

The Assembly met at 10:00.

Prayers

ROUTINE PROCEEDINGS

PRESENTING PETITIONS

Ms. Julé: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, I stand today to present petitions on behalf of people surrounding the Cudworth area who are concerned about the loss of community-based ambulance services. And the petition reads as follows, Mr. Speaker:

Wherefore your petitioners humbly pray that your Hon. Assembly may be pleased to cause the government to not implement the consolidation and centralization of ambulance services as recommended in the EMS report and affirm its intent to work to improve community-based ambulance services.

And the signatures on this petition, Mr. Speaker, are from the communities of Cudworth, Prud'homme, Vonda, St. Benedict, and Saskatoon.

I so present.

Mr. Hermanson: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, I have a petition regarding two of the government's Crown corporations — SaskPower and SaskEnergy. Both recently announced significant rate increases for residential and business customers. And, Mr. Speaker, the prayer reads:

Wherefore your petitioners humbly pray that your Hon. Assembly may be pleased to cause the government to use a portion of its windfall oil and gas revenues to provide a more substantial energy rate rebate to Saskatchewan consumers.

And as in duty bound, your petitioners will ever pray.

And, Mr. Speaker, the signatures on this petition come from Beechy, Lucky Lake, Dinsmore, Birsay, and the fine city of Saskatoon; and I'm pleased to present this petition on their behalf.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Ms. Draude: — Mr. Speaker, I also have a petition today regarding EMS (emergency medical services) report and the effect it may have on ambulance services in rural Saskatchewan.

Wherefore your petitioners humbly pray that your Hon. Assembly may be pleased to cause the government to not implement the consolidation and centralization of ambulance services as recommended in the EMS report and affirm its intent to work to improve community-based ambulance services.

The people that have signed this petition are from Rose Valley and Archerwill.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Toth: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As well to present petitions. Reading the prayer:

Wherefore your petitioners humbly pray that your Hon. Assembly may be pleased to cause the government to take the necessary steps to ensure that the Redvers Health Centre be maintained at its current level of service at minimum, with 24-hour acute care, emergency, and doctoral services available as well as laboratory, physiotherapy, public health, home care, and long-term care services available to users from our district, southeast Saskatchewan, and southwest Manitoba and beyond.

And as is duty bound, your petitioners will ever pray.

Mr. Speaker, this petition is signed by the good people of Maryfield, Redvers, Wauchope, and Antler.

I so present.

Mr. Wall: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise again on behalf of more of the 5,000-plus people who are concerned about the state of the Swift Current hospital. And, Mr. Speaker, the prayer of this petition reads:

Wherefore your petitioners will humbly pray that your Hon. Assembly may be pleased to cause the provincial government to carefully consider Swift Current's request for a new hospital.

And as is duty bound, your petitioners will ever pray.

And, Mr. Speaker, this petition today, this morning, is signed by people from Wymark, Stewart Valley, from Regina, from Herbert, and of course from the city of Swift Current.

I so present.

Ms. Bakken: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to present a petition on behalf of the citizens of Weyburn-Big Muddy constituency who are concerned about the EMS development project and the prayer reads:

Wherefore your petitioners humbly pray that your Hon. Assembly may be pleased to cause the government to not implement the consolidation and centralization of ambulance services as recommended in the EMS report and affirm its intent to work to improve community-based ambulance services.

And this is signed by citizens of Radville, Lake Alma, McTaggart, Ceylon, Tribune, and Minton.

I so present.

Mr. McMorris: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I too present a petition today on behalf of citizens of the province. The petition's prayer reads as follows:

Wherefore your petitioners humbly pray that your Hon.

Assembly may be pleased to cause the government to not implement the consolidation and centralization of ambulance services as recommended in the EMS report and affirm its intent to work to improve community-based ambulance service.

As in duty bound your petitioners will ever pray.

This petition is signed by a number of people in the Redvers, Bellegarde, and Parkman areas.

Mr. D'Autremont: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have a new petition to present as a result of a chamber of commerce meeting on Fyke in Redvers this week. The prayer reads:

Wherefore your petitioners humbly pray that your Hon. Assembly may be pleased to cause the government to take the necessary steps to ensure that the Redvers Health Centre be maintained at its current level of service, at minimum, with 24-hour acute care, emergency, and doctoral services available, as well as laboratory, physiotherapy, public health, home care, and long-term care services available to users from our district, southeast Saskatchewan, and southwest Manitoba and beyond.

And as in duty bound, your petitioners will ever pray.

I so present.

Mr. Weekes: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I also rise today to present a petition from citizens of the Hafford community and area.

Wherefore your petitioners humbly pray that your Hon. Assembly may be pleased to cause the provincial government to take necessary steps to ensure the Hafford Hospital remains open.

Signed by the good citizens of Richard, Saskatchewan. Thank you.

Mr. Brkich: — Mr. Speaker, our petition signed by citizens of Saskatchewan concerned about the high rates SaskEnergy and SaskPower are charging:

Wherefore your petitioners humbly pray that your Hon. Assembly may be pleased to cause the government to use a portion of its windfall oil and gas revenues to provide a more substantial energy rebate to Saskatchewan consumers.

As in duty bound, your petitioners will ever pray.

The petition is signed by the good citizens from Davidson, Bladworth, Saskatoon, Imperial.

I so present.

Mr. Hart: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I too rise to present a petition on behalf of concerned constituents. The prayer reads as follows:

Wherefore your petitioners humbly pray that your Hon. Assembly may be pleased to cause the government to not

implement the consolidation and centralization of ambulance services as recommended in the EMS report and to affirm its intent to improve community-based ambulance services.

And the signatures to this petition come from Wynyard, Mozart, and Fishing Lake.

I so present.

Mr. Allchurch: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, I too rise in the Assembly to bring forth a petition from citizens concerned about the high energy rates:

Wherefore your petitioners humbly pray that your Hon. Assembly may be pleased to cause the government to use a portion of its windfall oil and gas revenues to provide a more substantial energy rate rebate to Saskatchewan consumers.

And as in duty bound, your petitioners will ever pray.

And the signatures on this petition, Mr. Speaker, are from Saskatoon, Spiritwood, Shellbrook, Rabbit Lake, and Leoville.

I so present.

Mr. Peters: — Mr. Speaker, I rise on behalf of the citizens of Assiniboia, Saskatchewan and the prayer reads as follows:

Wherefore your petitioners humbly pray that your Hon. Assembly may be pleased to cause the government to take the necessary action to ensure that, at the very least, current levels of service and care are maintained at Pioneer Lodge in Assiniboia.

Mr. Speaker, the petition is signed from people from Assiniboia, Mossbank, and Rockglen.

I so present.

Mr. Huyghebaert: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, I rise with a petition to stop further cuts at Assiniboia Pioneer Lodge and the prayer reads as follows:

Wherefore your petitioners humbly pray that your Hon. Assembly may be pleased to cause the government to take the necessary actions to ensure that, at the very least, current levels of service and care are maintained at Pioneer Lodge in Assiniboia.

And as is duty bound, your petitioners will ever pray.

And, Mr. Speaker, the signators on this are from Assiniboia, Crane Valley, Regina, Wood Mountain, Lafleche, Gravelbourg, Viceroy, and Limerick.

I so present.

READING AND RECEIVING PETITIONS

Clerk: — According to order the following petitions have been reviewed and pursuant to rule 12(7) they are hereby read and

received.

These are petitions of citizens of the province that are addendums to previous sessional papers no. 3, no. 4, no. 5, no. 58, and no. 65.

PRESENTING REPORTS BY STANDING, SELECT AND SPECIAL COMMITTEES

Standing Committee on Private Members' Bills

Mr. Wartman: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As Chair of the Standing Committee on Private Members' Bills, I present the third report of the said committee, which is as follows:

Your committee has duly examined the undermentioned petition for private Bills and finds that the provisions of rule 64, 65, and 68 have been fully complied with:

Of the International Bible College of Moose Jaw in the province of Saskatchewan praying for an Act to amend its Act of incorporation;

Of Our Lady of the Prairies Foundation in the province of Saskatchewan praying for an Act to continue Our Lady of the Prairies Foundation;

Of the Providence Hospital, Moose Jaw, in the province of Saskatchewan praying for an Act to dissolve Providence Hospital;

Of the Saskatchewan Association of Rural Municipalities in the province of Saskatchewan praying for an Act to amend its Act of incorporation;

Of the St. Anthony's Home, Moose Jaw, in the province of Saskatchewan praying for an Act to dissolve St. Anthony's Home;

Of St. Thomas More College, Saskatoon, in the province of Saskatchewan praying for an Act to continue the St. Thomas More College.

I move this, seconded by the member from Humboldt:

That the third report of the Standing Committee on Private Members' Bills be now concurred in.

Motion agreed to.

NOTICES OF MOTIONS AND QUESTIONS

Mr. Toth: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, I give notice that I shall on day no. 30 ask the government the following question:

To the Minister Responsible for Rural Revitalization: (1) what are the adaptation programs established that will help farmers establish alternative operations or retrain for alternative occupations; (2) how much money has been allotted for each of these programs; and (3) where can information be found if someone would like to apply to one of these programs?

Mr. Hillson: — I thank you, Mr. Speaker. I give notice that on day 30 I will ask the government the following question:

To the Minister of Justice: regarding the proposed land system: (1) how many positions in the Land Titles Office will be displaced; (2) how much retraining will be required of present employees to work in the new system; (3) how much will the retraining cost be; (4) is consideration being given to an early retirement package for existing senior employees as opposed to requiring extensive retraining for employees now near retirement; (5) when will the land system come into operation?

INTRODUCTION OF GUESTS

Hon. Ms. Hamilton: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It's indeed a pleasure to introduce to you and through you to all members of the Assembly, 17 adult students seated in your gallery, Mr. Speaker. They're here from SIAST (Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology) English as a Second Language program and accompanied by teachers Ron Mang and Ruth Quiring

They'll be present in the gallery all through question period and I'm sure they'll take a great deal of interest in the proceedings. And I'll be looking forward to meeting with them later on to answer their questions and have a refreshment in room 218.

Mr. Speaker, I ask all members to warmly welcome our guests from the English as a Second Language program at SIAST.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Hillson: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm pleased to introduce to you my son who is with us this morning, my son, John, in your gallery. John is an RN (registered nurse) at Allan Blair clinic here in Regina. He has not gone off to Alberta to work.

He is compassionate, thoughtful, loyal, and quiet — in short, he takes after his mother.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Hart: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the official opposition I would like to join with the member opposite in welcoming our students, the students from SIAST. I certainly hope that they enjoy their visit today to the legislature and I wish them every success in their studies.

And so I'd ask all members to join with me in welcoming them.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

(10:45)

STATEMENTS BY MEMBERS

Day of Mourning

Hon. Mr. Hagel: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, today flags on the Legislative Building and the provincial government buildings are flying at half-mast as we

commemorate Saskatchewan workers injured and killed on the job.

Back in 1988 I was approached by Nadine Hunt who was then the president of the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour to ask if I would introduce a Private Member's Bill to make April 28 a statutory day of mourning for workers killed and injured on the job.

I was very proud of this legislature, Mr. Speaker, when that Bill passed unanimously, making Saskatchewan the first jurisdiction in all of Canada to legislate the day of mourning.

Mr. Speaker, April 28 is the day chosen because it was on that day back in 1914 that Canada's first Workers' Compensation Board Act was passed in the province of Ontario. This is the day to share the grief of workers injured on the job and to families who have lost a family member on the job.

Mr. Speaker, unfortunately young people and first-time workers are more likely to be injured in the workplace. More than 8,000 young workers age 15 to 24 are injured each year. Since last April 28, 33 people have died on the job in Saskatchewan. Two of them under the age of 24.

Mr. Speaker, for ourselves as legislators, this is a day to recommit ourselves to legislation and action in support of good occupational health and safety practices and programs. We do this for those who make up the backbone of the Saskatchewan economy — Saskatchewan workers; for them and for their families.

Thanks, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Weekes: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. On behalf of the official opposition I also rise today to speak on the National Day of Mourning — a day set aside to remember those workers killed or injured on the job. Mr. Speaker, it's a tragedy that more than 30 people lost their lives in work-related accidents in Saskatchewan last year and thousands more were injured.

Tomorrow, April 28, is the day we set aside to remember those who are no longer with us. Across Canada 1,000 people die from workplace accidents annually and a million more are injured nationally. This means that a work-related accident injures someone every seven seconds of each working day; every two hours of each working day a life is lost. These statistics speak volumes about the importance of ensuring workplace safety.

A safe work environment is not just the responsibility of employers or employees, it is a commitment that all of us must make. The toll that workplace accidents take on families, friends, and the communities is without end. Over time pain and grief may fade, but memories do not.

Tomorrow, April 28, is a day for remembering. And while we have reserved April 28 to respect this solemn occasion, we must also remember that the responsibility of workplace safety is not limited to just one day.

On behalf of the official opposition, our sincerest condolences to those who lost loved ones this past year and our best wishes to those who are recovering from their injuries.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Cancer Month

Hon. Ms. Lorjé: — Mr. Speaker, this is a solemn occasion today and as we approach the end of this month, it is important to remember that April is also Cancer Month, the month during which we pay tribute to the health workers, families, and friends who are in the struggle against this dreadful disease. We remember those who have suffered and too often died too soon from cancer.

April is also a month, though, in which 10,000 Saskatchewan volunteers redouble their efforts to raise money for research and for prevention programs. In Saskatchewan we can ask with pride: where else? Where else can you find our combination of volunteerism, of co-operation, and of determination to work together for the public good?

Mr. Speaker, the motto for this year's fundraising campaign is "Let's Make Cancer History." And we will, in both meanings of the phrase. Nevertheless, this year in Canada there will still be 134,000 new cases of cancer.

We are making progress but we want a declaration of total victory. The \$4 million the Saskatchewan branch plans to raise will take us closer.

Mr. Speaker, as someone who lost her husband to cancer, I recognize and praise the work of all those involved in cancer research and treatment and I urge us all to help the Cancer Society to reach its financial target. Thank you.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Meeting on Fyke Report in Redvers

Mr. D'Autremont: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I too rise on an issue of care and health. Redvers Chamber of Commerce last Wednesday night held a meeting, Mr. Speaker, in the rink in Redvers in which people from across southeastern Saskatchewan and southwest Manitoba participated.

Over 500 people were in attendance, Mr. Speaker, to hear and discuss the Fyke report. The chairman of the health board made a good presentation and explanation on what was in the Fyke report, along with a doctor who had a commentary on it. And it was very interesting, Mr. Speaker, that just as the doctor got up to go and give his presentation, his cell phone rings for some health consultations from the hospital.

I was also a part of that, Mr. Speaker. The people of the area were expressing their concerns about the potential loss of their acute care services, ambulance services, lab and X-ray services, long-term care, and home care, Mr. Speaker.

There was one general consensus at the meeting, Mr. Speaker,

and that was that this government needs to listen and needs to act on the health care concerns of people across Saskatchewan and that they asked that I speak out on their behalf and continue the struggle to maintain health care services in the Cannington constituency.

Thank you.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Balgonie Tumbleweed Community Theatre

Hon. Ms. Hamilton: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to tell you about a very special event held this last weekend by the good people of Balgonie.

Close to a hundred volunteers gathered over the weekend to put on the Tumbleweed Community Theatre's presentation of *Looking Back and Stepping Forward*. I had the pleasure of attending Sunday's show, Mr. Speaker, and I'm delighted to share with the Assembly a little more about this event.

As many people know, we in Saskatchewan take two things very seriously — our politics and our heritage. Well, Mr. Speaker, the people of Balgonie are no exception. These volunteers put on a show that illustrated the long and rich history of Balgonie and area; one that was full of homesteading stories, tales of success and hardship, and folklore that truly represent the pioneering spirit we in Saskatchewan are so famous for.

Young members of the cast portrayed stories of computer chips, the Internet, and music titles from bands that many of us in the audience had never heard of before.

Mr. Speaker, the diversity of the two eras was well represented. The oldest actor in the cast was 70; the youngest was 5. The proceeds of this event, Mr. Speaker, are going towards the Balgonie swimming pool.

Congratulations go out to directors, Wendy Mokolki and Heather Entner; music director, Lisa Ermel; master of ceremonies, Darcy McKeown; the central character's grandmother, Rosemary Devers; and her granddaughter, Justine Melnychuk; cast, crew and the people of Balgonie on a job well done.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Holocaust Memorial Day

Mr. Toth: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, on April 10 I spoke in this Assembly in support of a private member's Bill to commemorate Holocaust Memorial Day.

While the other members of this Assembly clearly understood my unqualified support of the Bill and my absolute abhorrence of all human atrocities of this nature, I did receive an e-mail from a Saskatchewan resident seeking further clarification of some of my remarks.

Specifically, Mr. Speaker, I was asked to clarify why I believe the Jewish victims of the Holocaust and the Rwandans and

Bosnians victimized in more recent atrocities were killed. In each case these innocent people were slaughtered by an evil regime with wanton disregard for human life and for God's universal law that each and every one of us is created equal.

My remarks were intended as a reminder that the human race must be ever vigilant against the religious and racial discrimination that has led to the senseless deaths of millions of innocent people at various times throughout history.

For these reasons I strongly supported the remembrance of Holocaust Memorial Day in Saskatchewan.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Saskatchewan Drug Plan Additions

Ms. Junor: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Saskatchewan residents enjoy an excellent health care system but we are always looking for ways to improve upon everything from patient care to 911 services. And health care has once again been improved in Saskatchewan by the addition of 26 new drugs to the Saskatchewan Drug Plan; a drug plan that already covers more than 3,500 products.

Among these new 26 drugs is Exelon. It has been covered by the Saskatchewan Drug Plan since April 1, after the provincial government accepted the Saskatchewan Formulary Committee's recommendation to cover Exelon. Exelon is used to treat patients with mild to moderate forms of Alzheimer disease. This drug has been shown to be beneficial to new patients or to those who cannot tolerate Aricept, another drug used to treat Alzheimer disease that was added to the Saskatchewan Drug Plan last year.

By adding Exelon, we can hope to provide a better quality of life for those suffering from Alzheimer disease, and for their loved ones.

Other drugs that were added to the Saskatchewan Drug Plan are Monacor, a medication for congestive heart failure; Avelox, a new antibiotic; and Actos, a new oral alternative treatment for diabetes. In addition, many lower cost generic drugs are being added in order to provide alternatives to existing products.

Mr. Speaker, health care in Saskatchewan continues to improve. With the addition of Exelon, along with 25 more new drugs, Saskatchewan residents can be assured that they will be provided with the best drug choices possible in order to continue to live a fulfilling and healthy life.

Thank you.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

ORAL QUESTIONS

Sex Offender Registry

Ms. Julé: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, my question is for the Minister of Justice. Last week Christopher's Law, which is legislation creating a mandatory provincial sex offender registry, came into effect in Ontario. In March, the

NDP (New Democratic Party) government in British Columbia announced they too would establish a registry to monitor convicted sex offenders.

Mr. Speaker, one year ago, I asked the Minister of Justice to bring forward legislation that would set up such a registry in Saskatchewan. But his answer at the time was that the existing CPIC (Canadian Police Information Centre) system was all we needed.

Then in September the minister changed his tune and urged his federal, provincial, and territorial colleagues to reconsider a national registry. But, Mr. Speaker, there is no real indication that the federal government is going to take this initiative.

Mr. Speaker, today I stand to say that I will reintroduce legislation that will establish a provincial sex offender registry in Saskatchewan. Will the minister support this legislation?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Mr. Axworthy: — Mr. Speaker, first of all let me recognize the member's continued commitment to addressing the needs of children who are faced with the potential of being offended by pedophiles, and her concern is shared by all members of the House. I know that.

The important thing is to try to do what will work. And in the process of discussing this matter with the member and with others, I did then proceed to raise the issue with the ministers of Justice at the last provincial/territorial/federal ministers of Justice meeting and we agreed to proceed to investigate the efficacy of a national sex offender registry.

Work is continuing in that regard and in February officials met to see how we could implement a national sex offender registry. The matter was raised in the House of Commons, as the member knows, and Alliance members pointed at the importance of a national sex offender registry. We continue to work at that level.

But the member should be assured that if progress does not proceed at that level, then we will look very seriously at implementing something similar here in the province.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Ms. Julé: — Mr. Speaker, this situation just simply cannot wait for the federal government. We have waited long enough, Mr. Speaker, because just yesterday a violent sex offender who is considered an extremely high risk to reoffend was released from the Regional Psychiatric Centre in Saskatoon.

The police issued a public warning, and while they expect that Garry Nelson Bunn will head for Manitoba, he will not be under any probationary or community supervision and he is under no obligation to tell the police where he was going. So in short this man may very well be in Saskatchewan and the police say he may be a very real threat to the general public.

Mr. Speaker, a mandatory sex offender registry would require this man to report his whereabouts, and police would at least have some legal method of knowing where he is. Mr. Speaker,

why won't the minister be a leader instead of a follower and support a provincial sex offender registry? Why does he insist on waiting for the federal government to get around to it?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Mr. Axworthy: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well, Mr. Speaker, I share the member's urgency about this too. But we have to make sure that we do something that will actually work, which will actually improve the lives, the chances of children to be free from this kind of heinous activity.

I think, Mr. Speaker, that the very case of Mr. Bunn being in Saskatchewan, having committed crimes in Manitoba, expected to go back to Manitoba, actually proves the case for a national sex offender registry, Mr. Speaker. And even the member's friends in Ontario have argued that a national sex offender registry would be preferable.

But as the member says, if we don't get action from the federal action, we will consider quick action here in the province.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

(10:30)

Ms. Julé: — Mr. Speaker, it is imperative that each province show and demonstrate their willingness to do their part first so that, nationally, we can have a sex offender registry.

Mr. Speaker, the federal government could take years to decide if a national sex offender registry is worth establishing. But other provinces have already decided how important it is and have implemented their programs.

If we, as a province, don't act on this issue, in essence we are telling people and, in a lot of cases, children that their lives are not worth enough to take this one ounce of prevention. Victims of crime and police services support the establishment of a sex offender registry.

What is wrong with establishing a provincial program now, and if the federal government eventually starts a national program, our data and our registry can then become a part of it?

Mr. Speaker, why is it too much to ask this provincial government to take initiative for once and to set up a sex offender registry for the protection of Saskatchewan people?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Mr. Axworthy: — Mr. Speaker, just last month, officials were discussing the possibility of a national registry. Those discussions will come to ministers of Justice in the fall. That, I think, is a wise step to take, if we can persuade the federal government to act, then this will become a more meaningful registry as people move across the province and we can keep track of everyone across Canada.

Mr. Speaker, this is a matter of urgency, but we want to make sure that we get this right. And the member will know that, in fact, Ontario is having significant difficulty with its implementation. We watch the way in which they proceed.

There are significant difficulties within this legislation. We want to do the right thing. We want to do it as effectively as we possibly can.

The member should also realize, Mr. Speaker, that we have many other provisions which assist us in ensuring that sex offenders do not prey on children in this province, across the country.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Review of Workers' Compensation Board

Mr. Weekes: — Mr. Speaker, my question is for the Minister of Labour. Tomorrow is an official day of mourning for working people who have been injured or killed on the job.

Mr. Speaker, it is also a day when we, as legislators, recommit ourselves to taking every possible step to ensure safe workplaces and fair treatment of injured workers.

Mr. Speaker, almost two years ago, the NDP hired James Dorsey to review the operations of the Workers' Compensation Board. Mr. Dorsey submitted his report to the Minister of Labour more than seven months ago and yet the NDP is refusing to release it to the public or the injured workers.

Mr. Speaker, what's the holdup? What is the NDP trying to hide? Will the minister release the Dorsey report today?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Mr. Trew: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. As I've repeatedly stated, the Dorsey report was commissioned by this government. We received the Dorsey report. I have been now the minister responsible for the Department of Labour for some . . . about 10 weeks. In that time I've brought myself up to speed, read the Dorsey report, and a number of other issues that we have to deal with.

I'm delighted to repeat for the — I don't know how many times — we're not trying to withhold or hide the Dorsey report. It is a very, very good report and it will become a public document sooner rather than later. I expect, Mr. Speaker, we're not talking months. I've said I'm hoping it's weeks.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Weekes: — Mr. Speaker, James Dorsey submitted his review of the WCB (Workers' Compensation Board) to the NDP government seven months ago but all we get from the minister are excuses about why he continues to sit on the report.

Mr. Speaker, what is the holdup? Well according to the minister himself he hasn't gotten around to read the Dorsey report fully lately, because he's been preoccupied with the NDP leadership contest and then two by-election campaigns.

Obviously the Minister of Labour has decided to put the political interests of the NDP ahead of the interests of the injured workers. Mr. Speaker, the Minister of Labour has been sitting on the Dorsey report for more than seven months. Instead of making empty statements about how he's squeezing

support for injured workers in-between NDP by-election campaigns, why doesn't the minister actually do something about it?

Will the minister table the Dorsey report on the Workers' Compensation Board in the legislature today?

Hon. Mr. Trew: — Mr. Speaker, I thank the member opposite for his question around the Dorsey report and around Workers' Compensation because workers' compensation is a very serious matter. It's a very important part of my portfolio and I know that our government takes it very seriously. That's why we commissioned the Dorsey report in the first place.

In the interim there have been improvements going on at the Workers' Compensation Board and we look forward to continuing those improvements, not simply up to the Dorsey report but subsequent to the Dorsey report, and indeed as long as we're in government we'll always be looking for ways to improve the operation and the results of the Workers' Compensation Board.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

SaskTel Investment

Mr. Wall: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, the other day the SaskTel minister finally admitted that cabinet did approve SaskTel's decision to get into the health data business through a company called IQ&A which went on to lose about \$2 million without a single sale.

He said that cabinet approved that decision, despite the fact that no provincial health department, including Saskatchewan Health, was willing to provide the health data IQ&A needed to do the business.

Well, Mr. Speaker, this begs the question. Why didn't the then minister of Health say something? Apparently the minister for SaskTel came to cabinet with a scheme to risk taxpayers' money to sell health information. The Health minister knew his department didn't want to sell health information. Why wouldn't he say, oh by the way, we're not going to sell health information?

So, Mr. Speaker, my question is to the Deputy Premier, who was the Health minister of the day. How did he let this get by cabinet? Why didn't he tell SaskTel this data was not for sale before they lost \$2 million?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Mr. Sonntag: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Well as the member is aware, the reports around IQ&A, the annual reports, were tabled almost a year ago, Mr. Speaker, with all of the information largely around the investment.

To answer the question specifically — and this is public information made available the other day as well — the investment that IQ&A made or was planning to make as far as I have been informed, Mr. Speaker, over 95 per cent of that investment was not reliant on information from Saskatchewan Health.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Wall: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. That may be the case, but the point is if Saskatchewan Health wasn't prepared to sell the information, chances are pretty good they couldn't get it from any other jurisdiction either and it might send up a few red flags before they spent — wasted — \$2 million.

Mr. Speaker, the other day in the House, in this Assembly, the current Minister of Health said proudly that Saskatchewan Health data is not for sale. Well maybe someone should have mentioned that three years ago before SaskTel went into the health data business.

Mr. Speaker, who is minding the store over there? How on earth did this get by cabinet? How did it get by the Deputy Premier who was then the minister of Health?

Mr. Speaker, every day the minister for CIC (Crown Investments Corporation of Saskatchewan) gets up and talks about due diligence. That would have been a good start to the due diligence process at that time.

I'll ask the Deputy Premier again, who was the then minister of Health: why didn't he say something at the cabinet table and stop the wasting of 2 million tax dollars?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Mr. Sonntag: — Well, Mr. Speaker, as I've pointed out a number of times, Mr. Speaker, we will have Crown . . . our Crown corporations will make investments in Saskatchewan and outside of Saskatchewan. In those investments, Mr. Speaker, they will do their utmost to perform a complete and full due diligence. And obviously, Mr. Speaker, investments are never made with the intent of losing money.

History will show, Mr. Speaker, that our Crown corporations and their subsidiaries will return profits to the people of Saskatchewan many more times than they will lose, Mr. Speaker. And I know it, Mr. Speaker.

And again, public information, Mr. Speaker, that there were four other telephone companies who also invested in this . . . who made an investment in IQ&A, Mr. Speaker — MTS (Manitoba Telephone System), MT&T (Maritime Telephone and Telegraph), MB (Manitoba) Tel, BC TEL, Mr. Speaker — four other companies who did due diligence as well, Mr. Speaker.

So if the member is suggesting that SaskTel is the only company who made a mistake here, Mr. Speaker, he's wrong. But, Mr. Speaker, we will make investments many more times that are profitable.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Wall: — Mr. Speaker, the difference of course is that the other partners in this got out when the gitting was good. This government stayed in and lost an additional million-or-so dollars of taxpayers' money, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, I don't know what's more troubling — the NDP's

gross negligence or their flippant attitude that we've seen over this loss of \$2 million. Mr. Speaker, it's interesting to note that \$2 million is equivalent to the taxes paid by 500 Saskatchewan families. Those are the kind of numbers that we're talking about here.

Mr. Speaker, not long ago in this Assembly, the minister also indicated that he was prepared to bet his job on the fact that his government would lose more money in the future. That's what he said in the Assembly.

Well in this particular case, that government had the chance to stop the bleeding. The then minister of Health, the Deputy Premier had the chance to say no, the information's not for sale. I ask again, why didn't he say that, Mr. Speaker?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Mr. Sonntag: — Well, Mr. Speaker, I am not prepared to take advice from those members about when we should get in and out of investments, Mr. Speaker. They were the ones who advised us, Mr. Speaker, to sell Cameco shares and when they were down around what? Seventeen dollars a share? They were sold in excess of 60, Mr. Speaker.

They were the ones who told us to get out of the Husky Upgrader, Mr. Speaker, on 7 cents on the dollar, Mr. Speaker — 7 cents on the dollar. Incredible advice from those members opposite, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, I will note, Mr. Speaker, LCL (Leicester Communications Limited) Cable, they made — of SaskTel, a subsidiary — made over a hundred million dollars for the people of Saskatchewan, Mr. Speaker. Saturn/Austar made 37 million, Mr. Speaker. There are many, many, many more investments that our Crown corporations have made for the people of Saskatchewan to diversify risks and to provide services in constituencies that they represent, Mr. Speaker. Services in constituencies that they represent — that's why they make those investments, Mr. Speaker.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Conversion of Management Positions to In Scope

Mr. Weekes: — Mr. Speaker, my question is for the Minister of Labour.

Mr. Speaker, a couple of weeks ago we learned that the government had arbitrarily moved over 600 management positions into SGEU (Saskatchewan Government and General Employees' Union) without even conducting a vote. The vast majority of these managers are opposed to being unionized but they were given no say in the matter.

It was a flat out political payoff from the NDP to its union leader friends in SGEU. Now we learn the cost of this payoff — \$2.3 million. \$2.3 million taxpayers' dollars to unionize hundreds of people who don't want to be unionized.

Mr. Speaker, why is the NDP wasting \$2.3 million unionizing hundreds of workers against their will?

Hon. Ms. Crofford: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. It might be helpful to have a little bit of background on this issue.

During the previous government an extraordinary number of people were moved out of scope, more than the percentage in any other government in Canada. And during subsequent rounds of collective bargaining, an agreement was made to do a scope review.

That agreement and the scope review went before the Labour Relations Board. The Labour Relations Board . . .

The Speaker: — Order, order. I would just like to be able to hear the questions fully and the answers fully. The minister will continue for 30 seconds.

Hon. Ms. Crofford: — As I say, Mr. Speaker, this scope review was the result of a collectively bargained agreement. And what we have now is a situation where the Labour Relations Board has ruled on it. And certainly this is the way that scope is normally established in government positions.

The Labour Relations Board feels it to be appropriate. And certainly employees that aren't happy with it have access to appeal procedures. And I would just say to the member that everybody is doing everything, as they should.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Weekes: — Mr. Speaker, here's an idea. How about letting them have a vote? Maybe you should ask these people if they actually want to join the union. It's fair, it's democratic, and you'll probably save \$2.3 million.

Mr. Speaker, to the minister: will you conduct a vote on whether or not these government managers want to join SGEU?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

(10:45)

Hon. Ms. Crofford: — I have never heard such a complete lack of the most basic understanding of what it means to be part of a unionized workplace. Is the member suggesting that teachers who become part of the STF (Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation) should not be part of the STF union? Is he suggesting that health care workers that become part of a unionized health care workplace should not be in the union?

What the member is suggesting, Mr. Speaker, is patent nonsense.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Municipal Revenue Sharing

Mr. Hillson: — Yes, Mr. Speaker. In a budget which provides double-digit increases for nearly everyone else, the Department of Municipal Affairs sticks out like a sore thumb. The NDP has never been able to get along with municipal leaders in this province, and the Department of Municipal Affairs again confirmed its position as the unloved child of this government.

Zero increase for urban revenue sharing. Zero increase for rural revenue sharing. Zero increase for northern revenue sharing. Zero increase for assistance for transit for the disabled. Zero increase for urban parkways. Revenue sharing remains frozen at level one-half the NDP's first budget 10 years ago.

Mr. Speaker, my question is for the Premier. Why were municipalities frozen out of this year's budget? Was it to destroy the Liberal Party member's credibility in his government by showing they are ignored? Or was it to show how little respect he has for municipal government in this province?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Mr. Osika: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The member will know that there are budget deliberations that lots of people participate in. I want to remind once again the House the commitment that this government has had to the municipal sector and that member opposite should know very definitely.

When the \$10 million provincial funding into the provincial infrastructure program was announced, Mr. Speaker, that was as a result of consultation with those municipalities that it seems to me almost as if the member is actually attacking. And I don't quite understand that.

There have been consultations. And I want to refer to particularly consultations and a comment from the people seeking some relief in education tax specifically, and business tax. There were 2 per cent reductions in those business taxes, Mr. Speaker. There was an increase as a result of representation from three local governments who met with the Finance minister and reminded him of the need for property taxpayers in the upcoming budget for education tax relief, Mr. Speaker. And there was a great deal of . . . \$1.1 billion — the biggest education budget ever.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Hillson: — Mr. Speaker, if the hon. minister is suggesting I had some hand in this budget, I ask him to please not give me any of the credit. I think everyone knows, if I was Municipal Affairs minister, I would not end up as the only person around the table to get nothing. Even, even Culture and Youth . . .

The Speaker: — Order. Order.

Mr. Hillson: — Mr. Speaker, do I take it that the invitation to come back is off?

Mr. Speaker, even Culture and Recreation, which was taken away from Municipal Affairs, got a big jump up. Municipal Affairs was left with nothing. This has destroyed the credibility of the officials and the ministers when they meet with groups like SARM (Saskatchewan Association of Rural Municipalities) and SUMA (Saskatchewan Urban Municipalities Association).

Is this part of the Premier's strategy to destroy the credibility of that department and that minister when dealing with the municipal leaders of this province who have no faith in this government?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Mr. Osika: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'm not sure whether my response should contain sympathy or condolences to the member opposite.

I'm going to go back to this news release that he would have been aware of — or should have been aware of — that the Saskatchewan Association of Rural Municipalities, SARM for the member opposite; the Saskatchewan School Trustees Association, SSTA; and the Saskatchewan Urban Municipalities Association, SUMA, joined forces and I quote, "to meet with Cline." Their concern? We need some relief on education taxes, \$1.1 billion dollars. This is dated January 24, 2001.

Guess what happened in response to their plea? Look at the budget, the education tax relief that was contained in that budget — it was there.

Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I don't know what else I need to do, maybe send some copies of this information over, that he should already be aware of.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mr. Hillson: — Mr. Speaker, Mr. Speaker, Roy Romanow used to like to tell the story about the southern governor who at his inauguration told of his plans: for those of you who work hard to get me elected, I promise you a big piece of the pie. For those of you who did not work for me but didn't work against me, I promise you a small piece of the pie. For those of you who worked against me, I promise you good government.

Well, Mr. Speaker, the municipal leaders of this province got the Premier's version of good government. The only problem is now municipal property taxes, among the highest in the country already, are rising everywhere in the province.

What does the Premier have to say to property taxpayers in this province who just got a swift kick in the wallet?

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Hon. Mr. Calvert: — Mr. Speaker, Mr. Speaker, we have witnessed, we have witnessed in the House today the most desperate case of amnesia that I think I've ever, I've ever seen.

Mr. Speaker, the member from Battleford says we have a little difficulty with municipal government. Well we may have had a spot of trouble a few months ago under a former minister but that is no longer the case, Mr. Speaker. And wonder if the then minister was going out quoting American politicians, little wonder we were having a spot of trouble.

Mr. Speaker, that member was fully part of the budget deliberations and he knows it. Mr. Speaker, part of those budget deliberations. Budget deliberations, Mr. Speaker, was meeting with SARM, SUMA, and the municipal leaders who came in number and said to this government if you've got money in this budget, put it into education. Put it into education. Where did we put it, Mr. Speaker — into education.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

INTRODUCTION OF BILLS

Bill No. 205 — The Sex Offender Registry Act

Ms. Julé: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. Mr. Chair, I move first reading of Bill No. 205, The Sex Offender Registry Act.

Motion agreed to, the Bill read a first time and ordered to be read a second time at the next sitting.

Hon. Mr. Trew: — Mr. Speaker, before orders of the day, I rise to ask leave of the Assembly to make a statement of importance to workers in Saskatchewan.

Leave granted.

STATEMENT BY A MEMBER

Day of Mourning

Hon. Mr. Trew: — Mr. Speaker, I thank you. And I thank all hon. members of the legislature for granting leave.

As my colleagues, the member for Moose Jaw North and the member for Redberry Lake have reminded us, tomorrow is April 28, a day of mourning for workers who have been killed and injured on the job in Saskatchewan.

April 28 is a day to mourn, but it's also a time to act. We know that workplace accidents can be prevented, and a day of mourning provides us with an opportunity to reflect on the past year and to reaffirm our commitment to prevent these needless tragedies.

Mr. Speaker, 33 people died in Saskatchewan over the past 12 months and thousands more have been injured in the workplace. Co-workers, employers, communities, and families of workers killed on the job all suffer. All pay a high price, but no one more so than the workers giving everything they have to a job.

Our deepest sympathy goes to all those who have experienced a workplace tragedy.

Mr. Speaker, I ask all hon. members to rise and I will read into the record, the names of the 33 people who died in Saskatchewan workplaces in the past year, and I request a moment of silence after that.

The Speaker: — Would you all please rise.

Hon. Mr. Trew: — William Watson, Cyril Marion, Eugene Chamberlain, Charles Freeman, Scott Fletcher, Les Robert, Brian Wanner, Stanley Knowles, Gordon Cherney, Blaine Drew, Kelly Conlon, Ian Lupasko, Larry Mathews, Leslie Travis, Harold Benroth, Greg Sander, Theodore VanLoosen, Kelly Vaudry, Eugene Osze, Gerald Crotenko, Andrew Shyngera, Regina Gyore, Barry Kew, Rodger Holtskog, Hughey Foster, Marvin Hewitt, Michael O'Hara, Morely Penney, Rodney Teale, Dale Frinsko, Donald Smith, Robert MacDonell, Donald Bowker.

The Assembly observed a moment of silence.

Hon. Mr. Trew: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Weekes: — Mr. Speaker, I'd like leave to reply to the minister's statement.

Leave granted.

Mr. Weekes: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I'd just like to speak shortly again on, on the National Day of Mourning that is set aside to remember those workers killed or injured on the job. And as was mentioned, tomorrow, April 28 is the day set aside to remember those who are no longer with us.

As was mentioned before by the members, a safe work environment is not just the responsibility of employers and employees, but everyone in society. And again, our sincerest condolences to those who have lost loved ones in the past year and best wishes to those workers who are recovering.

Thank you.

ORDERS OF THE DAY

WRITTEN QUESTIONS

Mr. Yates: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I rise today to table responses to questions 100 through 111, Mr. Speaker. The members opposite are reaching for a new milestone of questions in a single year.

The Speaker: — The responses to questions 100 to 111 are tabled.

(11:00)

COMMITTEE OF FINANCE

General Revenue Fund Highways and Transportation Vote 16

Subvote (HI01)

The Chair: — Before we get underway, I would invite the Minister of Highways and Transportation, if she would please introduce her officials with us in the Assembly this morning.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. To my left is Ron Styles, the deputy minister for the department. Immediately behind Mr. Styles is Carl Neggers, who is the assistant deputy minister in charge of policy and planning division. Directly behind me . . . Can you hear me?

An Hon. Member: — No.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Okay, we'll start again.

Thank you. To my left is Ron Styles, the deputy minister for our department. Behind Mr. Styles is Carl Neggers, who is an assistant deputy minister in charge of policy and planning division in the department. Behind me is Don Wincherauk, the

assistant deputy minister in charge of corporate services; and to my right is Barry Martin, the assistant deputy minister of operations.

The Chair: — Madam Minister, your microphone, it has come to my attention, is not working, so I'm wondering if you could maybe change places with Mr. Styles or with Mr. Martin.

Mr. Elhard: — Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And thank you to the minister and her officials from the Department of Highways and Transportation for coming to the estimates session this morning. We're, I think we're loaded with questions actually. We came fairly well prepared and we have quite a range of topics we want to cover today and I think that we will find this session quite informative. So I appreciate this opportunity.

I want to begin by referring to the Throne Speech of the . . . earlier this session, handed down late March 2001. And as part of the Throne Speech there was a section, a paragraph, I guess, under rural Saskatchewan that caught my attention.

Because as we all know as important as the highway infrastructure is in this province, there is a continuing concern about the rail infrastructure in this province and maybe a growing concern. I know that I hear about it frequently from my own constituents and I'm sure other MLAs (Member of the Legislative Assembly) that are facing rail line abandonment and issues pertaining to rail transportation have had that matter raised many times with them as well.

If I may I'd like to just read this paragraph from the Throne Speech that says:

Saskatchewan's rural landscape is changing dramatically due to rail line abandonment and elevator closures. We are working with communities and grass root organizations throughout the province on options to retain branch lines, which if successful, will help preserve rural economies and help minimize road impacts.

For the record, I would ask the minister if she could detail for us what specific initiatives her department is undertaking right now in this particular area.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Mr. Chair, I can report to the member that our government supports short-line developments through our short-line advisory unit that provides the following services to community groups, local governments, and existing short lines. We administer The Railway Act, including safety inspections and dispute resolution. We provide technical advice on operations and maintenance. We assist in negotiations, develop short lines, with submissions to the CTA (Canadian Transportation Agency) to determine that salvage value and to lodge complaints. There has been financial assistance for the purchase of track, feasibility studies, and legal advice.

I can report to the member that there are currently seven short lines in our province that operate 1,255 kilometres of the provincial rail network, and that amounts to about 13 per cent. The short-line railway financial program was developed to provide interest-free loans to short lines for rail line purchases. And the program provides loans up to 16 per cent of the cost or the net salvage value of rail lines, and it has to be repaid within

a 15-year period.

And one of the existing short lines has been funded under the program, and another two groups that are developing short-line operations are expected to apply in the coming year.

Earlier this year, another 25 kilometres was added to the short-line network, and if you read rural newspapers — which I do everyday — groups are thanking the department for its assistance. The short-line advisory unit provided assistance to the Arborfield and Cudworth local governments and community groups like the Golden Prairie Short Line Rail Co-operative as they are working towards the development of short lines.

As well our unit has provided assistance to the Arborfield and Cudworth lines during the CTA process, and we've just had a decision on that. The short-line advisory unit is also providing the Cudworth group with assistance as they petition the federal government to vary the CTA decision on rehabilitated assets and appeal the CTA decision on the reclamation bylaw.

As well, our unit is also providing technical support to the following local governments and communities on the matters of other short lines: local governments on the Lewvan and Northgate subdivisions as they work with CN (Canadian National) to restore operations on their line; the RM (rural municipality) of Excel, in their case to uphold in the Amulet subdivision their reclamation bylaw; the village of Stenen as they petition the Governor General-in-Council to have the CTA level of service decision altered; and the Wood Mountain Road & Rail, which is the Wood Mountain subdivision. They also petitioned the Governor General-in-Council to overturn a CTA decision authorizing the discontinuance of the track. Our province has provided a letter of support.

As well our province has made it very clear to the CTA that we support competition on track in the province of Saskatchewan and that we support the least-cost option for farmers as they try and save their rail lines.

I can also report to the member that we had a very good meeting with Paul Tellier, who is presently the CEO (chief executive officer) of CN. And Mr. Tellier has announced a moratorium on further branch line abandonment in the province and he wants to work with the provincial government, as well as other stakeholders, to see how we might be able to have a more integrated approach to road and rail and grain handling in the province of Saskatchewan.

Mr. Elhard: — Mr. Chairman. Thank you, Madam Minister. I think that's a fairly extensive and detailed response.

It sounds to me, given the information you've provided, that the issue of short-line rails and abandonment issues are of even greater concern I think as time goes by. And I appreciate anything that the department can do to advance that cause.

You mentioned something that is going to take me off track just a little bit. But you did mention that in your CTA submission you have supported the concept of competition. Would you elaborate on the level of competition that your department is referring?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — What I can tell the member, and I'm not sure if the member has received a copy of our first submission to the CTA that talked about competitive rail issues, and we submitted it to the CTA on October 20.

As well, we made a further submission in April on the second phase of some of the difficulties around the weaknesses in the CTA that required balance . . . or adjustments to ensure that privately owned transportation loads and the demands of shippers and consumers were taken into consideration when the CTA review panel reports in June or July.

What I can tell the member is that we support competition on our branch lines, but we want to make sure that we have viable railroad operations and grain-handling operations.

One of the things that I learned in Winnipeg when I attended a, I guess it was a think tank that was put on around the whole issue of the CTA review panel and the many myriad of issues that they're dealing with, is the need to ensure that we do have a viable rail industry not only in this country but when it comes to short lines.

So we wanted to make sure that when we're talking about competitive access, that we're not putting our rail industries, whether they're provincial industries or national industries, into a position where there are competitive issues that force a myriad of rail interests to not be viable in the long term.

So we have to be very careful when we're dealing with competitive access in order to ensure the long-term viability of the rail industry not only in this province but in this country.

(11:15)

Mr. Elhard: — Thank you, Madam Minister. Mr. Chairman, through you and to the minister. The issue of viability is something I want to talk about later, but if you had to describe your department's leaning right now, would you say on the issue of running rights that you are leaning more toward open access, open running rights or commercially dictated joint running-right agreements?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — At present, under the submission that we gave under the phase I submission to the CTA, we indicated very clearly that we supported joint running rights, that we supported reverse onus, and that we supported final offer arbitration. And that is an interim measure but we think we need to be very, very careful because we do not want to put any . . . the viability of operations at risk.

And if you're talking about, you know, open competition where they just go out and compete with each other, we need to understand whether in the long term whether or not various companies, short lines or other companies, can survive. So we have to be very, very careful. But we do support competition on our branch lines. But we want to make sure in the long term that there is viability of the rail industry; not only in this province but in this country.

Mr. Elhard: — Mr. Chairman, Madam Minister, since you've raised the issue of viability a couple of times, maybe we better go to that particular part of our discussion today.

What are you suggesting, as a minister, as a department, in terms of determining viability? What kinds of criteria will be you seeking to assure yourselves of viability; and to what extent will applications be accepted or rejected when viability seems to be the deciding factor?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — First of all, for the information of the member, the province of Saskatchewan does not determine joint-running rights. That is determined by the federal government through the CTA.

What I can say, in our submission under phase 1, we talked about three principles that we thought were important. We thought competition was important, co-operation was important, and commitment was important.

What the member, I know, knows is that some of these branch lines are low-density branch lines. They have low volumes.

What we want to make sure is the long-term viability of the branch line. And, if you have competition to such an extent that no one can survive, then those branch lines won't survive into the long term. And so that's why we want to be very careful how we position the province on this matter, because our long term goal is to ensure that those branch lines are viable in the long term in order to get the traffic off of our roads, on to some of those branch lines.

And we know that in order for them to be viable in the long term, the short lines or who's ever going down those tracks has to be able to be in a position where they can either return money to their shareholders which could be farmers, or return money to their shareholders which could be a private interest of some kind.

So we just want to make sure that the people who are operating those branch lines are viable in the long term so those branch lines last into the long term and take the volumes off of our already stressed highway system.

Mr. Elhard: — Thank you, Madam Minister. Mr. Chairman, through you to the minister, I think I can understand the need for careful analysis of viability when it comes to low-volume lines and competition.

How stringent will the viability requirements be, however, for a new branch line operator to get approval? Are you going to demand certain financial standards before you would even grant a short-line operator, a new operator the opportunity to take over a branch line that is subject . . . or potentially subject to abandonment?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Okay, what I can tell the member is that if CN or CP (Canadian Pacific) wants to sell a branch line to a short line, and if that short line is only operating within the province of Saskatchewan, it comes under provincial jurisdiction. If that short line wants to operate into Manitoba or into Alberta, then it would be covered by federal legislation.

What I can tell you is that the Department of Highways and Transportation is involved, inside the province of Saskatchewan's borders, with the whole acquisition issue between the CN and the short line, if that short line is only

going to operate within Saskatchewan. The department . . . or the Highway Traffic Board, under our legislation, deals with accessibility and the marketing plan and the safety. The day-to-day operations of that short line within provincial borders is handled by the Department of Highways and Transportation.

Mr. Elhard: — Thank you. Mr. Chairman, to the minister. Do you have benchmarks though, for viability? I guess the reason I'm asking this question, frankly, is that I understand your department is in the process of rewriting the legislation that pertains to railways operating in the province of Saskatchewan.

And somebody, at some point, has made me aware of the fact that they have some concerns about the draft legislation. I understand that provisions for coming into existence as a new short-line operator are quite onerous. And I'm wondering if the viability element of those requirements is what they're finding most onerous about the proposed new legislation.

So I'd like to know from you, if you can give me some specifics, what kind of benchmarks are you requiring of new applicants in terms of financial resources, in terms of funding, and those types of viability-related questions?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — What I can report to the member is that we have not yet determined whether or not the railway Act is going to go ahead in this session of the legislature. But we are consulting with various stakeholder groups on a number of drafts. There have been several — I think two or three drafts — that have been sent out to stakeholder groups.

So I have not yet received a report from my department on those latest discussions. But I can tell the member is that when a proponent for a short line goes to the Highway Traffic Board, what they have to do is they have to submit a business plan which demonstrates viability, because we're talking about lower volume branch lines. So they have to demonstrate that they are viable in terms of the volume that would be needed in order for them to make a positive go of their endeavour.

But we don't have benchmarks in particular. But the Highway Traffic Board certainly looks at the viability of a proposal in terms of the business plan that is being put forward by the proponent.

Mr. Elhard: — Mr. Chairman, Madam Minister, would the issue of viability just surround the give-and-take of cash flows, or will the viability questions also require a pretty serious inquiry into the financial resources that the company is bringing to the application?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Right. What I can tell the member is that various proponents might bring various financial resources to their operation. We do know that whether you have a lot of financial resources or little financial resources, if you don't have the kinds of volumes that are required to make the short line viable in the long term, people — whether you're a private operator or whether you're a co-operative — you can't sustain long periods of losses.

So various proponents bring various resources, whether financial resources, human resources. But what we tend to look

at, or the Highway Traffic Board looks at, is what kind of volumes are required to make this operation viable — depending on the company or the co-op's resources — in the short term, medium term, or long term.

Mr. Elhard: — Mr. Chairman, and to the minister. I'll just ask this kind of in passing. But is viability the primary reason that you are looking at rewriting the legislation in this regard as it applies to short-line operations?

And secondarily, I might ask as well, the issue of standards and fairly stringent standards in obtaining the operating rights on a short-line rail seem fairly high according to my sources. But they're equally concerned with the requirements for going out of business if for some reason the line isn't viable.

So I guess what the saying or what the vernacular of that question might be is, it's going to be tough to get into the business, but if you can't make it, it's going to be even tougher to get out of the business.

Can you explain to me what your rules and regulations might be, what kind of things you're envisioning for the termination of a short line if viability ultimately is non-existent?

(11:30)

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — What I can put to the member is that The Railway Act, existing Railway Act to the province of Saskatchewan is, I believe, over 10 years old.

There has been a significant amount of development in the short line industry in the last few years because of the changes to the Crow benefit which allowed the class 1 carriers to consolidate their operations.

So we need to update the Act, not only in terms of making it more in line with some of the provisions in the federal legislation, but also in terms of occupational health and safety or citizen safety kinds of issues. Those are important.

And as you know, the federal legislation has provisions for salvage and we are taking a look at that. What happens if a short line operator goes out of business? What are the implications for those communities that, in a sense, give up salvage value in order to accommodate short lines in the province?

Mr. Elhard: — Mr. Chairman and again to the minister, I noticed in the Speech from the Throne that it says specifically that the government and the department is working with communities and grassroots organizations throughout the province.

While I don't object to that in any way, I also notice the glaring omission, frankly, of privately owned short-line operations.

Are you working with short lines that are privately owned and operated and, if so, are they going to be on a playing field that is entirely level, no matter whether it's a volunteer, a co-operative effort, or whether it's going to be a private ownership scenario, whether it's in province or from out-of-province? Can you assure us that the rules and

regulations will be equitable for all?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — What I can report to the member is that short lines are coming to the province or being started in the province because of the impacts that communities and grassroots people are feeling as a result of branch line abandonment, the need to try and minimize their transportation costs as much as possible.

And I was looking at some interesting data the other day in terms of what's happened to farmers in this province in terms of their costs. And transportation as a proportion of their cost of production has grown dramatically in the last several years. So farmers are looking at ways to minimize their transportation costs. And communities, obviously, are looking at ways to enhance their communities by keeping branch lines along their towns or villages.

We have a number of groups in the province that are working with private short lines, the developing co-ops . . . There's a whole myriad of possibilities and we don't treat any particular proponent differently than another proponent.

What we want to ensure, from a public policy perspective, is that we have an integrated road and rail transportation system in the province of Saskatchewan. And that we have a way to get our commodities — because we're such a large trading province and exporting province — a way to get our commodities to market in a way that minimizes costs for shippers, whether they are farmers or other shippers; minimizes cost for taxpayers who are having to pay for a publicly funded road infrastructure; and puts our province in a position where we can take advantage of some of the global markets that are available to us if we have the necessary physical infrastructure, whether it's road, rail, air, truck, water, with some of the economic development opportunities that communities and private interests are talking about in the province.

The Speaker: — Why is the member on his feet?

Mr. Kwiatkowski: — Leave to introduce guests, Mr. Chair.

Leave granted.

INTRODUCTION OF GUESTS

Mr. Kwiatkowski: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. It is my pleasure to introduce to you and through you to all members of the House, Claire Belanger-Parker. Claire is the owner-director of CNT Tours here in Regina. And one of the things that Claire's company does is they tour hospitality staff from various Regina businesses around the city in order that they will be able to better promote the city and its attractions.

Today she has with her three staff from the Days Inn: Joan Jakobson, front desk agent; Jewel Mayer, front desk agent; and Shawna Hubenig, front desk agent. She also has with her three staff from the Travelodge South, Mr. Chair. They are Jennifer Whelan, front desk manager; Tammy Martens, reservations manager; Melanie Thompson, reservations manager. And, Mr. Chair, these are three of the — I'm referring here to Jennifer, Tammy and Melanie — three of the most dedicated, courteous professionals I have ever had the pleasure of meeting.

And I have to say that because the Travelodge South is where I stay, and I would like my stay there to continue being an enjoyable one, I would ask everyone to join with me in welcoming these hospitality industry professionals here today.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

The Chair: — Why is the member on his feet?

Mr. Thomson: — To introduce guests.

Leave granted.

Mr. Thomson: — Well thank you, Mr. Speaker. I certainly want to join with my colleague on the opposite side in welcoming these dedicated hospitality professionals to our Assembly today.

There are two things I want to say in welcoming them here. First is that I think it goes to show the strength of small businesses that we have a business like this operating here. And second of all, I want to say to those people who work in the hotel sector, particularly that of Travelodge South in my riding, that you do indeed do a fantastic job down there. I can't say about the Days Inn. I haven't stayed there and it's not in my riding but I'm sure they do every bit as good as the Travelodge South.

I would ask all members to join with me in welcoming them.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

COMMITTEE OF FINANCE

General Revenue Fund Highways and Transportation Vote 16

(Subvote HI01)

Mr. Elhard: — Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Madam Minister, in view of the comments you made just prior to the introductions, in the interests of public policy and the needs to have an integrated transportation system, would the government at some point consider subsidizing — paying a subsidy of some sort — to maintain a short-line railway and its viability?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — . . . answer that question. I won't get advice from the officials. One of the things that has struck me since becoming minister is the impacts of the branch-line abandonment and the huge increase in the amount of truck traffic that we're now experiencing on Saskatchewan's primary roads, secondary roads, and municipal roads, and thin membrane surface roads.

My understanding is — and I think this is probably a low estimate — from the officials in our department that within three or four years we may see an increase of about \$86 million per annum which will be necessary to repair our roads. Obviously we need to consider that as a way to minimize budget increases in the Department of Highways and Transportation.

Mr. Elhard: — I know that there has been considerable interest in the issue of subsidies expressed by some RMs, in correspondence with me. And I understand that the impact on our roads would make consideration of subsidies a more appealing route.

But I am somewhat concerned, I guess too, about the way those subsidies might also distort the viability issue and the question of government involvement in what is basically a private sector initiative. So I don't want to take a stand on that. I'm just interested in knowing what the department's position on that particular issue is.

Now we've talked several times about the submission of the department to the CTA. And I requested copies of the submission this last week and unfortunately, in my absence, I wasn't able to get the whole thing read, but I do plan to go through it. I did pick out a few points in there.

But, if you would, Madam Minister, for the record today, could you kind of discuss the difference between the submission of last October and the one just put in in April?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — I just want to go back to your comment that you made prior to asking me the question about you might have a concern about the province providing a grant or whatever to support short lines.

What's interesting about this whole issue of transportation — and this is something I've tried to get up to speed on in the last couple of months — when you look at the air industry, there is airlines obviously, there are airport authorities now, and there is very little in the way of public subsidization. They've been basically turned over to communities or non-profit organizations to run the airport authorities.

When you look at shipping, the ports of Vancouver, Prince Rupert, and so on, these are now commercial operations, very little in the way of federal government subsidy.

When you look at the rail industry, the physical infrastructure of the rail industry is basically owned by private companies — not only the locomotives, but also the track.

When you look at the public highway system in the province of . . . or in this country, this is infrastructure that is paid for by the provinces and the territories, with a little help from the federal government but not a lot. And yet the mode that goes up and down those highways is the private trucking industry.

My point is that there are some people who would argue that the province is subsidizing one mode of transportation over other modes. In the case of any province in this country we have a publicly funded infrastructure in terms of our provincial highways or our municipal roads. In the case of the air industry, there is very little or they are moving to get out of it. They will become commercial airport authorities. In the case of shipping, commercial port authorities, and in the case of railroads, they are owned privately by the rail industry.

So there could be, and I'm not saying there should be because we've not made a public policy decision, but given the huge impacts that we've experienced in the province of

Saskatchewan — and our province has experienced this impact greater than any other province — of rail line abandonment, we've seen I think a 900 per cent increase in the amount of volume that's going down our provincial and municipal highway or road system.

There may be, from just the ability to pay for this physical infrastructure, there may be a public policy argument to look at trying to put some of that volume back on the branch lines with some funds from the province. That determination has not been made. I've not discussed it with my colleagues but it's just an observation I've thought about in the last couple of months when I tried to deal with this issue.

Now I'll get to the substance of your question. In the first submission that we made to the panel in October, the panel had particular terms of reference that they wanted us to address. In the second submission they had a different set of questions that they asked us. I can share that with you if you want, in the name of time. But there were a different set of issues that we addressed in the first submission from the issues that we addressed in the second submission.

(11:45)

Mr. Elhard: — Thank you, Madam Minister. Mr. Chairman, we're bouncing around here a little bit because every time you say something, I think of something else I want to ask.

The issue of subsidies, whatever we think of them, pro or con, in the public interest, is not necessarily what I want to discuss.

But I guess what concerns me is the kind of a slippery slope argument. If viability is an issue and we opt for subsidies because it's in the public interest to take the heavy loads off of the roads, if viability can't be maintained, will the government be put in a position to take over, to consider taking over that short-line railway? Will the government be put in a position where it would have to entertain running railways as a Crown corporation, for instance?

Those are the kinds of issues I think that the subsidy question kind of leads us into. And I think that there'd be some hesitancy on the part of myself and many of my constituents to see it develop into that kind of an issue. So I think there's some reason for caution on the issue of subsidies, even though it may seem to be in the immediate public interest.

Have you, as a department, changed your mind about some issues that you have dealt with in this latest submission to the CTA? I'm wondering if there is kind of a changing of heart on the issues that are before the department in terms of the presentation you have made to the CTA.

Not as opposed from the fall submission in October, but I understand that you've been working on the submission for the spring's hearings on an ongoing basis and that there has been some dialogue in your department, and some tension maybe or questions about how you need to go. And I'm just wondering if you can explain for us what that's all about.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — In answer to the member's question, what I can say is that — and maybe I don't understand the

question properly — in the first submission we dealt with the issue of competition. In the second submission we dealt with a number of other issues that had to do with air, road, and ports.

So we don't think our submission has changed at all since our October submission. We simply, in the second submission, reiterated our policy around competition and dealt with the specifics of the questions that were asked by the CTA on other modes of transportation.

Mr. Elhard: — Thank you, Madam Minister. Mr. Chairman, again to the minister, maybe I can clarify my question a little bit by being quite a bit more direct. What role do you see for the company Omni Trax in the department's view of how short-line rails and competition ought to be developed?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Okay. There are two issues here. The submission that we gave in October and then again in March — or I believe it was April — for phase 1 and phase 2 of the CTA review panel, there are two different processes. There is a CTA review panel where they are looking at the whole issue of changes to the Canada Transportation Act, and there are a number of citizens that have been appointed by the federal minister to address issues, particularly in the grain handling industry. So there's phase 1 and phase 2 submissions that have to do with the review panel.

Omni Trax has applied for joint running rights under the existing CTA legislation and regulations. That is different than the review panel. And that is being addressed by the CTA itself, not the review panel.

In terms of Omni Trax, what I can report to the member is that the Government of Saskatchewan has a position regarding competition in the rail industry. We haven't changed our position. But we have not ever taken the position that we support a particular organization or a company in their application. What we do is we support our public policy position.

So in terms of Omni Trax's application, the province of Saskatchewan has indicated to the CTA what our public policy position is with regard to competition and also with the issue of merit or is this in the public interest. And we have indicated what our public policy is with regard to public interest matters.

Mr. Elhard: — Madam Minister, through the Chair, can I assume then that you will not take a stand on any similar type of application by any similar type of rail operation?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — We've had the same position with Ferroequus, which is another private group that is applying for joint running rights in the northwest part of Saskatchewan going into Alberta to the port of . . . I think Port Rupert or Port George . . . no, Prince Rupert — sorry, Prince Rupert. So we took the same position.

We do not support any particular group. We have a public policy position and we laid that out before the CTA.

Mr. Elhard: — In your earlier comments, Madam Minister, you refer to the fact that we have seven short-line operations conducting business in the province at this point. What in your

view and what in the view of your department is the ultimate number of short lines we could see? And do you have a preference, do you have a number — a benchmark of some sort — that you're working toward in that regard?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — What I can report to the member is that we're . . . we do not know how many short-line operations there will be in the province of Saskatchewan.

What I can also report is that we would expect that over time we'll have a more integrated system because some of the branch lines, as I understand it, are more viable than other branch lines. So you may cross . . . companies may cross-subsidize those branch lines in order for them to have . . . you know, bring cars or other cars go down those tracks.

So we think . . . In the short term, we don't know how many we will have. In the long term, we think that there may be a more integrated approach to this issue in order to ensure we have a branch-line system feeding into the secondary or mainline system.

Mr. Elhard: — Mr. Chairman, Madam Minister. The short line that runs through the biggest part of my constituency is Great Western Rail. It's a BC (British Columbia)-based company that came here and made private arrangements to buy trackage from CPR that CPR ostensibly was planning to abandon.

They have overcome tremendous odds even in their short time of operation to become a very important element in the transportation provisions of the constituency of Cypress Hills and Wood River and maybe even into the Thunder Creek area.

One of the things, though, that has stared them right smack in the face and caused them some concern is the difficulty of negotiating suitable arrangements with CPR (Canadian Pacific Railway), who are supposed to be their benefactors in some way, but have become very difficult to deal with on some issues.

In situations like that, will your government or will your department go to bat for the short-line operators and throw the influence of the government behind the short lines, in trying to move the class 1 railways to a position that is going to enhance the viability opportunities of the short lines?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — What I can report to the member is that we have been active in supporting various groups in their endeavours to work out arrangements with not only the CPR, but the CNR (Canadian National Railway) as well.

So this is not something that's foreign to us. We have, you know, advocated certain policy positions in order to support local community groups or municipalities that are trying to get these short lines into their communities.

Mr. Elhard: — Mr. Chairman, again to the minister. Have you been able to win the battle with the class 1 railways, making it clear to them that it's in their public relations best interest to be as co-operative in sustaining these short lines as possible. I think that that's the role that the government could play, and I'm wondering how effective you've been able to be in achieving that.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Well, the big area is multi-car discounts, and we've not been able to convince CP or CN of the merits of that. So we've got some more work to do. But what I can report to the member is that I have had an opportunity to meet with both CN and CP, and we're trying to establish the ability to have a rapport with each other, and I think that's important in terms of moving issues along. We need to build some trust, and I'm attempting to do that as well, so that we have a clear understanding of each other's policy positions.

I have done more work with the CN than the CP, but I've asked them a number of questions. I've received some answers but I've gone back to them with some more questions. So it's a matter of trying to develop a trusting relationship, both ways, between our department and the class 1 carriers in order that we can move some of these issues along to benefit local farmers and other shippers.

Mr. Elhard: — I know that the response from farmers in my constituency and others that I have talked to on this issue has been, frankly, they felt the government didn't do enough to argue against the rail-line abandonment that's transpired over the last decade or so. And I think that now they see some opportunities for these branch lines to be saved, in some cases rehabilitated. They don't want to lose any opportunities that might exist. And they would, I think, be quite interested in seeing the government push that agenda as urgently and as significantly as possible.

There are going to be as we mentioned earlier in terms of subsidies, there are going to be some reservations about going down that route. But I think that they would prefer to see no opportunity lost by the government in trying to see the class 1 railways, CN and CP, to co-operate in whatever way possible on the short-line development that's happening right now.

I have a number of other questions on that issue, but I think we'll leave that and move to a different area of the estimates today, if we may.

I have taken the Highways and Transportation estimates, the summary from the budget, and would like to turn our attention to that particular area right now. And if it's suitable and amenable to your department officials and yourself, Madam Minister, I'd like to kind of go through this in just a chronological order as it's been developed in the budget.

(12:00)

I'd like to look at the area, first of all of the administration that is laid out here. I did some quick calculating last night and noticed that there is going to be an 8.5 per cent increase in salaries in the area of administration for the Department of Highways and Transportation. And I'd like to ask, Madam Minister, how much of this increase is related to wage adjustments for personnel already on the administrative staff?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — The administrative subvote has increased by \$211,000 which represents a 4.5 per cent increase. What I can tell you is that an additional assistant deputy minister position has been added to the department. As well, the rest of the costs reflect increases in salaries to administrative staff.

Mr. Elhard: — Mr. Chairman, to the minister: can you tell us about the additional deputy minister's position and who's filling the role and what his responsibilities will be — his or her responsibilities?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — The additional position is Don Wincherauk and he is in charge of corporate services. So he's involved in a lot of administrative issues but inside the Department of Highways and Transportation.

The Chair: — Why is the member on his feet?

Hon. Mr. Melnychuk: — Leave to introduce guests, Mr. Chair.

Leave granted.

INTRODUCTION OF GUESTS

Hon. Mr. Melnychuk: — Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I'm very pleased to introduce to you and through you, 10 very bright and promising grade 11 students from across Saskatchewan seated in the Speaker's gallery, Mr. Chairman.

The students will soon be headed to Victoria to represent Saskatchewan at the annual Interchange on Canadian Studies, or ICS, at Royal Roads University. This is the 30th ICS conference, bringing high school students from every province and territory together to hear about and discuss issues such as the economy, the environment, health, and human rights.

Saskatchewan last hosted the ICS in 1997. Each participating student is twinned with a student from the host community and our Saskatchewan students in turn will host their counterparts for one week this summer.

The theme for this year's interchange is Canada's youth . . . voice into action/La jeunesse canadienne . . . une voix active. And the conference will focus on today's youth and their current and future role in the shaping of public policy.

Mr. Speaker, this is a tremendous opportunity for these young people to learn about the formation of public policy, but as important, it is an important opportunity for them to meet other young people from every part of Canada.

Mr. Chairman, I'm sure all members of the House will want to join me in welcoming Tyler Dixon of Regina, Kate Gotell of Prince Albert, Jinell Jesse of Drinkwater, Anne-Marie Kidd of La Ronge, Lindsay Richels of Churchbridge, Kate Wilson of McCord, Kate Pashovitz of Sonningdale, Kyna Daley and Gregory Mullens of Saskatoon, and Nicole Stebbings of Lanigan.

I also want to acknowledge the provincial coordinator for ICS (Interchange of Canadian Studies), Kim Engel of Regina, and chaperone Doug Panko of Moose Jaw.

Mr. Chairman, I ask all members to join with me in wishing them well and welcoming them into the Assembly today as well. Thank you.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

The Chair: — Why is the member on her feet?

Ms. Draude: — With leave to introduce guests.

Leave granted.

Ms. Draude: — Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and to members. I'd like to join with the Minister of Education in welcoming the 10 students and their teachers and chaperones into the Assembly. I know that you're going to represent our province well. I haven't met any of you individually but I'm sure you'll do a good job of telling everybody what a great place Saskatchewan is. Have a good time, learn lots, and I'm sure you'll learn lots here this afternoon.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

COMMITTEE OF FINANCE

General Revenue Fund Highways and Transportation Vote 16

(Subvote HI01)

Mr. Elhard: — Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I hope they learn as much as I'm learning this afternoon.

Madam Minister, the modern age of telecommunications has made us dependent on replays, and I could have used a replay in some of the answer you gave just a little while ago because I missed some of it.

I asked if there were administrative positions over and above the salary increases that are reflected in the increase indicated in this year's estimates. You did tell me about one new deputy minister but you didn't, to my knowledge, indicate if there were any other positions created that are reflected in that amount of money.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — There are no other positions that are reflected in this.

Mr. Elhard: — Mr. Chairman, out of the 89.8 full-time equivalents that have been indicated are coming to your department as part of the increased hiring opportunities available through the provincial budget this spring, can you tell me how many of those 89.8 people will be in the area of preservation and how many will be in the area of operation and how many in the area of construction, since none seem to be in the area of administration?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — I'm going to explain this to you the way we do it, if that's okay, and if you have a problem with that, we can try and rejig it to meet your requirements.

But what I can tell you is that there's 74.5 full-time equivalents for front-line crews; 48.2 full-time equivalents for maintenance section and bridge sulphur crews. Out of those, 15 to 20 new permanent seasonal positions will be created. And the remaining full-time equivalents will be used to increase the utilization of existing staff so longer work time for maintenance work, and then increased summer hiring.

Okay. There are 28.2 full-time equivalents for engineering crews; 8 of those will be used to fund new positions and 20 will be used to create 70 additional summer student positions.

As well, there is 3.5 full-time equivalents for sign crews and this one new crew encompassing 2 new positions will be added and the remaining full-time equivalents will be used for increased utilization of existing staff.

You have to account for all . . . This sounds confusing, so I know you're hearing it for the first time, because I was confused when I first heard it. But you have to account for extending people's hours of work or time of work in terms of full-time equivalents. And that's what the department has done.

As well, we're adding five new traffic officers for front-line enforcement on truck weights and vehicle safety. So this is an operational increase.

Mr. Elhard: — Well I'm not entirely confused, Mr. Chairman, but there is some question. The budget indicates an increase of 89.8 full-time equivalents and you're telling me that there is 72. And so the difference between 72 and 89 — which is what, 17 — is attributable to increased working hours for various individuals?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — One other thing that I neglected to tell you, sorry about that, there are full-time equivalents in the Revolving Fund as they've been increased to 18. But these aren't . . . what it does is, is they're not actually new full-time equivalents. What it does is it reflects that actual utilization of the fund and how we utilize people.

Mr. Elhard: — Out of the full-time equivalents that were discussed, you talked about 20 summer students. I'm assuming they are engineering grads — or engineering students rather, I'm sorry, not grads — but engineering students. Is that one of the prerequisites for the summer employment program?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — My understanding is most of these students are technologists or people who are studying technology in SIAST (Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology) but there could be other university students or SIAST students as well that have . . . that are working in a particular field to give them some work experience.

Mr. Elhard: — As part of your earlier answer, Madam Minister, you did talk about 28.2 full-time engineers. Are these people that will be on staff with the department here in Regina, are these design engineers, are they construction engineers? Can you tell me a little bit about that group of people please?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — There are eight full-time equivalents which will fund new . . . this will be new positions. And the rest, the other 20 are being used to create 70 additional summer student positions.

Mr. Elhard: — Summer student positions as labourers or as engineers?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — The students are in engineering programs and they work as surveyors or soil testers or these

kinds of things. So they're trying to get some work experience to enhance their credentials when they graduate from school.

Mr. Elhard: — Thank you, Madam Minister. Mr. Deputy Chair, welcome to the chair. I hope we enlighten you today as well.

The summer students then will not be filling potholes. It will be a work experience type of thing. They won't be actually part of a work crew out of any given depot or any given regional office, they will be doing something more significant maybe as opposed to filling potholes.

Do you have summer student positions for just ordinary labourers? Do you have a position of that sort available for a high school student who's looking for work for the summer?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — As I said to the member, these are new positions, but we have existing summer positions for students. We're not exactly sure how many, but we believe 40 to 50. And they're involved with maintenance crews.

Mr. Elhard: — Mr. Deputy Chairman, to the minister. Are any of these summer employment opportunities for students able to be financed through the summer student employment program that the government has talked about? Will that be used to offset some of the costs or will this come . . . the costs for this hiring program come entirely out of the department's budget?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Our 70, as I understand it, are funded independently from that program.

Mr. Elhard: — Madam Minister, as was indicated many times during debate on the budget, and even during question period, the government made a fair amount of . . . took a fair amount of pain to say that of the 570 or 80 new people that were going to be hired, many of them would be going to rural communities.

And in view of the fact that you have an apportionment somewhere in the range of 70, can you tell me how many of those people are going to go to rural communities? And if so, can you tell me where they're going? Because that is an important question for employment opportunities to the people of the rural areas.

(12:15)

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — We're still in the process of hiring. So I'm going to give you a sense of where we think people are going: 2.3 to Prince Albert, 1.5 to Meath Park, 1.5 to Meadow Lake, 1.5 to Puskwakaw, 1.5 to Meadow Lake, 1.5 to Green Lake, 1.5 to Goodsoil, 1.5 to St. Walburg, 1.5 to Buffalo Narrows, 1.5 to Southend, 1.5 to Watrous, 1.5 to Kelvington, 1.5 to Outlook, 1.5 to Eston.

It's all 1.5: Kyle, Kindersley, Moosomin, Grenfell, Estevan, Bengough, Lumsden, Qu'Appelle, Southey, Central Butte, Wood Mountain, Gull Lake, Cadillac, Consul, Shaunavon.

Is that good enough for the member? It's all over rural Saskatchewan.

Mr. Elhard: — The member from Melfort is disappointed, I'm

sure, that he's not going to get another highway worker.

Madam Minister, when you're hiring people for these types of positions, whether they're permanent or not, are there applications that require specific educational criteria or work experience criteria, or are these individuals hired on a first-come, first-served basis?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Okay. There are two kinds of positions in Highways. There's the labour service positions and those people are hired locally by the area managers. And then there's Public Service Commission positions and they're hired through the Public Service Commission.

There are various requirements for various jobs; and it may be a grade 12, it may be a two-year engineering diploma, it may be an engineering degree. It may be a heavy-duty mechanic credential, just depends. Some don't require any particular education and training, others do.

Mr. Elhard: — Mr. Deputy Chairman, and to the minister: would you say that the majority of those positions then, basically, will be a PSAC (Public Service Alliance of Canada) types of positions with those qualifications or will they be kind of ad hoc types of hirings?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — As I understand it from the ADM (assistant deputy minister) of operations, most of them will be labour service.

Mr. Elhard: — Madam Minister, let's move to the accommodation and central services section of the budget if we may, (HI02).

I notice that having done the simple arithmetic there's a 3 per cent increase indicated there for supplies. Is that 3 per cent representative of the cost of inflation only or have you built some other costs into that increase?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — For supplies, it's inflation only.

Mr. Elhard: — Madam Minister, the other item noted in the accommodation and central services section is capital. And I see that you have budgeted \$1 million of increased spending under the capital section. Can you indicate for us what the capital projects are that are included in this \$1 million.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — The Morse equipment storage building, the Lloydminster equipment storage building, the Milestone equipment storage building, the Moosomin equipment storage building, and the Regina area weigh scales.

Mr. Elhard: — Are these buildings leased or are they being purchased?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — The buildings are owned by the Saskatchewan Property Management Corporation.

Mr. Elhard: — Madam Minister, having mentioned the Saskatchewan Property Management Corporation, I understand that they are also responsible for equipment, actual equipment that is used by the department, whether it's bought or leased. I'm talking specifically about road graders and heavy trucks

that are used for material transport and snow removal and those kinds of things.

Where in your budget do you account for the payments to Sask. Property Management for that equipment?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — We only tender through Saskatchewan Property Management Corporation. So we don't give them a payment. The equipment is owned by the Department of Highways and Transportation. We tender requests for equipment or leases but we don't give them money. The money comes out of our departmental budget.

Mr. Elhard: — In that case, Madam Minister, could you tell me where it comes . . . or where it's indicated in your budget for equipment?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — It is noted in the Revolving Fund and for this year we are estimating \$2.2 million. And for the information of the member, the Revolving Fund has separate statements and it is tabled with the legislature.

Mr. Elhard: — Madam Minister, can you detail for us today the types of equipment the department is in the process of procuring and whether or not the fleet is being expanded?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — We don't have that information here at this moment. But it's not being expanded; equipment is being replaced. And we will get that for you.

Mr. Elhard: — Mr. Deputy Chairman, I'd like to move our questioning on to the third portion of the Highways and Transportation budget — moving to the preservation of the transportation system, (HI04).

According to the quick arithmetic that I did again, the surface preservation section sees a 14 per cent increase in spending this year; that amounts to just short of \$14 million. How much of that will go to the 800 kilometres of TMS (thin membrane surface) repair that has been promised in this year's budget?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — The 800 kilometres that you're referring to is not in this particular subvote. This is the 800 kilometres that we're going to upgrade over the next three years.

But I can tell you what's in this subvote if you'd like me to . . . (inaudible interjection) . . . Okay.

The preservation subvote, this is an increase almost entirely related to delivery of on-road programs. We plan to invest about \$13.9 million in this surface preservation program to improve the condition of paved and TMS highways.

There's \$2 million increase to the strategic rural roads partnership program, and that's where we're looking at alternative truck routes, if communities are worried about their thin membrane surfaces and the viability of those thin membrane surfaces in the long term.

So I think there's some money, I think, for the area transportation planning councils, those kinds of things. And I think that's what I can tell you.

Mr. Elhard: — Can you give us an accurate estimate as to what the department believes the cost will be to repair one kilometre of TMS road?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Depends on the condition of the TMS kilometre. It can be as small as \$1,200 a kilometre to as high as 5 or \$6,000 a kilometre to maintain it.

If you're asking me about construction, there's a different answer to that question.

Mr. Elhard: — Madam Minister, may I have that answer?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Well depends on what we're talking about. If we're talking about rebuilding the road to a structural pavement, depending on soil conditions, water tables, you name it, availability of granular materials, and so on, it could vary from \$90,000 a kilometre to 150, \$160,000 a kilometre.

I know that's one of the things that's confusing for the public, because I've met with many citizens in the province who don't understand why we can't do a particular piece of road for this amount of money.

But it depends upon, I'll just use the word from layperson's point of view, the science of what's happening in that particular kilometre of road that determines what it may or may not cost.

Mr. Elhard: — Madam Minister, you said that the 800 kilometres of repair that were discussed in the Throne Speech or maybe the budget per se are not included in these figures at all. Can you tell me when you're going to account for those repairs and when they will appear in the financial statements?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — The amount of money that we're talking about to upgrade 800 kilometres of TMS over the next 3 years is in subvoter under construction and transportation system, (H103).

Mr. Elhard: — Thank you, Madam Minister. Mr. Deputy Chairman, again to the minister. Continuing with the questions on the preservation of the transportation system, it specifies a certain amount of money for regional services. Can you describe for me and tell us what regional services are?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Regional services are the regional offices that are responsible for the area transportation planning committees. The regions are now going to be responsible for the liaison and contact with the area transportation planning committees because they're more in touch with what's happening in transportation in rural Saskatchewan. So we've decentralized this out to rural communities. So that's what I can tell you about the regional services sub . . . or program.

The regional services provide planning, engineering, and management of preservation programs within the regions. As well, they look after the area transportation planning committees in the area. So they have two purposes: they deal with transportation policy, in a sense, in terms of those area transportation planning committees; and they deal with the planning, management, and engineering of preservation in those areas of the province.

Mr. Elhard: — Madam Minister, the transportation planning committees have been in place for a number of years now. I think you would agree that they've had greater or lesser success depending on the seriousness with which the issues are treated by the local people and the intensity of the problems maybe.

But the cost of those transportation planning committees is not detailed here. Can you tell me what that cost is and whether the department feels that they're getting good value for the money they spend on those, on those committees?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — \$250,000 is what we budgeted for the area transportation planning committees.

I agree with you that there have been some ATPCs (area transportation planning committee) that have been highly successful; others need some more capacity building. And I think with the decentralization of this out to the regions with the area managers, I think we might have a better chance of getting some of the area transportation planning committees more involved because they're very familiar with those area managers.

(12:30)

Mr. Elhard: — Madam Minister, will the department put some onus on these committees to perform to a greater standard? Are you going to use a carrot to entice them to take these issues more seriously? And if they do, if they do take their responsibilities seriously, will the department act quite specifically on the recommendations that they make?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Well I think . . . I don't believe in the, you know, taking a hammer to people who are just coming to a process or have just become involved in a process. There are various capacities of communities to respond to particular issues and we know that there are some areas of the province where we need to do a lot more work in terms of developing the capacity of the area transportation planning committee. But we think with the area managers and the people in the regions working with the committees, we may have a better chance of more community involvement in transportation planning.

The second issue that you raise is about whether or not we'll listen to what the area planning committees have to say. I think that they have offered very sage words and good advice in the past, and we will do our level best to respond.

Part of the problem that we will have in terms of responding is how do we balance what various regions of the province are saying about transportation with a budget that is fixed. So, you know, we'll try and respond as best we can but if we don't have all of the money that's required to respond then that makes it very difficult. It's not that we're not listening, but we have only so much capacity ourselves.

Mr. Elhard: — Madam Minister, through the Chair, I notice that the budget for the regional services is increased by about a quarter million dollars. What is that money going to?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — That's the ATPC. We transferred it out of head office to the regions, so you have to account for it.

Mr. Elhard: — Mr. Chairman, I see the clock has proceeded well past the noon hour and I have more questions to go, but I think we'll forego the questioning at this time and I'd like to thank the minister for the answers. I think that she was fairly candid today. We haven't got to the tough questions yet though and we'll anticipate doing that at a later date.

And thank you to the department officials as well for coming.

The committee reported progress.

The Speaker: — This House stands adjourned until Monday, 1:30 p.m. A good weekend to all.

The Assembly adjourned at 12:36.