were speaking I've asked a page to photocopy . . . there would probably be a couple hundred. And we have more. I mean I have several letters here that I have yet to open and read. But I think a couple hundred will keep you busy for a few days. But I guess . . . which falls into another question.

I raised in the House about a week ago, some highways on three or four of the callers that had phoned into the pothole patrol hot line, and I want to know if you've responded, if you went and had your department look at those highways, or are you just wanting to have me send over a bunch of documents and you're never going to follow up on them anyways.

Hon. Mr. Renaud: — I want to thank the member for that last statement, because I did look at the five that I received, but there was no return address, just a name. And so I would appreciate the member opposite's help in determining where the people are from. And I certainly would be pleased to answer those people's concerns. So I may want to send these back and then you could maybe fill me in with the address, and then certainly we'd be happy to answer them.

But I wonder, when did you get these 200 complaints? I mean you started the highway hot line when? — probably early March, and we're now into April. I would have thought that we would have been able to receive them much earlier so we could have looked at the concerns quicker in case some of those concerns were a matter that needed immediate attention.

But we will certainly take a look at them, yes.

(2130)

Mr. McPherson: — Mr. Minister, I'm starting to enjoy your answers. I tell you, it doesn't look good. Because you're saying, well if you just had more you would look into the problem more. And yet when I asked you a little while ago about the safety of a young boy going to school in the community of Ponteix and having a bridge washed out, you can't even take care of a bridge, let alone, you know, dealing with individual callers.

And why is it . . . you know many of those pages that you're going to get later this evening aren't going to have names, addresses, and phone numbers on there. I'm not asking you to phone the people back. Their messages are on the sheet. You will see what their comments are.

It's not that you're going to give comfort to the people of the province because the Highways minister phoned them up and says, don't worry, I know the highway is bad but, you know, I gave you a call. It's not the call they want — it's the highway.

Now it's not important whether you had their name. Did you or did you not know which highway they were talking about and how many kilometres? Isn't that what's important to you, Mr. Minister? Not just an individual's concern but, you know, all of Saskatchewan people that travel that road? Isn't that what's important?

Hon. Mr. Renaud: — Well, Mr. Chairman, one thing that the people of Saskatchewan don't want is another deficit and another debt and high interest bills. And I know that they are watching tonight and they're seeing the Liberal government say we want more for this road and we want more for the roads in Thunder Creek and we want more for the roads in Wood River.

And I'm not sure which other MLA (Member of the Legislative Assembly) is going to get up next. Maybe — I'm not sure — maybe it's the member from Melville that's going to get up and ask for more roads or maybe the member from Melfort is going to ask for all new roads in his constituency.

But the people that are watching know that that's impossible. They know that the government has to be frugal in their spending and they have to do as best they can. And that's exactly what this government on this side of the House is doing, Mr. Chairman.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. McPherson: — Mr. Minister, you know I don't think you've given the opposition due credit in being somewhat sympathetic to your problems if in fact cabinet and the Premier won't give you what I hope you're asking for, is more money for your department.

Now I think we've been more than tolerant because we've actually been asking not that you go out immediately and fix all the roads. We know. We're realistic. The people of Saskatchewan are realistic. They're not saying go out and fix

Highway 18 and re-pave it and, you know, go overboard, but they are wondering if your department is as broke as you claim we are. Do you or do you not have enough money for warning flags? Do you have enough for that, Mr. Minister?

Hon. Mr. Renaud: — Mr. Chairman, I want to remind the member opposite that it happened that the Department of Highways got the largest increase this year of any of the departments — \$30 million for our department. Certainly we would have liked more. I mean it would always be nice. But we're realistic and the \$30 million is certainly going to be good because we're going to be — it's step one — we're going to be able to put that money into preserving the existing infrastructure; so that in years to come we will have savings because the highway will now be in a preserved situation that we can spend money on new construction and in other places.

And so it's step one. Combine that with a new strategy, looking at area transportation committees, looking at transportation partnerships with the private sector, looking at the possibility of designated roads and a lot of other things, spending the dollars as wisely as we can, we will get somewhere. If we had the federal government to participate with us with a national highways program, it would just maybe put us over the edge and it would be a great benefit. We haven't got that at this point in time. We'll continue to fight for that but we'll also continue to improve the roads as best we can under the circumstances.

Mr. McPherson: — Mr. Minister, let's deal with that 30 million that you keep referring to. Are you able — and I'm sure you are, so this isn't a political question for you at all — are you able to supply us with the document as to what exact projects the 30 million is going to?

Hon. Mr. Renaud: — We can certainly send you over a list, if that's what you would like, on the projects that are going to be done.

Mr. McPherson: — So, Mr. Minister, is this list that you're talking about that's over and above the list of highways and priority projects that you would have had ongoing without the extra 30 million? Correct?

Hon. Mr. Renaud: — If you look at the summary of expense, administration is \$4.8 million; accommodation and central services, \$6.6 million; preservation and operation of the transportation system — and I should explain preservation a bit to the member opposite; it also includes recapping of roads for an example, that's included in preservation — 125 million; construction of the transportation system — this is in new capital — \$56 million; logistics, planning and compliance, \$5.9 million, for a total of \$198.811 million. And that's our budget for this year, including the extra \$30 million that we're receiving.

Mr. McPherson: — Well I'm glad you set that out, Mr. Minister, because you know I think the people watching this evening were under the assumption that you were working with a certain budget, and then you added an extra 30 million for specific highway projects. But when you look at it really, what's going to go into the preservation of highways is a much smaller number. Correct? Well it's about 16 million.

So then if you made that decision at the last moment, do you have any list of projects that you added on for this upcoming year that you didn't have before, you know? And I can only say, we're working off a priority list. So which projects did you think you had to add on at the last moment?

Hon. Mr. Renaud: — The additional \$17 million in preservation actually goes across the province. It helps roads everywhere, not just in Thunder Creek or in Wood River but all across the province.

Mr. McPherson: — So, Mr. Minister, do you feel that your . . . and I guess it was your own words. You'd called this a preservation budget. I happened to see that newscast one night, and I was wondering, does that then mean that all the highways that are in need of being preserved before they fall completely apart . . .

Will that cover all the highways? Or are we still working on just a prioritized list and forget about all those other highways that a moment ago you said had to be preserved so that some point in the future you can build some new ones? Or are you accepting the fact that if you let most of these other highways go, that that in itself is a debt, as the member from Thunder Creek raised a while ago. It's no different than having a debt at the bank if in fact you're going to have to pick up that amount of money later. Or you wouldn't have to I guess, if you're of the view that you don't have to worry about the safety of Saskatchewan motorists and are not going to do anything with those highways. So which is it?

Hon. Mr. Renaud: — Mr. Chairman, here we go again. You know, we need more money yet. We've got to fix all the roads at once. Well the people of Saskatchewan know that that's not possible. We have a prioritized list. The preservation money is spent to preserve roads so they do not deteriorate into a state that's going to be very costly to fix in the future. When we have enough roads in the preserved state we certainly will be saving money. We'll be able to put into new construction and to other projects. But it's a matter of planning and using the money as wisely as possible.

Mr. McPherson: — So then, Mr. Minister, I'm going to assume by your answers that once a highway reaches a certain state of disrepair you have to fix it, am I right? Your department's going to take some action, correct?

Hon. Mr. Renaud: — If you were here a little while ago — and I'm not sure if you were — but the province is broken down into three areas: the north, the central, and the south. And the prioritization of the roads that need repair are set by the department staff in those regions and then a comprehensive list is developed. Certainly we can't fix all the roads immediately, because you know you have to understand that the federal government's decision to allow the railways to abandon lines just happened not too long ago; so the lines are just being abandoned and the effect on the roads are just happening now. So we can't do that.

But I guess my question would be to the member opposite, how much would you spend on roads — 200 million, 250 million, 400 million, 10 million? I don't know. You know I mean 30

million is certainly a good start; \$2.5 billion over 10 years is an excellent commitment.

But I don't know what the member opposite would spend and where he would get the money to spend the amount he would like to spend.

Mr. McPherson: — Mr. Minister, I think I could answer that even though you're the one who's to answer the questions tonight. But I think, as Highways minister, I would have some feeling that you would spend the required amount to ensure that there's safety on Saskatchewan highways for Saskatchewan school kids, for our sick and our elderly that are now having to go further for their health care needs. Don't you think that it's hard to put a number on there? You just get at the job at hand.

Now you're going to say, well where do you get the money from. Well that's up to your Finance minister, to let us know which account she wants to pull it out of, which rainy-day account or election-day account. Because she's got hundreds of millions of dollars by the sounds of it stuck away in Liquor Board accounts, and who knows.

But don't you feel it's more important, Mr. Minister, that we stop sort of the prioritization in the sense that you do it where you're looking at this highway has 800 cars a day versus what was it, Mr. Member from Cypress Hills — 80?

An Hon. Member: — Eighty.

Mr. McPherson: — Eighty cars a day on Highway No. 18, and that's one of the stretches . . . (inaudible interjection) . . . Hey, I'll follow up on your theme. That's one of the stretches where it's just been announced that there's going to be a branch line pulled.

So don't you think that should jump up to number one position on your prioritized list? Or do we then say, well our prioritization is more on or just on the population for the people using the highway. And it has nothing to do with if you're in a remote, rural area you don't deserve the same level of safety as if you are, well driving the Ring Road. Is that how you do it?

Hon. Mr. Renaud: — Well that was quite an interesting statement. First of all he says you shouldn't have a budget for roads. You shouldn't have a budget for roads. Just go and do it. Well that's pretty interesting. No priority. Don't prioritize anything. Just go and spend whatever road needs fixing. Just go and do it. So I would ask the member opposite, would he spend 200 million or 400 million or 800 million this year? And if so, where would he get it?

He suggests Highway No. 18. I wonder if the member opposite would . . . maybe he would twin No. 18. It does have 80 vehicles a day. Maybe he would twin that highway. I'm not sure. That's why we've invested in area planning committees. And the south-west has an area planning committee to prioritize their road needs: to take a look at the possibility of short-lines, to take a look at the possibility of elevator consolidation and the effect, to take a look at the federal Liberals' decision to allow the railways to abandon branch lines and what effect is that going to have on the south-west.

That's why we're investing in grass roots decision-making at the local level; so that they can say and help us prioritize the needs in that particular area because money does not grow on trees, and the people of Saskatchewan know that.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

(2145)

Mr. McPherson: — Well by your answer then, Mr. Minister, I can only assume that safety isn't the number one issue for you as Highways minister. Otherwise, well you wouldn't be trying to belittle those people that live in the Frontier-Claydon area by talking about twinning their highway. No one is asking you to go extremes.

What we're asking you is if you feel that you should be out there with your highway crews and making sure that the road is safe. And you know as well as I do it's not safe today. The RMs in that area, the RMs and communities in that area were going to, I guess, block the highway. They're trying to make sure that whatever they have to travel on is safe for their school kids and their mothers and fathers. And I can go on and on.

But you're not at that same level. You want to talk about strictly population and the safety of certain rural people. Well it just isn't, it just isn't up on your calendar, Mr. Minister.

And there again, some of your colleagues are heckling, well what would we spend. It's not wide open. But surely, Mr. Minister, you're going into these cabinet meetings, and armed the way we are with some of the desperate people, the desperate situations that people deal with, and saying no, \$30 million isn't going to do it. And instead of having a little fund set away so that you can win an election in a couple of years or use it to try and buy an election, perhaps the safety of somebody . . . And I'm using Highway No. 18 because it's not a well-travelled route, Mr. Minister. I'm using that highway because if you're not prepared to stick up for the people there and make sure that they have safety, well where do you draw that line?

Hon. Mr. Renaud: — Well it's interesting. The member accuses us of buying an election. I mean when we . . . we told the people when we could afford a sales tax reduction, we would give it to them. And we did. And not on election year, Mr. Chairman. But we did it two years before an election, two and a half years — I don't know, whenever the Premier decides to call the election. But we could afford it now and so we did it now.

But it's going to be interesting because the federal Liberals are going to call an election very shortly, maybe within the next few weeks here. And I'm wondering, maybe the member opposite would help me, because I think if we really pushed hard now, you know, maybe there's a chance on a national highways program before the federal election.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. McPherson: — Mr. Minister, I will send across quite a stack of these pothole patrol calls, and like I say, we're not asking for anything out of the ordinary. I don't expect you

personally to get on the phone and phone all these people but if . . . could we at least have your assurance that you will look and see what highways are affected?

And we don't have to try and belittle the people that phone in with their concerns, but take a look at the highways and see if in fact their concerns are legitimate. And I think you and I both could safely say, yes they are, because you and I both travel the province a fair amount and know the problems out there. But perhaps what's needed are warning signs in some locations, flags in other locations, you know, maybe just a load of gravel here or there.

One of these callers in fact told me of an incident where he was following a Department of Highways truck, a tandem unit filled with gravel, and they came across a pothole — it'll be in here so you'll read it yourself — came across a pothole that was the width of the road and it was long enough that when the tandem truck drove into it, the entire truck fit in the pothole. So he stopped his vehicle, he stopped his vehicle thinking that, well he's going to dump the gravel and once this is level I'll go through. But he went out the other end and went on. I mean I guess there was bigger ones to deal with.

I'm going to send these across, and I guess if you want this kind of reporting from us, then I'm going to assume that what you will supply back is a report on the condition of these highways. I don't think that's out of, out of — in fact, I'll give you more here . . . (inaudible interjection) . . . Well I still have to go through some of these myself but I'm just saying that he can start with a hundred or two and perhaps will get some reporting back, as you know as well as I, Mr. Minister, how concerned you are about reports.

So could we get that say in a week? If these highways are in the disastrous condition that the people say they are, then I know you're going to take immediate action. And is a week too short a period for you to reply?

Hon. Mr. Renaud: — Well I want to tell the member opposite I really appreciate that, because this information is certainly helpful. Whenever I go out in the country and talk to people, I ask them to please forward their concerns and ideas to me, and I really appreciate that. Too bad they couldn't have forwarded them a lot sooner, but I will certainly do our best to answer to those concerns. So I want to thank the member opposite.

Mr. McPherson: — Mr. Minister, and I know you would like to have the people believe that it's just, you know, our opposition that's got concerns about highways, and somehow we're asking for something that's unfair, that we would ask for highways in Saskatchewan to be repaired, even though some of those calls that you will go through you will notice the remarks are, my relatives don't visit Saskatchewan any longer because they were afraid of, you know injury to the vehicle and motor.

Well the members laugh, but it's not us writing that down. So perhaps the member who is doing the heckling would like to help the Highways minister go through the list and phone them back. I don't know how they vote, nor do I care, but they are concerned people. So you pick up the phone and you see if you can't answer some of their concerns.

And you know what else is interesting? It's not just the people out there, the non-partisan type that are concerned about your highway conditions, because I have a copy of an article that was in *The Western Producer* some time ago, "Delegate Blasts Snow Policy." I'm going to quote from it here:

The NDP government got it in the ear from one of their own party members for waiting too long to clear treacherous highways after snowstorms.

And I could go on and on. It talks about who it is and how angry they were. And in fact it goes on to say that MLAs and cabinet ministers made sure that the debate did not reach the floor.

Oh you can say, well it's the Liberal opposition that's raising these concerns. I don't think you're even dealing with it at the party level, Mr. Minister. And perhaps would you like a copy of this as a refresher? If you do, you raise your hand and I'll get it copied for you.

Back to an earlier question, Mr. Minister. Through freedom of information, the member from Thunder Creek received . . . oh where is it here. Well it's just about 6,585 warning flags in the '95-96 fiscal year to cover, I guess, the problems that you're having in your highways. So would you be able to give us — and then perhaps your officials have this at hand — how many warning flags are ordered for this year and upcoming years?

And are they enough? Do you have enough? Do you feel that you have enough flags to cover the highways in this province that are in terrible shape? Because if you do have enough, then I don't need the pothole patrol ones to tell you if the highways that I've been on recently, where it cost me a wheel alignment only last week . . . and there's no flags on the highway let alone near that bump. So could you at least answer, do you have enough flags if you're think you're too broke for . . . (inaudible interjection) . . . Well I think he's anxious to answer.

Hon. Mr. Renaud: — Well our spring break-up is just around the corner, Mr. Chairman. We had a lot of flooding in the south-west. Certainly needed a lot of signs and we do every year in the province of Saskatchewan. Probably in every province, I haven't checked. But we, I would suspect, have enough flags to mark the situations that are going to develop on our highways this spring. And it's very important because the travelling public need to know exactly where the tough spots are.

They realize that the highways are going to break up some in spring. They realize that the federal government's allowed the railways to abandon branch lines and that's going to have a lot of pressure on a lot of our thin membrane surface roads. They're going to break up, Mr. Chairman, and we're going to have to mark those spots until we can get at them to fix it. So we expect we have enough signs, and we know it's very important to advise the general public to the best of our ability on the tough spots in the roads.

Mr. McPherson: — Is there, is there . . . Do you have like a guideline or a policy in your department that would say a

pothole of a certain size warrants a flag? How do we know that . . . what we're facing? If we see one of those little . . . well they're often mistaken for election, New Democrat election signs, much smaller, those little orange road signs for danger. What will the people expect if they see one coming up, especially when they've probably just come across 200 miles of highway where're they're hitting things that are 9 and 10 inches deep? So what would be the policy for putting up a flag?

Hon. Mr. Renaud: — Well I would say that they're red flags, Mr. Chairman, because we're following the "red book" — the federal Liberals' "red book" — and maybe we're just not . . . there is not really a pothole here, we're just putting up a red sign.

But we need to mark the tough spots in the roads in the province of Saskatchewan. They do break up in the springtime quite often and the travelling public need to know where those spots are.

Mr. McPherson: — Well, Mr. Minister, do you say that you then have enough flags to mark all of the bad spots on the highway? Would you be able to give me some indication as to how many of these red, or I think they're orange, flags you would have say on Highway 18 if it's in as bad of condition as those people that live in that area say it is? You will have some sense as to how well marked it is. So do you have flags up at all? Or do you have enough? Or roughly how many?

Hon. Mr. Renaud: — Certainly the tough spots in the roads this spring will be marked, as they normally are for the safe travelling of the public in Saskatchewan. They know that in Saskatchewan our weather is pretty tough stuff and that roads are going to break up. They expect roads to be fixed, but unlike the member opposite, they don't expect them to all be fixed at once and all new roads and all twinned for millions and millions of dollars. They don't expect that, Mr. Chairman. They're reasonable. They want them repaired as best as can be within the financial circumstances that the province sees itself.

Mr. McPherson: — So then do I take that as, the answer as, yes there are several flags up at each and every dangerous spot on Highway No. 18 . . . is well marked?

Hon. Mr. Renaud: — Well, Mr. Chairman, if we could take some off No. 1, if the federal government would contribute to a national highways program, we could have more for Highway 18, I'm sure. But what I want to tell the member opposite, that we have enough signs, and certainly as soon as it thaws enough and we're able to, we will be putting up the flags where necessary.

Mr. McPherson: — You see, Mr. Minister, our concern is this: we haven't really got into the bad highway situation of the spring. So our spring thaws and the truck traffic haven't . . . I'd say give it another two, three weeks and then we'll have some real problems. And then we'll have some pothole patrol letters to bring to you, because they'll come in by the hundreds at that point.

But you see, Mr. Minister, the problems that have come about and the calls that we've received weren't due to damage this

spring. That's how you had the people of Saskatchewan enter into their winter driving. So, Mr. Minister, if you can't take care of a few holes in the winter, how on earth do you expect to keep up with it in the spring?

Hon. Mr. Renaud: — Our crews are ready and waiting, and we're all hoping for spring. We're not sure it's ever going to come, but we think it will eventually. And we're ready.

And we know that there's going to be a lot of pressure. The grain didn't move that well this year. It seemed that the grain companies . . . or pardon me, the railway companies maybe didn't do as best they could on getting our grain to market.

So what we're going to see this year is likely a lot of early traffic to get their grain to market; so we're going to see additional pressure on our roads. But we're ready for that as best we can. And certainly I know that if there is a problem in the member's area he will be notifying us — the department or myself — and we will get right on it.

(2200)

Mr. McPherson: — Well, Mr. Minister, to prepare for the anticipated problems that you are going to receive in the next few weeks, can you give us some indication as to how many more staff you're bringing on stream at the service depots for say the next few weeks for a period of time until the highways are in better shape?

And can you give us some indication the extra amount of, you know, asphalt and things that . . . Well give us a, give us a sort of an idea what your plan is and how you've beefed up the entire system to handle what you anticipate is a real problem here coming up.

Hon. Mr. Renaud: — Well the member asked how many additional employees we'll have. Probably with the extra \$30 million in the department's budget this year, likely there will be an additional 50 FTEs (full-time equivalents). We expect also, because of the added activity in the road building industry, that there will be as high as 240 full-time equivalents in the road building industry. So the announcement of the \$30 million is going to be quite a boost to employment in the province as well.

Mr. McPherson: — Mr. Minister, are you able to tell us the increase? How many more employees you will have? So we'll know that with the increased truck traffic and all the things you talked of, that we're going to be safe, that our highways are going to be taken care of.

Hon. Mr. Renaud: — Well I think that's the same question as the other one. I'm not sure. But there will be 50 full-time equivalent employees within the department, an additional 50, and there will be about 240 full-time equivalents in the road building industry in the private sector for a total of nearly 300 additional employees in roads and road building this year. And that's quite a boost to employment in the province as well as great news for the roads.

Mr. Goohsen: — Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I recognize you as well.

Well, Minister, it's nice to be able to have an opportunity to ask you some questions about the highways in our province. I was listening with some keen interest as you answered some of the questions to the member from the Liberal Party. Obviously our concerns are the same, but we may target some different areas.

I did pick up from his last few questions a couple of things that I wondered about myself. In the conversation you were engaged in, with the numbers of people, have you any initiative to hire students with the new hiring programs that have been announced by the minister of secondary education? And I think he's in charge anyway of the program for hiring students that will be coming out of school in the springtime — university students are coming out fairly quick now; high school students a little later — those programs for \$400 rebate for those employers. Do Department of Highways get involved in those kind of programs at all or do you have a student hiring program that you will be engaging in this summer?

Hon. Mr. Renaud: — Any students that the Department of Highways hire — and we do every year, a significant number — are over and above the 51 FTEs (full-time equivalent) that will be with the department because of the budget increases. And they're hired through the Public Service Commission. So that students will apply to the Public Service Commission, and when the department needs employees they will ask Public Service Commission for names and hire accordingly.

Mr. Goohsen: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. I'm glad to hear that you have a program and that you are considering hiring some students. And obviously the next question that would come would be from young people that are saying, where do I get an application form and where do I put it in? Do you want to answer that for the record so we can pass it around?

Hon. Mr. Renaud: — Public Service Commission of Saskatchewan would have application forms that you would have access to, and/or if they wrote to or visit any MLA office, I'm sure they would be able to get Public Service Commission application forms.

Mr. Goohsen: — Thank you, Minister, for putting that on the record for us.

Now it is important that we do what we can for our students in the summertime. And I'm glad that the Department of Highways will do their share, and I know you will. I know that for sure the highway crew down at Consul, Saskatchewan had asked for additional help last year. We were trying to get some extra help for them. What is the number of the crew down there at the present time? Has it increased since last year? And will you be increasing it this summer?

Hon. Mr. Renaud: — The crew size now I believe is Consul, four; Shaunavon, six; and Maple Creek, six. And on certain projects they will work together. So I don't see any increase in the size of any one of those crews this summer, but they will work together when needed.

Mr. Goohsen: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. I'm glad that you will have the crews working together, especially in times of

crisis, if we happen to have a flash flood. And those kind of things can happen occasionally.

But the reality is that you've increased your budget by \$30 million. Last year already we clearly identified one of the more prominent problems, which of course was that we have people wanting to take their holidays in the summertime. I don't fault people for that. If they took them in the wintertime, certainly the road would plug with snow, and you'd be criticized for taking the crews off and letting them have holidays when they should be ploughing snow. However, you have to be prepared for those people that are going off on their holidays.

We clearly identified in the last session of this legislature that that was a problem. That was identified by the people out in the field, the people on the crews. They take their holidays. They get three weeks off or whatever they get, according to the amount of seniority they've had. And while they're gone on their holidays, of course the crew runs with a man short. If you run into a problem . . . and the member from Wood River has clearly indicated that Highway 18 is a bad road and a good one to use as an example. Obviously the people from the Consul area would be taking care of that road, as well as the other ones, No. 13. They clearly identified that if they could have a student hired to take the place of the people that were going on a holiday and have that extra student on staff, that that would be a great help to them in order to be able to get these little jobs done — like hauling a load of asphalt out and filling in holes with a shovel. I mean these are back-breaking but employment type jobs. You can't really run around with a front-end loader and a piece of machinery to do all this work; you've got to have some people to do it.

So in view of the fact that that was identified as a problem, why haven't you changed your policy and decided to hire students to go at least one to each depot in the province? You don't have that many depots. It was identified earlier, is that you don't have all that many left. But if you have one extra student hired for each depot what would it take you? A handful of people extra hired out of the universities.

Give those people some work to do for the summer so they could pay for their education. They would cover up for the people that are on holidays so that you would have full crews when you need them. And let's face it, you can't put asphalt on highways right now; it's in the cold and the freezing. It's obvious to people that have had any experience with it that it just won't hold. It will break up; it just falls apart. So you have to do this in the summer when the weather's a little better, and the students are out of school at that time.

You have a factor here that you can put together. There's an equation here that makes two and two makes four. You put together the people with the Highways department; they get their education. They get the money they need and you get your potholes filled in and you've got everybody a little bit happier at least, even though the pothole still has a little bump in it but at least it's filled up so that you're not leaving a muffler behind. So why haven't you changed that policy and decided to hire more people from the student employment base in order to fulfil that need?

Hon. Mr. Renaud: — Well I want to thank the member for the question about holidays and I guess the member is right. There's no good time for holidays, but on the other hand people need holidays. I mean you have to have time with your families, and you have to have a break from work, and that's understandable.

I guess it's an option to have students, but you have to remember that we still have 107 depots across the province. We have our crews working in teams now to try and be as efficient and effective as possible. And because we did a reorganization last year, we saved \$6.3 million that we could put, rather into extra staff, into actual roads.

And so there's a fine line as to how many staff you have and how much money you can put into roads. So we believe we have a fair balance right now. We can get the road done by using the crews as teams. And certainly we will use summer students as we can, but to just say, well we're going to put 107 students in 107 locations, where there may be a need in some and maybe not a need in others, isn't, I think, a proper way to manage.

Mr. Goohsen: — Well, Mr. Minister, Mr. Chairman, thank you. I'm amazed at that type of an answer because the fact that you can't clearly identify which divisions might need help and which ones don't need help, you don't hire any. It doesn't make a whole lot of logic here, Mr. Minister. Go out there and ask your division superintendents, or whatever they're called, if they are one of those departments that will need help, and then back-fill that number.

And the cheapest thing you can do in road fixing today is to hire people. And here's why. You've already got the equipment. You've got \$100,000 trucks; you got \$150,000 tractors with front-end loaders and you've got those machines out there for eight hours a day because the union says people shouldn't have to work more than eight hours a day. Fair or not fair, that's the way it is, and that's no more of an argument there for now.

But there's no reason why you can't have two shifts, because in the summertime in Saskatchewan we do have 16 hours of sunlight. And so you could have those trucks and those front-end loaders working for two shifts, 16 hours a day. All you have to do is have double crews, and you can get double mileage out of that very expensive equipment with very cheap labour these days, because labour is about the cheapest thing you've got going in this province. It's not maybe fair, but it's true. It's a reality. For 10 bucks an hour, you can hire every student in this province, I'm quite sure, to stay here instead of going to Alberta looking for a job.

And you could put those machines to work and all of these roads fixed up — at least to the point of having the holes filled in. It isn't an insurmountable problem, and it doesn't cost you a whole bunch of money because you've already got the trucks. It takes a little bit of diesel fuel to run them, and that too is not a big cost factor. It's your investment in machinery that is depreciating, sitting at the side of the road at night time not working; and an awful lot of daylight hours when they're not working in the middle of the summer when we have the sun

coming up a little further to the north and to the west.

So, Mr. Minister, I'm amazed at your answer, and I'm amazed at your logic. I want you to reconsider that. And in all fairness to you, I know that it would only be embarrassing for you to have to stand up and answer this question again. But put on your thinking cap and think about this next time you get a chance, when you're in your office and your people are sitting around you. Because you can solve this problem and you can make yourself look like a bit of a hero without spending a whole bunch of extra money. And we go along with you not to have to spend a whole lot of extra money if you can save it. So think about doing what will make things work.

I want to get on to a couple more questions, Minister, because obviously the night will drag by quickly. And there are so many very important things that need to be talked about in the Department of Highways.

You alluded, some minutes back, to the national road system concept. And obviously the opposition here is a little bit testy about things that come up that involve the word "Liberal" whether it be federal or provincial. But that doesn't bother me, so I can talk about it.

And I agree with you, Mr. Minister, totally and completely, there should be a national road program. There should be a dedication from a federal government to build roads in this province and in this country. The interconnection between our borders from one side of this country to another by highways, and north and south and back and forth, is extremely important to the national interest. If our grain can't get to elevators that in itself is of national interest; because when the federal government has farmers paying income tax, that money goes to the federal government to pay the bills and hire themselves and pay their own wages. There is a national interest in what happens in Saskatchewan. And roads are extremely important to that. So you are right.

And in the United States of America of course, they do have the military as an excuse to do that, but they do it and there is good reason why. The reasons in the United States for having that kind of involvement federally, isn't that also a good argument to use that same philosophy and same thinking in this big country of Canada. So I support you totally in that concept and I think we ought to push it as hard as we can — a national road system with federal government money helping to get it. In the meantime you haven't got that; so you do have to apply yourself better.

(2215)

I was a little amazed that you would finally see the light and promise a long-term program. And I'm glad you did that in terms of the two and a half billion dollars over 10 years. A long-term plan in highways is extremely good. Every municipality does that sort of thing; however when municipalities do it they actually back it up with the dollars. You put 200 million into your highway program and you're promising over 10 years to have 2.5 billion spent. Well 200 times 10 does not come to 2.5, it comes to 2. And if you need some help with your mathematics, Minister, we'll get a

calculator out for you.

And next year you're going to end up behind already. You're going to be \$50 million short; so the next year you already have to put up \$300 million. What happens if you only get a budget for 2 next year, that you can't get enough squeezed out of your Minister of Finance to keep your promise? Are you planning on catching up a billion dollars all at once in the ninth year, or the eighth year, or would it be the sixth or the seventh year that we're planning catch-up? Mr. Minister, these are idle promises that mean nothing to nobody if you don't back it up with the dollars you promised.

So go after the national program. Stop kidding the people. Don't tell us you're promising money that you aren't backing up with dollars that are real, that are going to happen; because all you do is create false hope. And I trust the taxpayers of this province, and the voters of this province, to be bright enough to understand this kind of phoney boloney and they'll put you to the test in the next election.

Now I want to ask you some questions which relate, Minister, to this national highway program with regards also to short-line railroads, which come into that. And obviously the short-line railroads are going to be a very serious problem for you to tackle in the near future.

I want you to have an opportunity to give your version of how that system can unfold, because I think it is necessary that you give the people your opinion about how we can get short-line railroads into the hands of people that can afford to run them and how they will be able to finance that and how they will be able to offset then the need for extra highways monies to bring their grain and produce from the country into the main lines.

So I want to let you respond to that, to have an opportunity to be fair about this.

Hon. Mr. Renaud: — Well thanks to the member opposite, Mr. Chairman. There were several, several questions there. I think one of the questions, if I can remember, were we should be hiring more people. And hiring more people is fine, but you have to understand that you can get yourself into some difficulties by hiring too many people and then spending a whole lot on hiring a lot of people and not having any money for roads.

So the logic of that is . . . can get you into some problems with deficits and high interest bills. And I think the member will quite understand that, and so I really don't know why he would ask that question.

So we're not going to get into increased deficits and increased debts and increased payments and put extra burden on our children. We're going to spend only what we can afford.

And I'm not sure — the member opposite now is suggesting we hire more but some days he wants us to privatize — so I'm not really sure where he's coming from, whether we should privatize or whether we should hire more or what we should do. And I'm not sure the member knows neither.

But he is right on his suggestion that the federal government has a responsibility to a national highways program, and I appreciate and would appreciate the member of the third party's support, especially nearing a federal election. I think if all provinces request from the federal government now some help with a national highways program, certainly I would hope that they would listen. We may not get much help from the official opposition in Saskatchewan — they're Liberals — but maybe from the third party we would be able to get some help.

The member also complimented us on the long-term \$2.5 billion expenditure on roads, and I appreciate that. And he was wondering what the public will say about that, and I can assure the member opposite that the public are very appreciative. They like the idea of long-term planning. Road builders for one. Specialty groups like road builders are certainly happy with that, and the public will judge whether this government has indeed spent the \$2.5 billion over the next 10 years. Inflation . . . I think if we put more than that, we would need to know exactly whether we can afford more than that or not. The other thing is that we could create inflation in the industry; so that in fact costs would go up, and we wouldn't get as much work done as we will with this commitment.

In regards to short-line railways — and I'll try and be very quick — we do have a commitment to short-line railways. We did, along with SARM (Saskatchewan Association of Rural Municipalities) and SUMA (Saskatchewan Urban Municipalities Association), host a conference; 350 people attended the short-line conference. It was voted at that time that Saskatchewan was a short-line-friendly province. It's very difficult to create economically viable short-lines with the federal legislation, the federal transportation legislation. It's not complementary to the formation of profitable short-lines. But we believe, if we work hard with short-line companies, with short-line proponents and local communities, that we will indeed have short-line railways in the province of Saskatchewan.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

The committee reported progress.

The Assembly adjourned at 10:23 p.m.

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