

EVENING SITTING

COMMITTEE OF FINANCE

General Revenue Fund
Post-Secondary Education and Skills Training
Vote 37

Subvote (PE01)

The Chair: — Order, order.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Report progress on Post-Secondary Education and Skills Training.

General Revenue Fund
Highways and Transportation
Vote 16

Subvote (HI01)

The Chair: — I recognize the minister to introduce her officials.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — To my right is Ron Styles, deputy minister. On my right is Barry Martin, the assistant deputy minister. Behind me is Don Wincherauk, the assistant deputy minister in charge of corporate services. And beside Mr. Wincherauk is Carl Neggers, the assistant deputy minister in charge of policy and planning.

Mr. Heppner: — Thank you, Mr. Chair, And welcome to the minister and her officials.

I guess you probably know from which member stands up what questions on highways are going to come first. It's interesting — my colleague said something about, I don't have any bad highways. Well I happen to have two pieces of asphalt sitting by my front door, about that size, that have hit two cars in the last two months. And I see the member from Moose Jaw says put them back. If I could find the highway, I would.

But rather than go through a whole long tirade about that situation, because you've probably heard about it or read it in the papers, my question is, what exactly is the time line on Highway 312 repairs? Because my people are driving me nuts on weekends, saying where is the equipment, when are they going to start, and when are they going to finish.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — What I can tell you is that we have scheduled from Rosthern to Laird, kilometre .66 to 6 and 11.4 to 17.9, for a total of 11.8 kilometres, at a cost of \$1.6 million. This is a contractor that has two other projects, and it's scheduled for later in the summer or early fall.

Mr. Heppner: — Okay, thank you. I'll pass that on, every weekend. The other question I usually have deals with Highway 11. I'm wondering where Highway 11 presently stands when you do the traffic counts. Generally this is one of the top three, four busiest highways in the province. I'm wondering if it's changed and what its position is at present.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — What I can tell the member, and it just depends on which stretch, but it is the busiest two-lane highway in the province, particularly in the summertime. And I'm emphasizing two lanes because there are four-lane highways that are busier.

Mr. Heppner: — Thank you. The minister, last time I think we had Highways in estimates, made a statement something to the effect that it was her opinion that the department was downright frugal. And so I want to just pursue that a little bit with a specific example. So I have a couple of very specific questions that I'm going to be asking.

One is I'd like to know how you analyze the cost of a piece of equipment, particularly let's say tandem trucks, gravel trucks, payloaders. Are those costed at an hourly cost or on a kilometre that you put onto the piece of equipment or how do you cost those out?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — I need further clarification. Are you talking about the equipment that's owned by the Department of Highways or are you talking about the private sector . . . (inaudible interjection) . . . okay, you're talking about the equipment that we own. I'll be right back to you with the answer.

For the large equipment it's an hourly rate and it includes repairs, overhead, depreciation, and all of those kinds of factors.

Mr. Heppner: — Would I be able to have that for, let's say, a tandem gravel truck and a large payload?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — We can get that information for you.

Mr. Heppner: — Thank you. I'd also like to know what the hourly wage is for a payload operator and tandem gravel truck operator, if I could.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — We don't have it here; we'll get it.

Mr. Heppner: — Okay. And I'm going to hope that the minister will get that to me.

So now I'll explain why I'm asking this particular question. Just before the access to the towns — and this is particular on Highway 11 because I travel that one a fair bit — from about Chamberlain through to Rosthern there are the signs that you have about a mile outside of each community that says the name of the community — might be Osler 1. Those are signs that are probably about six feet long and about a foot and a half, two feet wide.

And I'd like to explain to the minister the process that happened with Department of Highways putting up those signs and then to sort of question the fact when she says they're actually frugal. This is a process that happened this winter. Tandem truck, two people in there, hitched to the back is a trailer with a payload. They move to one of those signs. The truck operator stays in the truck, the other individual gets out, removes the payload, and takes one strip of snow away from one side beside the sign. Now in most cases, the snow was only about 3 to 4 inches deep this winter, so it was in most cases an exercise

that wasn't even necessary. But it's a process that took place, I imagine that at some considerable expense because there's two operators and two fairly expensive pieces of equipment.

Then that piece of equipment moves down to the other side of town, does the same thing over there, and works its way all the way down Highway 11. Next follows another tandem truck — the one that has the Canada arm on there with a bit of a drill unit for drilling holes to put up signs — with two people on that one. They then back into that little slot that's been put in the snow and they put up the sign.

So by the time all is said and done, you've used two tandem trucks, a payloader, and four people to put up that sign. That's why I was asking the cost and so when I get these various figures I'll add that up, but I'm sure it's going to be significant.

Now had Department of Highways wanted to do that differently, I'm sure they could have waited till spring or summer. And right now any three-quarter-ton truck with a bit of a rack on the back, and two people could've done that very quickly. A matter of fact they could've probably been farmed out to some of my farm boys who would've been glad to change those signs for probably \$10 a piece, and they would've made themselves about 3, \$400 a day. They'd be glad to have done that.

So my question is this basically: if you're so frugal then why would you have gone through all this process to do it in winter using all that equipment when you could do it now in summer with two people and one three-quarter-ton truck instead of that whole entourage going down the highway?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Well what I can tell you is it's no doubt, as I understand it, trying to use our maintenance crew at various times of the year because we have people who are full-time employees — they're not seasonal workers — and it's a matter of having them doing certain tasks outside of maintenance on the highways in the summertime and then snow clearing in the wintertime. So it's a matter of utilization.

What I can tell you is that we have increased the amount of money in our budget to rehabilitate our signs in this fiscal year. We had a lot of complaints from motorists who . . . because of the condition of the signs they were difficult to read. The paint was starting to wear and it was very difficult to see what the signs were in fact saying.

This is going to allow us to replace a number of aging signs and also non-standard intersection signing patterns. We invested \$300,000 last year as the start of our \$1.5 million, five-year program to improve the conditions of our provincial highway signs across the province.

The department is not . . . The officials here tonight are not familiar with the exact situation that you talk about, but I presume it was in the Osler area, and I presume that this must have occurred this past winter and we'll get information and respond to your specific question.

Mr. Heppner: — Thank you. The situation occurred all the way, I believe, from Chamberlain through to probably Rosthern or Duck Lake. And I've noticed that on various ones of those on

both sides of Saskatoon — the same process, the same group of equipment. And Madam Minister used the word, sort of giving tasks to people. Sounds like that is a euphemism for a make-work project.

And as I said earlier on, when I see all that equipment and all those people going down there, someone is not utilizing people properly. We're just looking at what is happening in health now and where we have individuals overworked maintaining the health care, and here you have four people and four or five pieces of equipment to put up one sign that two people and a three-quarter-ton truck could have done. I think government needs to look at that, maybe even get out the old P-word and do some privatizing because they could do that a whole lot cheaper.

While we're dealing with use of equipment, this one may have the same answer, Madam Minister. Beginning of February this year I made a number of trips to Regina, and as you'll know if you check your weather forecasts, in the beginning of February the temperature basically was between 20 and 30 below. There is no frost on a Saskatchewan highway at that temperature. We hadn't had any snow and there was virtually no snow in Saskatchewan and we had absolutely no wind. So after days of that sort of weather — no frost, no snow, no wind — and when I come out of Saskatoon, which would usually be about . . . oh, around 6, 6:30 in the morning, here I have a nice big snowplough going down the road. And this happens time and again, and there is no snow. There's not a snowbank in sight.

So I'm wondering, is there a process out there that decides when these snowploughs go out, or is that part of, to use your words, giving a task to someone?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — I'm advised by our assistant deputy minister of operations that we have a procedure in place where we regularly inspect the roads to look for, maybe there's a snowdrift or an icy spot or some difficulty with the road. They use the snowplough trucks, the bigger trucks, because if they were using a half-ton, they'd have to come back . . . go back in and then come back out with the truck.

And it's just a matter of how we try and keep our roads in safe condition. And it's the procedure that they use in the department, and it's the procedure that we've used for many years.

Just to get back to your earlier comment about tasks. You will know that there are people that work in the Department of Highways on a full-time basis. A lot of the people who work in the department are seasonal employees. These tend to be older workers that have been with the department for a number of years, were full-time employees, and they are in charge of maintaining the roads in the summer and looking after the roads in the winter.

And as you know there will be downtimes, when you have full-time employees, where you won't necessarily have various roads to plough and things to do, and it's a matter of trying to utilize workers in an effective way to get things done that need to be done in the department.

Mr. Heppner: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I appreciate the

safety concerns. I don't think anyone wants to have a highway that has snowbanks that stay across it day after day.

However, sometimes when there is no wind, you're not going to have a snowdrift. I think we've lived in Saskatchewan, we know that, so I think we need to keep those sorts of things in mind.

Switching gears here a little bit on questions. There's an interesting one that has come to light in my constituency, and I guess the question I have is with relationship to election signs on highway property. I'm wondering if you can just give a bit of a brief answer to exactly what the location of election signs has to be relative to highways. And I'm going to add a little more to that — how would any person who wants to run get that information?

(19:15)

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — What I could tell the member is that whenever an election is called, whether it's a federal election or provincial election, a by-election or municipal election, information is sent to all of the political parties advising them of the information with regard to election signs.

Mr. Heppner: — Thank you. I believe it is, but the information isn't anywhere near valid or satisfactory.

In the last election I had someone from Department of Highways phone up, as they do every single time there's an election, and complain that my sign's in the wrong place. So this last time I said, could you please tell me how far from the centre of the road I can have my signs for the highways in my constituency. And the answer I got back was, that would be way too much work to give that to you. We won't send that out. So here I have different highways that obviously have a different amount of space from the centre of the highway to where my signs are allowed.

Then I was also told, when I didn't remove my signs as requested, that if I didn't remove them they would remove them. So that's just a point of information. I'm not looking for a response on that.

The interesting thing was when we had the federal election, the last federal election, there was one particular candidate who happened to be a Liberal who had his signs strewn up and down Highway 11 and Highway 12 between where you have the information sign that might say so many miles to another town. Those are about 10, 12, 15 feet off the highway. Between there and the asphalt which is about 10, 12 feet, that's where that person's signs were, and they stayed up the whole time. Not just one but dozens of signs, and that was from the Liberal candidate in the Saskatoon Wanuskewin.

So I'm wondering why some people's signs can stay there when other people's signs are threatened to be moved out of the way. That's sort of a political question, and as a member mentioned, it doesn't seem to make any difference if they're on the right or the left side of the highway.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Well maybe the Saskatchewan Party's more co-operative than the Liberal Party, I don't know. Or

maybe the area manager's a Liberal, I don't know.

We do try and have consistent application of the policy and if you were suggesting that we need to sort of become a little more detailed in terms of the number of feet from the centre of the highway to, you know, the edge of the ditch, maybe we could take that . . . we could take a look at that.

Because I do think we need to have a consistent application of public policy regardless of who the candidate is.

Mr. Heppner: — Thank you. I would think consistent enforcement will probably be the key thing. I can live with most anything as long as everyone else has to live with the same sorts of things.

I have a question that relates to snowmobiles and you're probably going to move this one over to Justice, but it seems to fall in between. I will be asking the question and we'll see what happens with the answer.

What happens with the snowmobile trails that are groomed in highway ditches? There's a fee for those. Now for example between Rosthern and Waldheim — that's about a 15-mile stretch — there are some 50 farms that are within a mile to less of the highway so they use the highway ditch just to go from neighbour to neighbour or go to the towns and this sort of thing. But with the grooming that takes place they're supposed to buy a \$40 permit to use that grooming area. So I'm wondering how does Highways fit into this decision making and is this actually a toll ditch that we have now instead of a toll highway or a toll road?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — My officials know nothing about this so maybe you can provide me with greater detail and the permit may be coming from some other department.

Mr. Heppner: — Okay, I did ask the question of Department of Highways, they've shuffled it on to Justice. The Justice minister's listening carefully so when he's up later on he now knows that it's in his territory . . . and he's giving me the similar response.

One other quick question. The bridge that fell through — you've probably had lots of questions on that already. Was that truck overloaded by the standards that were there or had the bridge been inspected previously? When was the last inspection and what was the result of that inspection?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — The last inspection was in the fall, November of 2000. At that time there was a recommendation that the pile caps and piles 5 to 11, I believe, or 5 to 9, needed to be replaced. In March there were replacements made of the pile caps, and I think it was June 10 the piles were scheduled for replacement.

The morning of the collapse of the bridge, the maintenance crew noticed that there was a bend in the bridge. They closed the bridge to one lane of traffic and the engineers were en route to the bridge when the bridge collapsed.

The bridge has undergone . . . we've had a number of engineers there to determine precisely what has happened. And I

understand that the bridge is going to be repaired this week and the bridge will be repaired for about \$100,000 because the concrete beams weren't damaged and they could be reused. So the bridge should be operational by mid-June.

Mr. Hermanson: — Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and good evening to the minister and her officials. I will not be as colourful in my questioning as my colleague from Rosthern, but I have a few questions that pertain to the Rosetown-Biggar constituency and then a few general questions about budgeting for the department.

The first couple of questions are more on the specific nature. I've had some calls from constituents about Highway No. 373. It's a very short stretch of highway that commences just north of Riverhurst ferry and goes up to Birsay. That highway was ruined by the Department of Highways when they reconstructed Highway 42, I believe the number is, from Lucky Lake to Birsay to facilitate the transportation of potatoes out of the Lucky Lake facility.

Needless to say because the highway was ruined, it has been reverted back to gravel. And the concerns of my constituents that live in that area is the . . . there is a high volume of traffic for a grid road and the dust problems are rather severe.

Also there is concern because this is an area that is trying to develop and expand its tourism potential with Palliser Park being located near Riverhurst ferry, and the access from the north is made more difficult because a lot of the recreational users of that area are not very keen on using a gravel highway to gain access to the Riverhurst ferry and the park.

So I am wondering what plans the department has to improve the quality of that highway so that tourism potential will be realized so the traffic volumes will again increase on that stretch of highway.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — What I can tell the member is we have no immediate plans to pave that particular stretch of road. There are other highways in your constituency that have undergone a number of activities in the last two . . . well actually last four years. I note that there have been several hundred kilometres of road that have been addressed in your constituency.

This year there will be some sections from Kyle to Sanctuary, 11 kilometres, for a cost of \$672,000 where there will be some spot overlays. As well, between Tessier and Harris, there's some resurfacing work that's being undertaken at a cost of \$790,000. Between Biggar and Perdue, there's some carry-over, and there's some problems with that road that the contractor has to go back in and redo.

As well there's some 4 kilometres at Biggar that's going to be resurfaced, so there's about \$1.6 million that's going to be spent in your constituency. Last year we spent over \$5 million for 94 kilometres, but that particular stretch that you're talking about is not on our immediate . . . we don't have it in our immediate plans in the next three years. And we are now doing multi-year budgeting, and that road is not in our . . . not sort of on our agenda at this stage.

Mr. Hermanson: — I wonder if the minister was aware, and if

so, could she respond to the fact that the highway was ruined because of the construction of another highway. That was a dust-free surface in reasonably good shape and was totally annihilated with the refurbishment of Highway 42. Does the minister and does her department feel any responsibility to bring that highway back up to standard rather than leave it in the condition it is now?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — As you know, there's a very heavy potato haul in that particular area, and it would be impossible to restore it to a TMS, a thin membrane surface road, with that kind of haul that's going over the road. If we could work with municipalities for some form of alternate route, then we might be in a position to repair the road to its former position, but it's a matter of working with the municipalities in order that we can divert some truck traffic off of that road because it is a TMS road.

Mr. Hermanson: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. Also my constituents are wondering in your — is it three-year planning? — are you planning on reverting any other dust-free surfaces to gravel in the Rosetown-Biggar constituency?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — That certainly is not our plan.

Mr. Hermanson: — Another question I have . . . thank you, Mr. Chair. Another question, questions that I get is in regard to the quality of Highway 44 which runs from just north of Elrose, east through Dinsmore and through Macrorie. It's a notoriously bad highway. In fact there have been some accidents in that area. I just wondered if there are any plans on the drawing board to improve the quality of Highway 44.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — As the member may know, what we're trying to do is invest in strategic corridors across the province. We only have so much money. And it's not, once again, it's not in our plans for the next three years.

What . . . if we could get some alternative truck routes, we might be able to keep the road as a thin membrane surface with good repair. But when we've had some experience with alternate truck routes in certain parts of the province where people, the truckers and people got extremely upset at . . . And I don't know how you balance this between, you know, truckers who want to go over these roads but the roads were never built to handle that kind of truck haul, and yet the public wants to have dust-free surfaces.

That's why the legislation was introduced today, amendments to The Highways and Transportation Act, 1997 in order that we can do some creative work with municipalities to try and keep as much truck traffic off our TMS roads in order that we can maintain those roads for our rural citizens in a dust-free condition.

Mr. Hermanson: — Thank you, Mr. Chairman. A few more general questions now just for my knowledge and understanding, some classification of the categories under the Highways construction and maintenance budget.

Out of the global budget, how many dollars would be classified as being spent on highway construction and maintenance?

(19:30)

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — It's about \$268 million is being used on capital construction and preservation and maintenance.

Mr. Hermanson: — Thank you. Then could the minister break down that amount as to how much is construction and is there categories within construction. Like would new construction or would twinning be separate from renewing an existing roadbed? Just give me some idea of the categories of construction. How much is there and how much is considered maintenance?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — \$140.4 million is for major construction and \$127.8 million is for preservation and maintenance.

Mr. Hermanson: — Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Are there any other categories besides construction and maintenance that relate to highways?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Then there's the operations part of the department which would be winter maintenance, ferries, just the operations side of the department. All of the \$311 million goes into . . . most of it goes into our highways. There is some of that money that goes into ferries and our airports, but most of it's into the roads.

Mr. Hermanson: — Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I have a news release dated May 29, 2001 and its title is "Additional spring road improvements," and it identifies 20 new highway improvement projects valued at over \$45 million in the spring tender schedule. And then there is an appendix to the news release, and in it, it indicates, first of all, a summary of 2001-2002 road activity, and by general category, and following a more detailed description of a number of projects, certainly more than 20 projects are contained on about 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 . . . about 5 or 6 pages here at the end of the news release.

So am I to understand then that the activities mentioned in the 2001-2002 construction projects include all projects for the year 2001-2002?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — There's \$140.4 million in capital construction. Out of that, \$15 million is coming from the federal government under the prairie grain roads program. And this question was asked by a previous colleague of yours. So \$15 million is federal money.

We couldn't announce the project until the federal government passed the necessary order in council because . . . announcing that we'd entered into this agreement. Therefore we had to make the announcement at the end of March.

As you will recall, there were a number of announcements that were made in the wintertime, because with the excess oil and gas revenues that we had last November, the Minister of Finance was able to give our department \$150 million over the next three years to improve our provincial highways. That's why we have the multi-year budget and that's why we have some money in the Fiscal Stabilization Fund. That's where our money is sitting to get us through the next three years.

So we were able to announce a number of initiatives in the

wintertime which was before we had the provincial budget at the end of March. And then we had to wait for the federal order in council to be passed before we could do the other tenders. And it was getting very late and we were quite concerned about this. And that's why, when we issued the press release, we were talking about the prairie grains program, but then we also indicated once again all of those things that had been announced in the winter and shortly after the provincial budget.

Mr. Hermanson: — I just wondered then — so that I know exactly what's happening in the Rosetown-Biggar constituency — what projects that might be occurring now that aren't in the list, that's the addendum to the May 29 news release.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — The schedule that you have attached to that press release was the winter projects and the spring tender projects, so you will have all the projects for your constituency announced. They've all been announced; there's nothing new.

Mr. Hermanson: — Well that's what I was wondering. Then the problem is, I don't know what . . . where then does the construction on 342 Highway fall, which is from north of Kyle to Clearwater Lake? This is new construction; it's not on this list. I'm wondering what category in the budget it would fall under.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — It's a partnership project with the rural municipalities.

Mr. Hermanson: — So then my question is: what category does the funding for these partnership projects fall under? Does it fall under your . . . is it a part of your budget for construction, highway construction? Where does this fall and how many other projects like this are occurring in Saskatchewan?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — The strategic rural roads partnership program is a \$6.9 million program, and that's where it falls.

Mr. Hermanson: — Can the minister tell me . . . Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Can the minister tell me how many projects under this partnership project are partnerships with rural municipalities. And can the minister indicate whether this is a . . . I guess what the reason is for partnering with municipalities rather than partnering with, you know, using her own department to do the construction or using private sector construction companies to do the work.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — There are times when RMs (rural municipality) want things to get done, and they have some money and we have some money and we can get it done together. And a lot of RMs have equipment, as you know, because they build grid roads and it's a matter of utilizing their equipment that might not be utilized. So it's a way to try and minimize costs as much as possible.

And I'll just give you an example of some of the things that we've done. There at the last SARM (Saskatchewan Association of Rural Municipalities) meeting I met with a number of municipalities. They have specific issues about access roads to terminals or whatever, turning lanes. They're worried about safety, they're coming off of their RM roads, they want the department to act and we want to act.

So we have some money, and if we can partner we can get things done. And oftentimes what they might do — and we pay them for the use of their equipment — that they might move gravel or dirt with the equipment that they have. They might offer services in kind as part of their contribution. And that's how we are able to get more things done with the existing budget that we have. And that's why the fund — the \$6.9 million strategic partnership fund — is to deal with some smaller issues that are very important to the people in those RMs.

Mr. Hermanson: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. So on the project that I was questioning about, the Highway 342 project, what is the total cost of that project and how much of that cost is being borne by the minister's department and how much of the cost of that project is being borne by the municipality?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — What I can tell you, I made a mistake. It's not 6.9, it's 6 million in the strategic partnership. I was looking at the wrong number. So it's 6 million and what I can also tell you is that we're spending \$600,000 on that partnership that you referred to in your last question, and we're providing the money but they're doing the work.

Mr. Hermanson: — So thank you, Mr. Chairman. So then can the minister . . . does the minister have to have a costing of the amount of work done by the municipality before the project is approved? And in this case, what would that costing be?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — What I can tell the member, had the RM not partnered with us, it's probably something that we wouldn't have done. And there will be . . . there is a project estimate. We don't have it here, but we suspect it might have been twice as much, so 600,000, had you gone elsewhere, because they're providing the equipment and the human resources and we're providing the money.

Mr. Hermanson: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. So is the minister telling me then that the entire cost is actually borne by her department, but that cost then is less than if the work was contracted to someone other than the municipality?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — We pay for their direct costs and there is a view that, had someone else done it, it may have cost a lot more than their exact direct cost.

Mr. Hermanson: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. So then my question to the minister is, is this based on experience where tenders were put and consistently RMs were able to undercut the private road building sector, or is this more based on speculation?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — There is in-kind contribution from the RM. So they might go out and purchase the land; they might provide the gravel, the clay, the equipment, the human resources. So there are some things that the RM provides, that are in kind, to the total cost to the project. We provide the . . . we provide money for the direct costs of the project.

Mr. Hermanson: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. So then I guess my question is, in the case of this project, what are the costs in kind that are being borne by the municipality?

(19:45)

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — We don't have that here but we'll get that for you.

Mr. Hermanson: — Thank you. I think my final question — unless it's not answered satisfactorily, Mr. Chair — is how many projects of this kind have been completed prior to the 2001-2002 year? How many of these projects currently are occurring in the current fiscal year? And does the minister expect that this program will be expanded in the future?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — We don't have the previous year's information here, but we can get that detail for you.

Mr. Hermanson: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. Could you tell me how many projects are underway this year and whether your department expects to expand this partnering category in the future?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — We have three underway this year, and we could see the program expanding if municipalities want to participate.

Ms. Julé: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. Mr. Chair, Madam Minister, welcome. And welcome to your officials for this evening.

The Chair: — We'll just take a brief recess for one moment.

Ms. Julé: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. Mr. Chair, I'll just resume some of the questioning that the Leader of the Opposition put forward to you just a moment ago about the partnering projects that are now taking place. And you had mentioned that there were three of those projects taking place in Saskatchewan.

Madam Minister, I was quite surprised to see that there was some work being done on No. 20 Highway south of Humboldt, and I believe it's between No. 16 and Humboldt. So what I'm wondering if that's part . . . one of the partnering projects, because I too looked at your list of 2001-2002 construction projects when it came out and I didn't see any reference to No. 20 Highway. So I'm just wondering if this was something that was done, partnering with the RMs, whether in fact this was one of the projects that you were waiting on the federal government's money for, or what category this project is under.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — We're paving Highway No. 20 from 16 kilometres north of Junction No. 16 to 8 kilometres south of Humboldt, and we're doing 12.9 kilometres. And it's under the prairie grain roads program which would have been announced at the end of March, or end of May, pardon me.

Ms. Julé: — Thank you, Madam Minister. Madam Minister, I was simply curious about that because I do use that highway quite a bit and as well do many of the people from the Humboldt district in going south. So thank you for the answer.

Madam Minister, I've had a number of my constituents in the St. Louis area asking me about the proposed reconstruction of the St. Louis bridge. Now as you well know, Madam Minister, that's a very, very important bridge. That bridge is the connection between the north and the south of Saskatchewan

and crosses the Saskatchewan River. That bridge has long since been condemned and there are some concerns about the usage of that bridge as far as safety concerns go.

So, Madam Minister, I'm wondering what the status is of the construction of the new bridge, and why in fact this bridge and the construction of it has not been tended to much sooner than it is. In fact, there doesn't seem to be any proposal put forward by your government in your construction projects, and I'm wondering what is going on here and why that bridge is not being reconstructed. What is the problem?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — What I can tell you is that the bridge is tentatively scheduled to begin construction work in 2003, 2004. UMA Engineering has been commissioned to carry out a study to determine the recommended location for a new bridge and all of the related roadways. They've submitted their report. That report was distributed to local governments in late 1999. There's been additional geotechnical drilling that was carried out in the river during February of 2000 to verify that a bridge could be constructed along the recommended route, recommended by UMA Engineering.

The analysis of the data gathered during the drilling has confirmed the feasibility of the construction of a bridge at that particular site. We're currently developing recommendations on where the bridge should be located because there is some concern from the village or the town of St. Louis about the location of the bridge, and different contact has been made with local government. And we will need to do more work with local government before we finalize exactly where the bridge will be located.

As well, there's been further technical drilling done in the river during February of this past winter in order to establish additional design parameters for the bridge foundations and the approach. So there's some geotechnical work that's being done.

We're advised that the St. Louis bridge has a service life of about five to ten years longer, but we know we need to start construction of that bridge within the next couple of years.

Ms. Julé: — Thank you, Madam Minister. Madam Minister, that bridge was condemned so I'm just wondering . . . (inaudible interjection) . . . that's what I understand from the people in that area that it had been condemned, and really it does look like it should be condemned. To tell you the truth, there are great gaps in that bridge. When traffic drives over, you can see huge gaps rather between the support beams. And so I think there needs to be some attention paid to making sure there is a bridge there that's safe.

Madam Minister, you'd mentioned that there were some recommendations put forward from the geotechnical team in regards to the location of the bridge. So can you tell me what this team of people recommended as far as the location of the bridge and where the bridge could be adequately constructed in a safe fashion, where one could be sure that it's going to uphold or the surface underneath will uphold a bridge and so on. So can you tell me what the recommendations were.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — I understand there are five different locations. They're downstream from the town of St. Louis. All

of them have certain geotechnical risks and we need to determine the best location. And that's why further geotechnical work was done in the river in February of this past winter; that's why geotechnical work was done in the river in February of 2000.

Now the member grimaces. Well let me just say this, Member. You can grimace all you want but this bridge is going to cost a great deal of money and we need to make sure that we're locating it where the bridge can withstand the geography of the area and we just don't want to put it someplace for the sake of putting it someplace. You need to make sure that, given the soil conditions and the geography, that the bridge will stand into the future, and that's why we're being careful about this.

Ms. Julé: — Madam Minister, I would agree with you on the points that you put forward. However, there have been studies going on about where to place this bridge and a safe location for it for quite a number of years now — I think since about 1998 that I was informed. So there have been a number of geographical studies done, geotechnical testing, and everything that goes with it.

So as far as I know those things have been done and I know that they did some work again in February of this year. But all of the necessary testing I understand has been done and so to continue with testing after it has been done over and over again makes me question why.

There are just people there that are wondering when the construction of that bridge is going to take place. And you have given me that answer, Madam Minister, and I think you said that the year 2002-2003 . . . (inaudible interjection) . . . 2003-2004. Okay, well I will certainly convey that back to the people in the area, and I thank you for that.

Madam Minister, there's a constituent around Cudworth that lived in Toronto for a little while and so she has gone back and forth between the two provinces, visiting her parents here and so on. And she made some notations about the safety on the roads.

She is wondering why, when in fact there has been road construction done in regards to repairs — and she was referring specifically to Highway No. 2 and Highway 27— and she is wondering why the white lines on the side of the roads have not been marked. After the repairs take place, there doesn't seem to be any markings on the road to guide travellers, especially in the wintertime.

So I don't know whether or not you want to respond to this, Madam Minister, but I bring it forward to you as a request by some of my constituents that this be done in order to guide them in the wintertime, especially during storms.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Well last year we painted 45 kilometres of highway lines. And that's what you're talking about, is the lines at the side of the road, right? And we plan to paint another 42,600 kilometres of highway lines in this fiscal year. So we plan on improving our highway line markings and pavement markings.

I'm advised by the department that after there's been a patch,

that before winter there's supposed to be lines put at the side of the patches. And obviously you've noticed that there haven't been. And I'd be interested in precisely where this is occurring because — which highway, which section of the road — in order that we can remedy that situation.

(20:00)

Ms. Julé: — Thank you, Madam Minister. Madam Minister, I think that that is really very necessary, and I thank you for offering to take this to the attention of highway workers.

Madam Minister, the other concern that's been brought to my attention is the use of the mixture of salt and potash and gravel to put on roads in the wintertime when it's icy to improve road conditions, I guess. As we know in some other provinces, and particularly in Ontario, as my constituent refers to Ontario, there is salt used in order to address the ice on the highways and make it safer.

In Saskatchewan it seems that this mixture now of salt, potash, and gravel is being used and my constituent is simply wondering why because she says, she says that really . . . her words are:

“This mixture is much worse on a vehicle than salt. My vehicle has been doused with this all winter and it's truly disgusting, much worse than in Ontario and just as hard on a vehicle.”

So I'm just wondering whether or not you or your officials could comment on why that mixture is used.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — The officials advise me that there have been studies done about salt usage in the country, and that Ontario and Quebec use 10 times the amount of salt that we use. We try and minimize the use of salt in the province as much as possible, but we do have icy patches that need to be dealt with.

And we also will put some salt into the sand in order to prevent it from freezing and sticking together. But we try and minimize it as much as possible.

Ms. Julé: — Thank you, Madam Minister. Madam Minister, this particular constituent states that the use of the three components or the three elements in order to check the icy highways does not . . . like the use of salt with gravel, doesn't necessarily keep it from clumping because these three things together really do cake a lot under one's vehicle. So why, if it causes that much damage to vehicles and it in fact does cake under a vehicle and it doesn't do any better a job as far as addressing the icy highway conditions, why wouldn't we just use salt?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — I'm going to write you a letter with the answer because it's a bit complicated because we're talking about potash tailings and there's certain kind of chlorides that attract moisture. Anyway it's a technical answer and what I'll do is I'll simply write you a letter because it will be much easier for your constituent to understand than if I just try and explain it here in the House.

Ms. Julé: — All right thank you, Madam Minister. That will

suffice.

Madam Minister, I just want to refer to your announcement that there are more highway signs planned to promote attractions — tourist attractions. In my constituency I have a vacation farm and the owners of that vacation farm are wondering why signs . . . they cannot erect their own signs especially if the signs are off the highways. If the signs are on side roads leading to their vacation farms, why in fact they cannot erect those signs? They were told by the department that they had to buy department signs. And of course their concern is with the cost of those signs.

And so they were rationalizing with me saying that if they made sure the signs were erected in a place that was complying with regulations about the distance signage has to be from roadways that they would be pleased to comply with that, but wondering why they could not in fact get their own contractor to make signs that may come at a price that's much less than what they'd have to pay to the Department of Highways.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — If I understand it, in Canada all across the country, provinces are trying to move towards consistent signage so that you have a marker when you're talking about recreation, culture, and museums, and you'll have a particular colour scheme. If you're talking about services, there'll be another colour scheme. You have the colours of towns; it's green. Services tend to be blue and white. And cultural facilities, museums, tourist attractions, there's a consistent signage that they're trying to go to across the country. So it has to do with standards and uniformity.

And even in the tourism industry, they too are trying to move towards particular uniformity across the province so that if you're driving, you see something, you know it's cultural, or it's tourism, or it's ecotourism, or whatever. And that's what the department is trying to work with in terms of developing consistent application of signs.

Ms. Julé: — Thank you, Madam Minister. Madam Minister, I can understand that in as far as the signs indicate the type of tourism that may . . . whether it's bed and breakfast or vacation farm or so on — little barns on the sign, that's understandable.

But if you're off highway and there is a number of different turns in a rural area, different roads to be taken, is it permissible — permissible, sorry — for people that own that vacation farm to erect their own signs giving direction to tourists on how to get there . . . (inaudible interjection) . . . Well it's about signage. And the signage is . . . these people have had to deal with the Department of Highways regarding signs.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Once they're 400 metres off the highway, then you're dealing with the RM. So perhaps, I mean once again, if you could just send me a note or we could have a private discussion, I can try and understand the issue, and we can see what we can do.

Ms. Julé: — Well thank you, Madam Minister. Possibly you want me to deal with the Municipal Affairs minister on this. That's fine; I can do that.

But it seems quite simple. If I'm driving down a country road

and I've been given direction off the highway that there is a vacation farm 10 miles off the highway, that's the only indication I'm given from the highway. And that's fine. If I'm travelling down that road and there is a number of different municipal roads that I have to take in between, is it permissible for the owner of that vacation farm to just simply have a sign — vacation farm, 5 miles — with an arrow going that way, so people know where to go?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — The way you describe it, it's up to each individual rural municipality to determine on a municipal . . . We're now talking about municipal roads, what sort of signage could be allocated along those roads. We only deal with provincial highways, roads that come under provincial jurisdiction. Municipal roads come under municipal jurisdiction.

Ms. Julé: — Madam Minister, if there were tourist signs that . . . Do provincial tourist signs have to be used consistently along the way as people move towards their destination? Or can they erect signs of their own making after they're off the highway? That's what I'd like to know.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — We're working with the tourism industry in order to have consistent signage when it comes to tourist attractions.

What a municipality does is up to them, but I do know, and the department advises me, that municipalities are trying to work with the province as well so that you have almost like a marker. You see something; you know it's a tourist attraction. So if you have consistent signage, whether it's along a provincial highway or down a municipal road, people know that it's tourism. But it's up to the local municipality to determine if that's what they want to go to: consistent signage. But I do know that municipalities are working with the province and the tourism industry in order to develop uniform signs across the province.

Ms. Julé: — Well, Madam Minister, if municipalities agree that people within that municipality can put up a sign that they want to manufacture themselves, then they can be assured that the Department of Highways or tourism is not going to stop them from doing so.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — We're not aware of any Department of Highways officials interfering with municipalities in their decision as to what kind of signs that they want located along municipal roads. We're not aware of any interference by us. It's up to the municipalities.

Ms. Harpauer: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. The Minister of Highways had said at one point — I'm not sure if it was in debate or question period — that we in rural Saskatchewan were going to start complaining about construction on our highways and I thought that was rather humorous. But now here it is and I'm here and I'm complaining about some work being done on the highways.

Highway 16 which is a Trans-Canada Highway . . . I had three motorists come in just in the last week and apparently there is some gravel being put on Highway 16 between Plunkett and Viscount. I haven't had an opportunity to go out there and see

what actually is going on. The motorists were saying that gravel was being poured on the highway and then oil on top of that. There was a number of vehicles that got stone chips in their windshields. It was slowing down traffic. And the people who are in the area between Plunkett and Viscount were saying there is nothing wrong with this highway. This is probably the best highway we have in Saskatchewan.

The gal in my office had phoned the department to get an explanation because when I looked at the work order sheets that were sent out to my office there was no mention of work to be done on Highway 16 in this particular area. So I was wondering if someone had an opportunity to find out what was going on there, why work was being done when everybody in the area is quite happy with that particular highway.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — This is not a major construction project. It's not resurfacing. What it is is maintenance. And it's a seal coat that's being put on the road. And oftentimes when you're driving down the road you won't necessarily see the cracking in the highway but if you get out and walk it, you'll see cracking. And this is a preservation technique to try and preserve the road. And obviously with the way you describe it, my officials tell me that this is a seal coat that's being put on the road in order to preserve the road and keep it in a good state of repair.

We're trying to do a lot of preventative work now so that roads don't get to the point where they're starting to crumble. And this is all part of our preservation and maintenance.

Ms. Harpauer: — Thank you, Madam Minister. A question that I have, a further question: when this is done to a road — because I don't recall in my area this being done before — how long will the potential of damage from the loose gravel then continue that is put on for this seal coat? Because that is probably the major concern that's coming forward, is the windshield.

(20:15)

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — There shouldn't be any more difficulty with gravel on that particular stretch of road after 48 hours.

Mr. Bjornerud: — Thank you, Mr. Deputy Chair, Madam Minister. I just have a few questions, Madam Minister, on some highways out in my area. I believe the highway is going to be improved from the Togo corner to Kamsack this year. Is that on the agenda?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Yes it is, from north of Junction No. 357 to Kamsack, 17.7 kilometres of paving. As well, there's some work that will be done from Wroxton to Grid 637 for 13.3 kilometres, resurface work. In total you'll have close to a little over \$2.7 million worth of highway construction done in your constituency.

And if you take into consideration the activity from last year, you had \$2.2 million worth of construction work. So it's about a \$500,000 increase. Last year you had 56 kilometres worth of work done; this year it'll be 31 kilometres worth of work. This is new work; then there's maintenance and preservation over and above that. And if you want me to go to the previous year,

'99 to 2000, you had \$5.4 million worth of work done in your constituency for 53 kilometres worth of work, and the year before 172 kilometres of work done for a total of 12.9 million.

So, Member, you've got over \$20 million worth of work that's been done in your constituency in the last four years.

Mr. Bjornerud: — Thank you, Madam Minister. I'm glad to hear that. I would hope, Madam Minister, that the people of the Saltcoats constituency are listening tonight because that must be about 10 times as much as you spent in any other constituency in this province, and I'm glad to hear that.

Madam Minister, I also . . . I commend you for fixing the highway from Kamsack south. That was a terrible piece of road. I've got more calls on that.

But I'm getting another rash of calls on another highway, Madam Minister, and maybe your department has . . . from Langenburg south on No. 8 Highway and it goes . . . it doesn't go right to the town of Spy Hill but it goes to the junction, the junction of 22. And, Madam Minister, do you . . . how far ahead do you look? Like, is that highway getting anywhere near the top of the list from Langenburg south? Because that road is every bit as bad as the piece from Kamsack south and every bit as dangerous.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Well I know the member is pleased with all of the work that's been done in his constituency over the last four years, and he's very grateful. But I don't think I could make a commitment tonight that work will be done on that road in the next couple of years. There are other projects that are ahead of it.

Mr. Bjornerud: — Well thank you, Madam Minister. I would hope, though, that that road would be taken into consideration because I'm getting a lot of calls this spring. I don't know why some of the other highways aren't as bad this spring or don't seem to have broken up nearly as bad as possibly last year or the year before. But for some reason that highway . . . and I'm getting a lot of calls from mine workers and actually the mine itself at Esterhazy about that piece of highway.

And I know I was down at, while it was still frozen in the wintertime . . . but there was some really bad spots in that piece of highway. It's a narrow-shouldered highway that's actually . . . when you meet a car and there's bad spots on it you have nowhere to go but right through the bad spots. There's no shoulders on that road, Madam Minister. So I would hope that your officials will take a good look at that road, and maybe we can up the amount of money we're spending in that constituency — gratefully accepted.

Madam Minister, I'd like to talk for a minute about No. 15 Highway, and I'm sure your department over the years has had a lot of calls on that highway. And we have had quite a number of improvements made to that highway, but I want to mention the way that we've improved out there. The department has gone out and done stretches of maybe an eighth of a mile, a quarter of a mile and it's really improved the highway. And then we'll come along and do another stretch where we'll just patch here and patch there. And I know it would be appreciated by the people that use that highway if more of the spots like the

eighth of a mile in a section . . . because they seem to be standing up far better than the hit-and-the-miss patching that we've been doing before . . . and I would think in the long run would probably, Madam Minister, would be cheaper for everyone concerned.

One other question, Madam Minister. You're talking about the Bill you brought in today, about Bill 53. And I know we can ask these questions later in committee and so on in debating that Bill. But in bringing that Bill forward, have you dealt with SARM on this issue? And I'd like to know, have they agreed to what we're or what you're trying to do in that Bill?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — We haven't talked to SARM in particular detail about the details contained in the Bill. But the Bill contains things that we have been doing in terms of alternate truck routes, where we're entering into partnerships with municipalities. And as you know, we don't enter into partnerships unless the municipalities want to enter into partnerships.

And we had an example in the Vanguard area this spring where there was a partnership and then, because of the pressure that was brought to bear by people along that highway, two of the municipalities withdrew from the partnership and truck traffic is now back on that road. The difficulty is that some pieces of that road are just not standing up because of the truck traffic.

So it's not something that we're forcing on people, but it's a way to try and save as many TMS roads as possible as we make our way through the budget. You know, we've only got so much money and we're trying to manage the money that we have as best as we can, putting it into strategic corridors. In the meantime, what do you do with these TMS roads?

And many of you have raised examples in the last several days of roads in your riding, and you're saying, when are we getting to it. And I have to say, well not in the next two or three years. In the meantime, we are investing in roads in your ridings, but we can't do it all.

So how do you save those TMSs so that people do have a dust-free surface? At the same time we have to deal with the reality of truck haul. And that's why, if municipalities want to, if we can enter into alternate trucking arrangements, or truck route arrangements, we can keep those surfaces as dust free as possible and save those roads for as long as possible, until we get to the point where we have the money to deal with those roads.

Mr. Bjornerud: — Thank you, Madam Minister. Well, Madam Minister, in the case where you have a group of RMs you'd like to come into an agreement with and go to what you're talking about in Bill 53, but in the event that you couldn't come to an agreement with those RMs, would you still go ahead and put weight restrictions on those thin membrane highways?

An Hon. Member: — Put that on the record.

Mr. Bjornerud: — Yes, do answer us on the record, Madam Minister.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Well I'd like to, because we just see

what happens. They just get pummelled and then, you know, we have to deal with the reality. You're raising questions on behalf of your constituents and people say, well are you reverting any of these TMSs to gravel? When you only have so much money . . .

An Hon. Member: — Are you?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Well no, we're trying not to. We're trying not to revert those roads to gravel. But how do you . . . how do you manage this? And so it's a matter of trying to figure this out, you know, as much as we can, given the political pressure that you're under because you represent a lot of those rural communities.

But we only have so much money. And we have lots of pressures to spend that money and to do further tax cuts, and increase money in health care and education and municipal government — we hear it all the time in the legislature. And I understand why we hear it is because we're all trying to advocate on behalf of our constituents, and it's a matter of how do you balance this.

And we've got a large budget this year — \$311 million. We're constructing highways and maintaining our roads. I'm pleased to hear you say that our roads stood up better this year than last year. I think we did a good job last year of trying to really do a good job in maintaining the roads. We're doing that again this year. We're spending over \$120 million in preservation. But you will have people still complaining about it.

Mr. Bjornerud: — Well thank you, Madam Minister. Madam Minister, a little different question here.

Some of the complaints I get in the wintertime and out in my area is the quickness of the snowplough. And again I'm talking mostly mineworkers that have to go to work at 6 o'clock, 7 o'clock in the morning. And from the feeling I got out there, the direction that the Highway departments — and don't . . . this did not come from the local Highway department, this came from other people. So we won't, you know . . . don't be looking at the highway workers out there for saying that.

But is direction come from Saskatoon as to when the snowploughs can go out in the wintertime or is that policy changed? Because the understanding we had that they couldn't go out in the last couple of years without Saskatoon sent word out.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — The area manager, who I think is located in Yorkton, would make the decision when the ploughs go out. And in fact oftentimes it's the supervisors out in those communities that make the decision because they've lived there, they know where the snow is, they've got contacts, they know the roads, and they try and clear the roads. They know when people have to get to work.

So I think, as I understand it, there's as much decentralized decision making as possible in order to maintain those roads, particularly in the wintertime.

Mr. Bjornerud: — Well thank you, Madam Minister, because I agree with you. The local people have supervisors, and

Highway departments out there have a much better idea when those roads need to be ploughed in the wintertime.

I want to thank you, Madam Minister, for your answers, and I'll pass off to the member for Arm River.

Mr. Brkich: — Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and Mr. Minister . . . Madam Minister. I'm so used to dealing with the minister from Meadow Lake when it came to highways.

The member from Saltcoats talked about 15 Highway. I've had a . . . some of the communities have approached me and also the RM of 280 in getting Highway 15 identified as the main corridor between Manitoba and Alberta. Is there any money set aside for the budget this year? Are you looking at that?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Well now, if the member from Saltcoats thought he had a good . . . he was a good MLA (Member of the Legislative Assembly), let me talk about you.

This MLA, in his constituency, will have 90 kilometres of work done at a cost of \$10.3 million. Last year he had 113 kilometres of work done at a cost of 5.7 million. So we're close to 16 million. The year before — now he probably wasn't elected then — 85 kilometres at 2.2 million; and the year before, 368 kilometres at 25.5 million.

So this member has had over 35, 40, \$42 million worth of work done in his constituency in the last four years. So I can list all of the highways that are being done in your area, but I would say to you that in terms of the budget, this member has gee, about 8 per cent of the capital construction budget going into his riding.

Mr. Brkich: — Well thank you, Mr. Chairman. It's what I tell my constituents, that I'm here doing a job, and I guess I'll just be passing that on to them.

Just two more questions. First of all, of all that money you stated, how much of that was federal? And then again, you didn't answer me, are you looking at designating 15 Highway as the main corridor between Manitoba and Alberta? And have towns and RMs approached you over this, if you're looking at it?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — My understanding is none of the money is coming from the prairie grain roads — so none of the money. This is all provincial money that is going into your constituency. And the road that you talked about, Highway 15 I believe, it's not something that we have under consideration for the next couple of years.

Mr. Brkich: — Thank you. One other question. On 19 Highway, that was the winter . . . no, your spring tendering came out, you're building it from junction of Elbow to 44. And it didn't say in the tendering, and it's been asked of me, are you building that to primary weights? You're not?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — No we're not. It's being upgraded to a structural pavement.

(20:30)

Mr. Brkich: — Okay, thank you. So I believe a member was

talking about bridges. It also brought me up to remembering that I had a couple of letters this winter about the old bridge at Outlook. There was a snowmobile club there. I think they've written you letters saying that they wanted to use that old bridge as a snowmobile trail to cross from one side of the river to the other. That way they wouldn't have to use the new bridge. Have they written you for permission for that or how is that coming along? Are you looking at something like that?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — My understanding is, on your last question, they've written us several times and the department continues to deny that request.

And I just want to make one correction. On Highway 19 from Elbow to south of the junction No. 44, there is 13 kilometres of paving that's going on for a cost of 1.7 million, and that's part of the prairie grain roads initiative.

Mr. Brkich: — Thank you. How come on the bridge issue, why were they denied? Was it safety issues, the bridge unsafe? What would be the reasons?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Safety and liability issues. If anything happened, if the bridge isn't up to standard, then there is a liability question.

Mr. Brkich: — Thank you, Chairman, Madam Minister. I'll ask you then, one more question now. I'll just ask, what are you going to do with the bridge?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — We're not quite sure what we're going to do with the bridge at this point, but no doubt a decision will be made at some time in the future.

Ms. Eagles: — Thank you, Mr. Chair, Madam Minister. Madam Minister, on Highway No. 39 between North Portal and around Midale, the highway is extremely bad. So bad in fact that semi trucks are refusing to cross the border into Canada at the North Portal crossing and this is causing a lot of concern for the brokerage firms in North Portal that are losing a lot of business. Apparently the trucks are going up through Emerson, Manitoba and just going right onto No. 1. Now I know previously that you said that there was nothing scheduled for this portion of Highway 39, but that leads me to another question.

On this same Highway No. 39 between Macoun and Midale, this highway is deteriorating very quickly and along the centre line it is critical. There is cracks in some places that are maybe 2 feet long, 5 inches wide, and if you dare pull out and pass a vehicle, your wheel will get caught in that. And you know, it's especially critical for motorcyclists on the road. And I was just wondering if you have any plans to do any repairs at all on that stretch of road.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — We will be doing repairs on that road but we're not doing any kind of pavement or resurfacing.

Ms. Eagles: — Do you have those schedules, Madam Minister?

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — When? I can't answer that specifically, but it's ongoing and it's being done by the local crews.

Mr. Elhard: — By agreement we extended the time to 8:30. We're past that now. I'd like to thank the minister and her officials for allowing us that little bit of extra latitude. And I appreciate the opportunity to question her and I'm looking forward to the next five hours. Thank you.

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — I would ask that we rise and report progress.

The Deputy Chair: — Minister has asked the committee report progress. Is this agreed? Carried.

General Revenue Fund Municipal Affairs and Housing Vote 24

(Subvote MG01)

The Deputy Chair: — I'll ask the minister to introduce his officials.

Hon. Mr. Osika: — Thank you, Mr. Chairman. To my immediate left is acting deputy minister, Mr. Brij Mathur. Peter Hoffmann is sitting to my far right. John Edwards is sitting to the left of Brij. Lana Grosse directly behind me; she's executive director, protection and emergency services. Larry Chaykowski is executive director of finance, administration, and facilities. And Doug Morcom, who is the director of grants administration.

Ms. Julé: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. Good evening, Mr. Minister, and good evening to your officials.

Mr. Minister, the impact of reassessment on property owners has been indeed a very serious one and one that's causing a great deal of burden to taxpayers throughout the province. I'd like to bring to your attention, Mr. Minister, one of the concerns that constituents have brought to my attention, and I would just refer you to an e-mail I received from a constituent, and it goes like this:

I'm an acreage homeowner with 5 acres of land. I have been notified that our taxes for the RM of Blucher will increase 80 to 90 per cent. I was told this was because the government changed section 331.

Now this person states that they have a family of six people; there's two adults and four children and that they cannot afford this \$2,000 increase in their taxes on this acreage. That's \$2,000 increase, Mr. Minister, because of changes to section 331. These people have no services, no sidewalks, no paved roads, no stores, no sewer, nothing but a gravel road.

Mr. Minister, my constituent is asking you to justify paying these kind of taxes; and I am asking you, Mr. Minister, to please explain section 331 and the negative impact that this has on acreage homeowners.

Hon. Mr. Osika: — Mr. Chairman, to the member opposite, that section that you referred to, there were changes made to the statute specifically to create more parity between urban and rural lots that people had built their properties on, their homes on. So that was basically the reason for that.

Now the impact from reassessment on value of land, no question, also impacted on some of those properties, and some went up and some went down. In that particular case, if your constituent would like a more detailed explanation of the impact and the effects and how the direction taken to create parity for all taxpayers, landowners in those areas where you had close proximity to urban and rural land bases, I'd be more than happy to do it. My department would be more than happy to respond in detail as opposed to perhaps us talking about the complexities of those changes.

Ms. Julé: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. Mr. Minister, there's no doubt in my mind that you probably don't want to discuss this publicly because it is a very contentious issue. I think that this issue has been brought to the attention of your government for some time now, and I know very well that my constituent is very aware of the effects, very aware of the effects of this measure to create parity between rural and urban lots.

However, Mr. Minister, I point out to you one more time that in the urban areas, taxes paid on lots include services for those people like sidewalks, like stores, sewer, paved roads going by, a number of services. People in these rural areas, many of them that just have simple acreages out there, people who have gone out to live on acreages to escape the cost of living in the city are now inundated with increased costs to their taxes because of section 331.

Now I think there needs to be some consideration given to the fact there are no services out there and why in goodness' name should these people have to deal with an 80 to 90 per cent increase. Mr. Minister, this is not \$2,000 in total that these people pay in taxes, it is a \$2,000 increase. Now that seems to me to be absolutely unbelievable and unacceptable. So I ask you to respond to my comments regarding the fact that there are no services out there, and I want to know whether or not that was taken into consideration when section 331 was changed.

Hon. Mr. Osika: — Mr. Chairman, thank you. These changes to the legislation were made after lengthy consultation with people in the review committee, the tax review committee. And that tax review committee was composed of representatives from SARM, SUMA (Saskatchewan Urban Municipalities Association), and SSTA (Saskatchewan School Trustees Association). So it was not just an arbitrary decision to move in that direction. It was a belief by that committee, and through their recommendations, to create greater parity.

Now each municipality, as the member is probably aware, does have available to them tax tools that in some of those extreme cases, they can apply to offset some of the real significant increases in the tax assessments. And I think as I mentioned earlier, Mr. Chair, under those kinds of re-evaluations and reassessments, there may be those increases and decreases in order to create the parity and a level playing field for all.

And I, or this . . . certainly not concerned about discussing this issue publicly at all, and more than happy to supply detailed explanations at length, in writing, to whomever would like the explanations for those changes.

But the bottom line is that it was not an arbitrary decision by the department, by government. That change was made as a result

of extensive consultation and the appropriate representatives that are the representatives of the communities through SUMA, SARM, and SSTA.

Ms. Julé: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. Mr. Minister, I wonder if you could just please go through section 331 and explain that section and what changes were made in that section. I want to know what was changed there . . . what the government indicated must be changed there. If you could just read the changes to me, I'd be appreciative.

(20:45)

Hon. Mr. Osika: — Mr. Chairman, we don't have the Bill in front of us and so I'm not able to refer directly to the specific section. However, again going back to the changes made as a result of recommendations, particularly in recognition of the support for people in the agricultural sector . . . In other words, the land subtracted from the house evaluation was how it was initially used. This now allowed the effects of the changes, now recognized and gave some consideration to agricultural landowners specifically.

Ms. Julé: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. Well I know that the farmers and landowners, crop producers, and so on are very, you know . . . certainly are inundated with high taxes also. And when you consider they have a number of quarters of land they have to pay tax on, they are paying their fair share and more.

But this kind of a measure certainly will drive a number of those people that have acreages off the acreages, out of the rural area again, and force them to go somewhere else. They simply cannot afford this. So as minister of Municipal Government I would certainly appreciate that you would address this issue in the coming year and see if something can't be done about it.

I thank you very much, Mr. Minister.

Hon. Mr. Osika: — If I may just comment. Part of the concern was . . . the member alluded to building in rural municipalities opposite urban areas — similar homes with less taxes on one than the other because one was on agricultural land, in an RM, and the other was in an urban municipality.

So to try and create a level playing field, the changes were made to recognize that disparity. And from what you're saying, yes, there were those that perhaps may have seen their assessments and their values increase to similar values that members on the other side in the opposite RM, to bring them to some parity.

Mr. Allchurch: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. Mr. Minister, welcome, and to your officials, welcome.

I want to go down the path in regard into questioning something you're all familiar with, and that's regarding the forest fringe land. I've been asking questions of SERM (Saskatchewan Environment and Resource Management) and a lot of the questions I asked in regards to SERM was referred to the Department of Municipal Affairs. And so therefore I have quite a few questions for the minister today.

This goes back a little while because back in 1994-1995 SARM

came to the government — and I understand, Mr. Minister, that you weren't here I don't believe at that time, especially you were not here as minister anyway — but at that time SARM came to the government asking for RMs to allow to tax forest fringe land which SERM owns. And hopefully some of the members that are here tonight that have been here for quite some time can recollect some of the on-goings that went on, in other words to allow the department to allow RMs to tax forest fringe land.

And you already know, Mr. Minister, that forest fringe land is governed by SERM, but yet RMs, which is another jurisdiction, have the right now to tax that. And it is not only just municipal tax on that, it is also education tax on top of that. Can you take me back to the years '94-95, somewhere in that neighbourhood, in regards to why the Department of Municipal Affairs allow RMs to tax forest fringe land?

Hon. Mr. Osika: — Mr. Chairman, thank you. And thank you to the member for that question.

Again I have, there is the responses . . . I have the responses for your questions. And if it might . . . you might find it more expedient, I can give them, send these over to you. They answer the questions you just asked: why is the RM allowed to tax SERM-owned forest fringe land for cattle operations. I can read that into the record or I can send the answers over to the member in anticipation of our previous discussions that these questions might come up.

I'll read this, the first answer into the record. When property is normally exempt from taxation, such as SERM forest fringe land is used by someone other than the owner for a purpose that would otherwise be taxable were the activity not taking place on a tax-exempt land, the property is assessed for property taxation purposes and the occupant is taxed. The situation would be the same, for example, if part of a municipal building, office building, normally exempt from property taxation, is used by another person as office space to operate a business.

So there is rationale. And I'd be more than happy to send the member the questions and answers to this forest fringe land taxation issue.

Mr. Allchurch: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. Mr. Minister, I would welcome those comments in writing.

From what I gather from the comments you just told me about, if there was another building in regards to land of that nature, then the owner would be assessed tax. Is that correct?

Hon. Mr. Osika: — The property that's normally exempt from taxation, such as the land we're talking about, is used by someone other than the owner for a purpose that would otherwise be taxable. So there's no reference to buildings in this respect, but the activity is not taking place on tax-exempt land, so in fact the property's assessed for property taxation purposes and the occupant of that land at the time is taxed.

And as the example I used, no different than municipal buildings that may be vacant but rented or used by an individual for operating a business. Then that person becomes the person that's responsible to pay the taxes.

This goes on . . . the answer that you have, that I passed over to you, goes on to say that the subsections of the Act, 284(6) and (7) of The Rural Municipality Act, 1989, speak specifically to how leased and permitted land is to be assessed. So that, Mr. Chair, may be of help to the member.

Mr. Allchurch: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. Mr. Minister, in regards to the answers you just quoted me, in a situation with forest fringe land which is government-owned land — okay, the government owns it — there are many users of that said land. Not only do cattle grazers use that land, there are woodcutters, there are snowmobilers. In fact, even one government operation or department, which is SERM, utilizes that land. They utilize it for hunting licences. Those are users of that said land.

Why is it that just one user of that land, which is cattle grazing operations, are taxed on that said land?

Hon. Mr. Osika: — Mr. Chair, I assume the member is referring to multiple leases or permits on similar property . . . on the same property. Just for some clarity?

Mr. Allchurch: — Okay. Thank you, Mr. Chair. Mr. Minister, in regards to the forest fringe land, there are many users of that land. Anybody that's utilizing that land, like for instance the cattle grazing operations, they go to the SERM department and they buy a permit. They do not buy a lease; they buy a permit. That permit is granted to them on the maximum usage of land for 145 days. That's the maximum use.

Now there are other users of that land, like snowmobilers, who utilize that land in the wintertime, and it may be for 120 days. There are government departments like SERM, who utilize that land for hunting seasons, which may be eight or nine weeks. If it is a logging outfit that goes in there, or a woodcutting outfit that goes in there, they also buy permits to utilize that land.

But only one jurisdiction of that said land is taxed, and that is the cattle grazing operations. My question is, why is it just one jurisdiction of user of that land, who buys a permit, is taxed for the whole year, and the maximum days of usage they can use is 145 days?

Hon. Mr. Osika: — Mr. Chair, that is an important question and I think it should be properly answered. And if the member will allow me to get that answer within the next 48 hours, to respond to your specific, to the specific question.

The multiple uses — individuals who obtain a permit for that land are considered the occupants, and they would be the users and under those circumstances would then be the individual or individuals who are responsible for the tax assessments.

Beyond that, the points that you raise about the length of time that they may occupy that particular piece of land, the Crown-owned land, is a point of which I do not have clarity on, and I would appreciate the opportunity, if you would allow, Mr. Chair, for me to determine specifically so I don't respond in an inaccurate or a fuzzy way, if you wish. So I'd like to understand that answer myself, so if you'd allow me to do that.

Mr. Allchurch: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. Mr. Minister, I thank you for that response. And I really hope that you, Mr. Minister,

and your department — or the department — will take a real look at this issue because it's a very, very serious issue. It's been going on since 1996 where the RMs who absolutely provide none — absolutely none — services to that area. And the reason they can't provide services in that area, is it because it belongs to the government, which is SERM?

That is public land open to everybody. The public can go in there at any time to utilize that area as long as they're not using it for, say, taking out wood or cutting logs or whatever. Therefore, they have to buy a permit.

The department under SERM regulates the users of that said land and they do it in the form of a permit basis which is fair and equitable to anybody utilizing that land. And that's why the cattle grazing operations who utilize that land have no problems whatsoever paying for a permit.

But the whole problem lies with the Department of Municipal Affairs allowing RMs next to that said land, allow to charge municipal tax. They don't get absolutely no services whatsoever. They utilize the land for a maximum of 145 days and they are taxed on a year basis.

Now I say to the minister, is that a fair taxation system that has been drawn up? Put yourself in the shoes of the cattle grazing people. You're paying a permit. You're paying municipal tax. You're paying education tax because under the laws if you're paying municipal tax you have to pay education tax. Education is on a two-to-one basis, so if you pay \$200 worth of municipal tax, you're paying \$400 worth of education tax.

They don't own the land. They get absolutely no services and they're paying all this taxes. And I would like somebody from the government to explain why this unfair tax has been imposed on these grazing people and has been imposed since 1996. Where did the Department of Municipal Affairs come up with the idea that RMs have the right to tax this property to that extent?

(21:00)

Hon. Mr. Osika: — Mr. Chairman, I'll again refer further to some of the document that I sent over. And I do agree that this has become a controversial issue that the member raises.

To begin with, permits are issued annually, and SERM does not require proof of payment of the previous year's taxes by an individual to remove that permit. And I'm told that this is primarily because some rural municipalities assess the land and tax the occupant, while others do not.

Permits are issued for only part of the year, so taxing those occupants at all is becoming somewhat of a controversial issue.

So having said that, and again the contents of the information that I sent you, underlines that, yes, this is a controversial issue. And, Mr. Chair, I will assure the member that there will be a good, hard look taken at this situation. And it may need to involve the municipalities for discussion with SARM and to determine and, as you say, clarify what we both now understand is a controversial issue.

Mr. Allchurch: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. Mr. Minister, I just want to go one step further. I asked some questions regarding how many permits — and I asked these questions to the SERM department — how many permits were issued in the year 2000 and how many permits were issued in this year. And in the year 2000, there was 146 permits issued on SERM land for grazing purposes. This year to date there is only somewhere in the neighbourhood of 10.

Now not all RMs are taxing cattle grazing people. Not all RMs; there's only a few. And when you add up all the taxes as they pay, it becomes to a place where they should put their cattle in community pastures rather than on this land because they're taking all the responsibility for that said land and they're paying through the nose.

There are also some people in and around Lloydminster and Meadow Lake and Glaslyn areas that are now being summoned to court because of back taxes that the RMs have imposed on these gentlemen with grazing permits. They haven't paid their last year's taxes, and now they're being summoned to court.

Will you, or pardon me, would the minister come forth today and say that he will hold off on all court proceedings to all members of cattle grazing permits that are being summoned to court to pay back taxes until the minister or the ministers sit down with a group of people to get a hold of this issue because it is a very, very unfair practice?

Hon. Mr. Osika: — Mr. Chairman, with all due respect, I'm sure the member will recognize that it would be impossible for me to make such a commitment. These are matters that the rural municipalities have the right under The Rural Municipality Act to proceed with court action. They may sue for taxes under that particular Act — they have the right to do that — or collect taxes through the distress, and that's the seizure and sale of goods again under that same Act.

So no, I cannot make the commitment the member asks me to make.

Mr. Allchurch: — Thank you, Mr. Chair, Mr. Minister. Then, Mr. Minister, can you answer this question: if there is tax arrears on SERM land which is issued to cattle grazer permit owners and they have back taxes and they're summoned to court, can the tax arrears be charged to the land that they own outside SERM land? In other words, land that's in the RM that they own, can those taxes fall against that property? Or can a lien be put against that property?

Hon. Mr. Osika: — Mr. Chair, to the member, again that's a question that probably would need to be answered by someone more knowledgeable about the legal technicalities of those types of issues, and I would have to get some legal advice before I could answer to that or have someone from the legal profession give me that advice or that response in order that I could forward it to the member.

Mr. Allchurch: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you, Mr. Minister. With that, Mr. Minister, can you get legal advice regarding the question I just asked and have it given to me in the very, very earliest date? Because, like I say, some of these members are summoned to court already and they don't know

what to do and until somebody takes a hold of this issue and resolves it . . .

Because as you know, Mr. Minister, one of the bright spots in Saskatchewan is the cattle industry. In fact it's the only bright spot in the agriculture system right now. And when you look at the amount of users in and around the forest fringe area, which goes right across Saskatchewan, that are utilizing this land on a certain number of days, being taxed on a full year, then what you're doing is driving out the cattle business because if they don't have this said land to operate and graze their cattle in the summertime, where are they going to go? They've got no place else to go. So, Mr. Minister, I really hope that you take a look at this and try and solve this problem because it's going to hurt this industry.

Another question I want to ask in regards to the same said land as far as forest or forest fringe area is in regards to, if there are areas in the forest fringe area that the RM has to supply part of a road to go from one area to another one, then that area there could be taxed because of the usage of that road. Why couldn't SERM administer a fee for service to the grazing permit holder rather than a tax? If they utilize a fee for service then there's no tax on it. There's no education tax on it. And there are a few areas, Mr. Minister, that have that situation.

And I'm sure the cattle grazing operations would say, hey, if there's a road going through a part of SERM property which gets to my place, I don't mind paying a fee for service rather than a tax.

Any comments on that, Mr. Minister?

Hon. Mr. Osika: — The road that would be maintained by the rural municipality would require the rural municipality to recover some of the costs for maintenance of that road. SERM would not be involved in road maintenance or access, merely the issuance of permits for the use of that land. So that might be a controversial topic again because it's the RMs that have the right to assess taxes. And if, in the case that you're describing, they would be supplying the access, they would also be the ones that would require payment for the access.

Mr. Allchurch: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. Mr. Minister, I understand that. The same token is though that the land where this, let's say this house is, is still in forest fringe land which is SERM government-owned land. Why would there have to be a tax on it? Why can't a person just use it as a . . . or pay a fee for service? That way it gets away from all the taxation problems that we're faced with. That was my question.

And it's just a thought that when you're looking at this whole idea of taxing forest fringe land through the RMs that you could look at that.

Hon. Mr. Osika: — Mr. Chair, under the current laws and the way they exist and are presently written that any land that we're discussing of this nature is taxable. And until this issue is addressed and . . . as a matter of fact, I will be bringing it up with the Saskatchewan Association of Rural Municipalities in the very near future, this very issue. But regardless of the use of that land, it is taxable and it's taxable by the rural municipality. That's under the existing laws. That's the way it is.

Mr. Allchurch: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. Mr. Minister, I know that's the way the law is. It came into effect in 1996. What I'm saying to you, Mr. Minister, is the fact that, yes it is law now, but can it not be changed? I mean, just stop and think of the unfairness in the whole system regarding that idea of allowing RMs to tax forest fringe land.

Hon. Mr. Osika: — Mr. Chairman, this is a very valid concern that the member raises. And I'm not aware of it having been raised previously so perhaps now that it has been raised, I would appreciate the opportunity to discuss it with SARM, who is directly in one way or another involved in this controversy that we're having. And perhaps SERM as well will need to be engaged in order that yes, we can certainly take a look at.

And I agree with the member, Mr. Chairman, that because certain laws are in place, may have become outdated, or served no useful purpose and I fully support and agree with either changing or eliminating those particular regulations or the laws that no longer serve a valid or meaningful purpose and may be more distressful than they are beneficial.

Mr. Allchurch: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. Mr. Minister, I take your word at that and I hope that we can sit down in the very, very near future with whoever parties are involved in this and come up to a solution because I think I've outlined previous to the minister of SERM the problems regarding this. And now I've come to you as Minister of Municipal Affairs who has the power of the taxing issue.

And I hope we can sit down and come up with a recommendation that will be equal and fair to everybody because I can guarantee you they don't mind paying their fair share of taxes where they should be paying fair share of taxes. But to be taxed in this regards is totally unbelievable. And I'm sure that when you look at this from an open mind you will see this.

I now would like to go on to questioning . . . just a couple questions in regarding money under the Centenary Fund, I believe it is. To date, there has been many communities have gotten money from this fund and it's been welcome money. I was just at a function on Saturday at Big River where the Big River hall just received \$153,000 in Centenary Fund for their new hall, and it was welcome news to the people in and around Big River. I don't know if the Duck Lake museum project was under the same program. I don't know, but they received money down there.

To date, Mr. Minister, how many areas in Saskatchewan have received money, and could you give me a ballpark figure of the total of how much money has been spent to date and how much money is left in the fund to be spent?

Hon. Mr. Osika: — Mr. Chairman, to the member again, with all due respect, the previous discussion that we had on estimates, I had mentioned at that time that when all the grant money had been committed I would make the announcement with respect to all the various projects. There are those that have not yet been completely finalized and I would prefer again, with the member's indulgence, to allow us just some little more time until we have everything nailed down, and the entire announcement will be made — the number of communities and

the amounts spread out throughout the province.

Mr. Allchurch: — Thank you, Mr. Chair, Mr. Minister. I guess where I'm going with this, is there enough applications sent in to cover the allotted money that's been allotted through the Centenary Fund or is there still money available? Because I know lots of areas not only in my constituency but other constituencies that would like to apply for that kind of money but don't know if it's worth their time to sit down and go through and send it in or not.

Hon. Mr. Osika: — Mr. Chairman, I'm told there are enough applications for all the money that's available under that fund and the final decisions for all of them have not yet been made. And that will be coming soon.

Mr. Allchurch: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. I've enjoyed your answers today. And like I say, in regards to the forest fringe areas, I look forward to meeting with you and your officials, whoever is involved in that, so we can get to the bottom of a very, very serious problem. Thank you.

(21:15)

Mr. Wall: — Thank you, Mr. Deputy Chair, and Mr. Minister. A couple of questions on the community planning branch, if I may, within the department, and specifically a question with regards to a backlog that we're hearing about in terms of applications for subdivisions that are being made.

I wonder if you would provide your feedback in terms of surveying companies and surveyors in our province who — and communities, for that matter, I guess — who are waiting for the processing of the subdivision of land. I understand that some are waiting six to eight months. It's anecdotal; maybe it isn't that long. Certainly that's the information that I have, and I wonder if you could respond to that. And if there are delays anywhere near that length, if you could please outline why those delays are taking place and what the department is doing to speed up that portion of work of your department.

Hon. Mr. Osika: — Mr. Chairman, in response to the member's question, the applications are dealt with as quickly as possible when they are received by the department. In those cases where there may be some complications or some controversy with respect to the information that's supplied, it creates a delay.

I would ask the member, though, if there are specific instances where it seems that the delays or appears the delays are extraordinary, please bring them to my attention, and we will certainly follow up to determine why the holdup.

Mr. Wall: — We'll certainly do that, Mr. Deputy Chair, and Mr. Minister. Thank you for the answer.

I think, though, maybe you could provide for the members of the committee an explanation of how long that normal process is. I hear you saying that applications are being made, and they're dealt with as quickly as possible. So do you have an idea then, from your officials, how long is that taking right now, be it . . . well any manner of subdivision application that's coming in.

Hon. Mr. Osika: — Generally, Mr. Chairman, the application process would take from four to six weeks if everything was in place and all the t's were crossed and the i's were dotted. The delays again would occur if the applications would need to be returned, and perhaps some information verified. But generally it shouldn't take longer than four to six weeks without any complications.

Mr. Wall: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. Mr. Chairman of Committees, just one last question then on this subject. I appreciate the answer, Mr. Minister. There is a . . . I don't have a specific case to bring to you, and certainly as they come to me I'll do that; I'll take you up on your offer and do that.

Are you aware then, or are your officials aware of any specific applications or a group of applications that may be taking an inordinately long period of time other than those ones that have to be sent back to the applicant for clarification?

Hon. Mr. Osika: — Mr. Chair, I'm told that at this point we're not aware of any specific instances, although, in general terms, there have been some in the past that have taken perhaps four, five or six months to process because of some difficulties in clarifying information and requiring input from other departments or agencies with respect to the applications that have been submitted by individuals.

But again for any specific individual ones, we're not aware of any at this point. And once again I would encourage the members to notify our office in the event that there are some inordinate delays, and we can follow through and follow up on them as quickly as possible.

Mr. Hart: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. Mr. Minister, I would like to ask a few questions dealing with the protection in the emergency services branch in your department. I wonder if you could briefly explain the mandate and responsibilities of that branch.

Hon. Mr. Osika: — Mr. Chairman, if you want the specific detail, for the member, the public safety under Municipal Affairs and Housing develops and enforces safety standards for boilers, pressure vessels, elevators, amusement rides, and building construction. In addition it provides coordination services to municipalities for firefighter training, fire prevention programs, and emergency preparedness. It also provides payments for disaster assistance, Sask 911 address identification, and emergency telecommunications equipment.

So that's pretty much the mandate, the responsibility in a nutshell, of the public safety department.

Mr. Hart: — Mr. Minister, it appears that this branch has a . . . a large part of its mandate is public safety, having to do with boiler inspections and building codes and those sorts of things, if I interpret your answer correctly.

Therefore the executive director of that branch, that position, would be a fairly important position with regards to the public safety and as far as the responsibilities and mandate of that branch.

I wonder, could you just briefly outline what qualifications that

position requires, and that is the position of executive director?

Hon. Mr. Osika: — Mr. Chair, the requirements would be for management skills, leadership skills, and an individual to be able to lead a team of experts who would be able to advise on the technical expertise and provide the technical expertise in specific areas of concerns.

Mr. Hart: — Mr. Chair, does . . . is it not conceivable that the person, that position, would also require a certain amount of technical expertise in that position, supervises inspectors and those sorts of things? Is that also part of that position's demands and qualifications?

Hon. Mr. Osika: — Mr. Chair, because of the diversity of responsibilities in a variety of technical fields that's responsibilities of this department, the director needs to have the management and the leadership skills to coordinate the activities of the technical, the technicians and the experts. And that's what that position requires. Once again because of the diversity and the variety of expertise that's required for the various responsibilities.

So the leader of that particular department needs to have all the leadership skills and qualities, administration skills to lead a team of experts in dealing with those issues.

Mr. Hart: — So, Mr. Minister, so what you're telling me then is that you have a branch of your department that is responsible for public safety and inspections and you have the executive director — that position does not require any type of technical background, merely administration and management skills? Is that what you are saying?

Hon. Mr. Osika: — I believe that's what I'm saying. That it's for a person that's in a responsible position of ensuring that all technical aspects of responsibilities in a variety of areas are carried out. I don't, I don't believe that it's totally necessary for that individual to have all the technical knowledge for the various areas that that individual would be responsible for.

Mr. Hart: — Mr. Minister, it would seem to me, though, that that position would require at least a background and an understanding. Maybe not necessarily being an expert in any one position but I would imagine that that position would deal with a lot of technical matters. And if you don't have a background in that area, how can you make the proper management decisions?

And so therefore I find it somewhat discomfoting to know that that branch who is responsible for public safety, the person who heads that branch up is not required to have any technical expertise, merely management and administrative skills.

So I would ask you again, is that the only requirement for that position?

Hon. Mr. Osika: — Well, Mr. Chairman, I don't want the member to be distressed. The job descriptions for those positions are handled through the Public Service Commission. They're the ones that search out the people that they feel would have the qualifications to direct an operation such as we have here.

I might use an analogy that a conductor doesn't have to play all the trumpets and the clarinets and everything else, but certainly knows how to direct and make all those instruments work together. So I hope that clarifies.

Mr. Hart: — I agree with you, Mr. Minister, that a conductor doesn't have to play all the instruments, but he should be able to at least read the music, Mr. Minister.

But perhaps you could allay some of my fears. I believe the person that presently occupies that position is Ms. Lana Grosse; you introduced her earlier, and I was just wondering if you could tell us what education and experience she has to fill this present position.

Hon. Mr. Osika: — Mr. Chairman, to ease the member's concerns . . . and I hope he would be amenable to allowing us send over the qualifications for the person, the individual that occupies that position. We will send that over to you, the entire curriculum vitae.

Mr. Hart: — Yes, Mr. Minister, I was just hoping perhaps you could touch upon, you know, degrees that Ms. Grosse has and that sort of thing. But if you would send it over, I think that would be quite acceptable.

I was just wondering, how long has Ms. Grosse been in the position; and was that position — when she gained the position — was it by appointment or was it by competition? Could you please give us that information.

Hon. Mr. Osika: — Mr. Chairman, Ms. Grosse has been with that department . . . she was seconded from the Department of Finance in February of 1999 to head up, orchestrate, this particular department.

Mr. Hart: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. Within the protection and emergency services branches, there is the boiler and pressure safety unit. I wonder if you could briefly explain the responsibilities of that unit.

(21:30)

Hon. Mr. Osika: — Mr. Chairman, basically what the experts, the technicians are required to do is carry out inspections, safety inspections, pressure vessel inspections, and boilers, whether they're brought into the province or whether they are those that are already being utilized.

Mr. Hart: — Mr. Minister, could you perhaps explain where these boilers would be located? Are they in industrial complexes? Are they in residential complexes? Are they in schools? Could you give us some examples of where these boilers are that these inspectors conduct their inspections?

Hon. Mr. Osika: — Mr. Chairman, Saskatchewan's in-service inspection frequencies for boilers and pressure vessels are consistent with those throughout North American jurisdictions and they're performed at one year for steam boilers, two years for hot water boilers, and five years for pressure vessels. And these are items such of this nature are located throughout the province.

Mr. Hart: — So, Mr. Minister, could you tell us like what type of buildings — like are they in schools, for instance? Are they in hospitals? Are they in long-term care homes? Are they in areas where a great number of people are in close proximity to these boilers? Could you give us some examples?

Hon. Mr. Osika: — Mr. Chairman, I'm told that they are . . . they do exist in a number of industrial buildings and major facilities that require these types of vessels for heat, for water transmission, and so on. So yes, they're included in all those places that the member has mentioned and perhaps some others, some other industrial areas as well.

Mr. Hart: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. So they are . . . the inspections are carried out on boilers that are installed in schools and hospitals and long-term care homes and so on, plus many other places.

I understand by looking at the organizational chart that there is a position, a chief inspector position that is the head of this unit, who reports directly to the executive director of the branch. Could you briefly outline the qualifications that are set for this position, Mr. Minister?

Hon. Mr. Osika: — Mr. Chairman, these are trained technicians, technical people. And since the member wants the information with respect to the requirements of these individuals to fulfill those positions, I believe it would be probably more expedient, perhaps more informative, to the member if we supply you with the requirements for those positions.

Mr. Hart: — Mr. Minister, I understand that, again looking at the organizational chart, the position of chief inspector is filled by a Mr. Nick Surtees. And could you give us an indication as to whether Mr. Surtees's qualifications meet the requirements of the position of chief inspector?

Hon. Mr. Osika: — Mr. Chair, for any of those positions that the member wishes, we'll provide under the name of any members that you wish, their background and their qualifications for the positions that they fill.

Mr. Hart: — I wonder if, Mr. Minister, seeing that the executive director of the protections branch is sitting behind you, could you give me the qualifications that the inspectors that are out in the field and actually doing the inspections, what type of education and training do those people have and how many years of experience do they need to have in the field before they are deemed to be an inspector?

Is there a training period or do these folks come right out of SIAST (Saskatchewan Institute of Applied Science and Technology) or do they come off the street and are appointed as a position of inspector? I'd like some indication as to the level of experience that your people have.

Hon. Mr. Osika: — Mr. Chair, again there are a variety of expertise. Some of these people are professional engineers; others hold the proper type of certificates to present when they are applying for this kind of technical work. I'm sure there are not a lot of people around here that would know what the requirements would be to inspect a pressure vessel or a boiler.

Perhaps there are. But those folks, in order for them to carry out a serious responsibility, if you're looking at the type of equipment in the types of facilities where people are being cared for, so they would have to have the skills required before they'd be hired to do that.

And again, not having all the details on the specifications of individuals that are employed as such, we will send them over to the member.

Mr. Hart: — Well, Mr. Minister, though surely you must have a minimum level of training that an inspector must have before he's placed in such a position, whether it be some training through SIAST or . . . and also is there a minimum number of years of experience, whether that be six months on-the-job training or what have you? Could you not provide us with that information?

Hon. Mr. Osika: — Mr. Chair, there are minimum requirements that are specified and as spelled out by a variety of union agreements.

The different qualifications . . . yes, they could be engineers — first-class, second-class, or third-class engineers. They could be engineers who have the qualifications based on their performance in perhaps a military environment. But they are people that have some basic requirements in order to be accepted to meet the criteria of the job applications that are sent out and the individuals that are invited to compete for these positions. They must show that they are capable, able, and have had some training, by way of a certificate, a facility that they've attended, or undertake the training necessary for them to carry out these responsibilities.

It would not be prudent for someone to hire an individual who has had no background, no experience, in the field of carrying out such important inspections.

Mr. Hart: — Mr. Minister, I find it a little disconcerting that you have the executive director of that branch with you here today and that you're unable to tell us what the minimum requirements are for an inspector in the boiler and pressure unit . . . or boiler and pressure vessel unit inspection branch.

Hon. Mr. Osika: — There are four or five different options or combination of options that would fulfill the requirements of an individual looking for this kind of a position. And I'm happy to supply that information, what those combinations may be. There are a variety of them. Again from the different levels of engineering that an individual may have had, whether it's just a basic certificate or beyond or, as I mentioned, some training in the military background. There are a variety of combinations.

So we'll be happy to supply all the detail on what those basic minimum . . . For us to tell the member that the basic requirement is a certificate from SIAST may not fulfill the total requirement. There may be other requirements depending on what particular aspect of responsibilities the individual may be applying to do.

Mr. Hart: — Mr. Minister, again I find it a little concerning that you're not able to provide us this evening with the exact requirements; however, we won't dwell on that. My concern is

that I understand that there's been a fairly high turnover of staff in that particular unit. And could you give us an indication as to the average years of experience that the inspectors have that are currently working within your unit?

Hon. Mr. Osika: — Mr. Chairman, I'm told that the people working for the department now are between three and five years experience with the department. That does not include their experience prior to coming to the department. So they may have been occupied in other places. As a matter of fact, these people do quite a number of inspections each year and the addition of people based on the requirements of these additional inspections are quite extensive. But the folks that have been there up to this point in time, roughly between three and five years with the department, but prior to that may have had experience in other areas. And there may also, or there could be the possibility of people coming right out of engineering school and walking into a responsibility of this nature.

Mr. Hart: — Mr. Minister, I wonder, could you give us an indication as to the turnover in that particular unit . . . as the number of inspectors that have come and left within the last five years. I guess the question is: is there a high turnover or what is the turnover of inspectors in that unit?

Hon. Mr. Osika: — For a specific number of turnover might . . . may not be fair to suggest other than in general terms there is a fairly high turnover. And one of the reasons being is that the people gain the experience and then go on to private industry which attracts them through higher paying salaries. So the turnover is considerable; it's quite high.

Mr. Hart: — Mr. Minister, I would suggest perhaps there are other reasons that the turnover is high in that particular unit. I have a letter here in my hand that is dated December 16, 1999 and it's addressed to Lana Grosse, executive director. And it is signed by six individuals.

And I guess I would like to know, Mr. Minister, if these individuals have been and currently are employees of your department. They are . . . the names are Richard Guenther, Kathryn A. Black, Jim Kerr, Russ Mataford, Theo Poelen, and Gord Aisman. Are these people . . . have they been employees of the emergency or the protection branch, and more specifically the unit we are talking about? And are they still employed with the department?

(21:45)

Hon. Mr. Osika: — Mr. Chair, I wonder if we could either have a copy of the list of names, or if you would please repeat, if the member could repeat them for us. We didn't get them all.

Mr. Hart: — Mr. Minister, Richard Guenther, Kathryn Black, Jim Kerr, Russ Maddeford, Theo. Poelen, and Gord Aisman.

Hon. Mr. Osika: — Mr. Chair, all those employees are still there, with the exception of one.

Mr. Hart: — Mr. Minister, I would assume that they are inspectors within the boiler and pressure vessels safety unit. Is that correct?

Hon. Mr. Osika: — Yes, they are.

Mr. Hart: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. I wanted to confirm that they are employees of the department because these people sent a letter, as I indicated, to your executive director, outlining some very serious concerns within the unit, and I would like to pursue these concerns with you.

They have identified five main areas of concern, the first one being the administration of the power engineers exam and determination of eligibility. They say that none of the remaining inspectors are trained on procedures involved with the examination process. They go on to say that we need some training in order to get up to speed on what is involved in this area. I wonder could you tell me if that concern has been addressed, what has been done to address these concerns as outlined by these inspectors?

Hon. Mr. Osika: — Mr. Chairman, I'm told that yes, since that letter was written, there have been steps taken to address those concerns.

Mr. Hart: — I wonder if the minister could expand on those steps.

An Hon. Member: — Big steps.

Mr. Hart: — The Minister of Post-Secondary Education says big steps. I would hope that something more than big steps have been taken. These are people who are working within the unit, raising some very serious concerns, and I think we need a more defined answer than simply saying that some steps have been taken to address the concerns. Could you please expand on that?

Hon. Mr. Osika: — Mr. Chairman, I'm told that these people have received on-the-job training.

And unless there's something more that the member has in his questions, something specific, I'm told that these people have had the opportunity to become qualified to administer those certain exams and have received the on-the-job training. If there is some question with respect to inadequacies where there is still a concern, I would like those addressed directly, so we can deal with the specifically — if it's specific individuals, specific concerns — rather than try and guess as to what we need to zero in on. The concerns, I'm told, have been responded to through on-the-job training, qualifying people to administer certain examinations. But if there's some specific concern, then I'd appreciate knowing, so we can get right to the nub of the problem.

Mr. Hart: — Mr. Minister, I understand by reading the letter that the signatures to the letter state that branch practice in the past, only first-class power engineers can sit on the writing of first-class exams. And their concern is . . . The letter deals with the resignation of a manager, and their concern is that there isn't enough people with the experience to administer those exams. And that's their concern.

Now are there more people who have the qualifications and experiences to do the administration of the exams? Have there been people trained to fulfill that requirement?

Hon. Mr. Osika: — Mr. Chairman, the people that are sitting in on those exams now are considered to be qualified. So through the concerns that were raised, there were the opportunities to correct some of those concerns, both on the job and ensuring that people were qualified to sit in on the exams that were being carried out.

Mr. Hart: — Mr. Minister, the next area of concern deals with weld testing — weld testing. According to the six folks that submitted . . . or wrote the letter, they said no one has been . . . has had time to be fully trained to cover this area.

One of the signatures, Russ Maddeford, has been training with the manager that resigned but has . . . and is now doing independent testing, but he was using the manager of the inspection . . . the manager that resigned, he was using him as backup. He did not . . . Russ Maddeford did not feel confident in going out and doing inspections on his own. He felt he wasn't properly trained and the six people felt that this is a real area of concern.

Now what has been done to address that concern?

Hon. Mr. Osika: — Mr. Chairman, in the 18 months that has passed since that letter, I'm told that the people that are doing the well testing now have gained adequate enough experience to carry out that particular function. So during that period of time, there has been an opportunity for individuals to upgrade their abilities to carry out that function.

Mr. Hart: — I wonder if you could explain how those people were trained. Mr. Maddeford said after the resignation of the manager of inspections that he had no backup. There was no one else that he could rely on. He himself, Russ, felt that he wasn't . . . he didn't have the necessary training and experience to conduct the well tests. He used the manager of inspections as his backup. When the manager of inspections resigned, there was no backup.

So how did these people in 18 months get all this experience and training if they had no experienced people to work for? I wonder if you could explain that.

Hon. Mr. Osika: — Mr. Chairman, the experience that existed within the department from people who were qualified to do these well . . . the well tests, it was a combination of both support for one another plus the experience that had been there. And the additional experience of on the job, being able to facilitate an adequate enough experience to carry out that function.

Mr. Hart: — Mr. Minister, that doesn't seem credible. I make that comment based on the information in this letter. In the area number 2, in the letter, the well testing, it says:

With the recent departure of an employee, no one has time to be fully trained to cover this area. Ross Maddeford has been training with Henry . . .

And we're talking about Henry Bergey, who is the individual who resigned due to the problems within the branch, a person that has 22 years experience and did his level best to solve some of these problems. He ran up against a brick wall and submitted

his resignation and this letter now is a result of his resignation and the concerns that these folks have.

And the letter goes on to say:

Russ Maddeford has been training with Henry for the last month. He is now doing independent testing but still has to rely on Henry for assistance. Russ has no backup at this time other than Henry. And if Henry is gone, Russ has no backup.

So could you provide us with the names of the people who had the experience to train the folks and to do proper well testing? If there were . . . according to this letter, there is nobody there. So how did, how did the people that are in the unit gain experience when they had no one to gain experience from?

Hon. Mr. Osika: — Mr. Chairman, I guess the member is taking that letter as gospel, that there were no other people with the necessary training or expertise to coach others along. That's based on the letter that the member is reading.

So he's placing all the confidence in the world on what the person who is no longer there is saying, that there is no backup. And the contention within the department is that there were in fact people who were able and capable of assisting one another and meeting the requirements. So with all due respect, I just want to point that out.

Mr. Hart: — Mr. Minister, this letter is signed as I indicated by a number of employees who are listed on your organizational chart as inspectors. So I would place a fair bit of credibility in this letter. Obviously these people know what they're talking about. These aren't people that have walked in off the street or someone in a managerial or administrative position who are saying we've got problems in our inspection unit. These are the inspectors themselves that are raising these concerns.

Now, if in fact there are other people within the department or within the branch that have the experience to train people, provide us with the names of those people who did the training.

(22:00)

Hon. Mr. Osika: — I think, Mr. Chairman, what again may be both expedient and perhaps hopefully appropriate to the member, if he would share that letter with us and we would reply in writing to the questions that he is asking specifically in detail.

Because if there is some concern then it needs to be addressed and it needs to be addressed in probably a more detailed fashion or matter, if you wish, than just a matter of trying to guess or give answers to questions back and forth and skirting issues that should perhaps be zeroed in on and assessed and addressed by the department. We would very much appreciate the opportunity to do that.

Mr. Hart: — Mr. Minister, I'd be happy to provide you with a copy of the letter, but the person sitting behind you, that's who the letter was addressed to. It was addressed to your executive director, Lana Grosse. So you should have a copy of this letter available to you.

We are talking about some very serious issues here. You mentioned earlier that this unit is responsible for the inspection of boilers in schools and hospitals and long-term care homes and those sorts of things. And we have a group of individuals who have raised some concerns, and I have other documents here to indicate that these concerns have been raised for a period of years, and it seems like nothing has been done to address these concerns. So finally out of frustration they came forward and have raised these concerns to this level.

So I think what we will do is I'd be happy to provide you with a copy, but I think we will continue to discuss these concerns, Mr. Minister.

The third concern that's listed in the letter is, it's entitled "Branch past practices," and they go on to say:

Due to the high staff turnover, practices that normally would have been handed down by senior inspectors training their younger counterparts has been lost.

And they say:

We rely heavily on Henry to make up this deficiency in our unit.

So again, what they are saying is that this Mr. Bergey is resigning taking 22 years of experience with him. The remaining inspectors are saying look, we don't have the expertise within our group and they are asking for help.

And my question to you is, what has been done to address this particular concern where you don't have inspectors with experience to train the younger ones because it appears to me that this is an occupation where there is a lot of on-the-job training. So have you hired inspectors with more experience to train the younger ones? You indicated earlier that the average years of experience seems to be fairly low. And as you indicated earlier this evening, and I will repeat again, these people perform some very vital functions, and there is the issue of public safety here. And so I wonder, could you explain what has been done to address the concern about on-the-job training.

Hon. Mr. Osika: — First of all, these people again when they come to the responsibility areas, have their degrees. They have their certificates. They could be engineers when they do come to the job.

The member talks about the letter in December 16, 1999. Now since that time, has there been some problems that have come to light that would support the fact that nothing's been done since then or to . . . has there been a problem?

Have those concerns not been addressed? Have there been some issues that have happened that would suggest that there hasn't been any action taken to update or upgrade or to have confidence in those people that have been carrying out these responsibilities since that time? And if there are, then, yes, that's serious. And those specific issues should have been brought to someone's attention immediately.

Now this is now 18 months, and I guess my hope is that something did happen that people would not take the

responsibility or assume a responsibility of a serious job responsibility that they have if they didn't feel qualified. So I guess I appreciate very much the concerns that have been brought forward, but I'm also hoping that since the letter was written that there have been some measures taken that have prevented a serious incident from occurring as a result of the earlier concerns.

Mr. Hart: — Mr. Chair, I guess that's exactly the point. You asked what . . . has there been something, an explosion or something like that that has prompted these concerns, and I think that that's the problem here. These inspectors feel that there is the potential for a disaster. We don't need to wait until a boiler explodes and kills somebody before you take corrective measures, Mr. Minister, and these inspectors are saying that. I would read from this letter that these inspectors fear that there is the potential for that to happen.

And also, Mr. Minister, you keep referring to staff having training and experience elsewhere and that sort of thing. I wonder if you could, if you would undertake to provide it, me with a list of the years of experience and training that the inspectors have. Would you be prepared to do that, Mr. Minister?

Hon. Mr. Osika: — Yes, we'll undertake to do that. The fact still remains . . . we go back to 1999. We received a status report, and since that time hopefully, as I said, something has happened to try and make sure that there wasn't the catastrophe that you're suggesting might happen. Hopefully that's not the situation. So we had the status report, and people have carried out their responsibilities to this point in time. We will supply you with a detailed report of what has happened since that time.

Mr. Hart: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. I'll be looking forward to receiving your report.

The fourth concern that is listed by these individuals is a lack of experience. The inspector in the . . . and I'm quoting from the letter:

The inspector in the Regina office with the most amount of service is Richard Guenther with two and three-quarter years of experience. The remaining inspectors are approximately one year behind.

Now that's not much experience as you were saying earlier. And from what we've been told in the letter and other documents, it appears that this is a training on the job, and the inspectors themselves are saying that they don't have enough experience. The letter goes on and says:

Generally we accept that it takes over three years for a new employee to become an effective inspector.

Now these are inspectors themselves saying this, Mr. Minister.

Until then the learning curve is so great that a lot of time has been spent in investigating and studying the relevant codes. Again we rely heavily on Henry and Brian to direct us in our research.

So again I ask you, have you brought in people with more

experience because by now some of them may be up to four years of experience, Mr. Speaker, fairly new on the job? And in view of the concerns that these people are expressing, has there been people hired with more years of experience to replace the people who have left with 22 years of experience?

Hon. Mr. Osika: — Mr. Chair, that's another point in the letter from 1999 that we will address as to what action has been taken since that letter was written.

Mr. Hart: — Mr. Minister, the executive director of the branch is sitting behind you. Surely she'd be able to answer that question for us this evening, Mr. Minister.

Hon. Mr. Osika: — Mr. Chair, I'm told that there have been a number of training opportunities taken advantage of. For example, A and B endorsements — our inspectors need to get these A and B endorsements from the National Board of Boiler and Pressure Vessels. And there's communications training. And there are different training programs that are offered and made available to those people in those responsibility areas.

Mr. Hart: — Mr. Minister, then how many of the inspectors and staff have taken the training and taken advantage of those opportunities?

Hon. Mr. Osika: — Depending on the person's, the individual's previous experience or requirements, it could be any number of directed programs for an individual, depending on previous experience. And again there's a whole mixed bag of opportunities that would be made available depending on what specific needs a individual or individuals may require.

So again, the detail of all the available training programs, which, you know, we could find a list of, or send it to you with our other communication, I'd be happy to supply.

Mr. Hart: — Mr. Minister, it appears that there is a definite lack of information within your department in that area and I would hope that you could provide us at a future date with that information. It's somewhat surprising that the executive director wouldn't have that information available to her.

But we will go on with the fifth concern and that, at that time . . . I guess the question is does it still exist? Apparently there was quite a backlog in inspections and there was a great concern expressed by the inspectors that because of their lack of experience that they spent a lot of time trying to figure out what needed to be done instead of actually doing the work. They needed some experienced people to point them in the right direction, to explain codes to them and those sorts of things.

I wonder, could you give us an indication of what the backlog in the inspections is to date, and what remedies were put in place to deal with the backlog?

Hon. Mr. Osika: — The backlog that existed has been addressed in one of two ways. The numbers of backlogs . . . the numbers within the backlog have been reduced considerably, primarily due to the fact that in this year's budget there were provisions made for two additional inspectors to be hired to assist in reducing the backlog. Specific numbers I don't have because they've been lowered obviously, since there has been

inclusion of two additional people.

Mr. Hart: — Mr. Minister, have those two new inspectors been hired?

Hon. Mr. Osika: — They have not been hired, but that was the point of making the provisions within the budget — to bring them on stream as quickly as possible, and to address that.

Mr. Hart: — Mr. Minister, then in fact if you haven't hired new people, how can you address the backlog? These folks were saying some 18 months ago that there is a backlog. They don't have the experience to deal with it. They were spending a lot of time in administrative matters and those sorts of things, familiarizing themselves with codes, etc.

So how can the backlog be . . . I find it somewhat interesting that the backlog in fact has been reduced, and you haven't even hired the two new inspectors.

(22:15)

Hon. Mr. Osika: — The numbers of backlog changes from month to month. And from 18 months ago there would have been the problem of a backlog addressed. Let me just, if I can, refer to some background information.

Over 6,000 new pressure vessels have been added to the inspection inventory since 1996-97. That's a significant number. That's an average of about 1,200 new vessels per year. So in 2001-2002 this equipment will now become due for the five-year in-service inspections — that's going to come due.

This means that commencing this fiscal year there will be approximately 1,200 additional units that will require these kinds of inspections and that's one of the reasons that there were provisions made to hire two additional technicians to carry out this function. And so that . . . this rate of growth I'm told is expected to continue at 1,200 vessels per year.

Now each inspector can inspect 1,000 to 1,200 items per year — that's what I'm told. The combined 1,200 new pressure vessels which are now due for reinspection plus an estimated 1,200 new pressure vessels that will be put into service annually require or will be met . . . those needs will be met by the increase in these two additional inspectors which we will be searching for immediately.

Mr. Hart: — Mr. Minister, you indicated that an inspector can do between 1,000 and 1,200 inspections per year. Now is that experienced inspectors, inspectors who have four or five years of experience? And in fact are your inspectors doing that number of inspections per year?

According to some of the information I have, I would doubt whether those numbers of inspections are actually taking place, or if in fact they are whether the quality of inspection is there because of the concerns expressed by the inspectors. So if I understood you correctly, you said that an inspector should be able to do these up to 1,200 inspections per year.

My question is: in fact, are your inspectors doing that?

Hon. Mr. Osika: — Those inspectors that are full time attending to that responsibility and are in the field on a full-time basis, yes they can carry these out.

Mr. Hart: — Did I understand you correctly; you say they can do that. Or did you say they are doing that?

Hon. Mr. Osika: — I guess it's yes to both. They can do that when they're full time, when they're full-time inspectors doing nothing but in the field carrying out these inspections, that number is accurate.

Mr. Hart: — Mr. Minister, there was a concern expressed about . . . that dealt with the regulations of the inspection unit. The concern . . . and I'm just wondering when were the regulations last reviewed?

Hon. Mr. Osika: — Mr. Chair, they're currently under review and we'll be going into consultation, I'm told, this summer with respect to any changes that will be required.

Mr. Hart: — Mr. Minister, I have in my possession a department memo that's dated July 5, 1995, in which the concern was expressed with the long delay review of our outdated regulations. That was some six years ago almost. And you're telling me now that you're going to start reviewing them. Is that in fact . . . did I understand you correctly that these regulations will be reviewed in the near future?

Hon. Mr. Osika: — Mr. Chair, I'm told that the new Act was passed in 1999 and there is now the move to go into consultations with respect to regulations. So there was a new Act passed two years ago.

Mr. Hart: — So, Mr. Minister, the new Act is working with the old regulations who . . . regulations that were considered outdated back in 1995. Is that, is that what you're telling me?

Hon. Mr. Osika: — The new Act is not yet proclaimed. But it was as a result of the concerns that were raised that in fact there was a review undertaken and a need to revamp the Act, which was in fact passed here but not yet proclaimed in 1999.

Mr. Hart: — Mr. Minister, I wonder could you explain or tell us why the new Act hasn't been proclaimed?

Hon. Mr. Osika: — Because of the complexity of the Act and the regulations, it has not been proclaimed pending the regulations to be put in place.

Mr. Hart: — So what you are telling us, Mr. Minister, is that back in 1995, there was concerns being expressed about the outdatedness of the regulations back in 1995, and we are still operating with those outdated regulations now. We have a new Act that was passed in '99 and it hasn't been proclaimed.

And that tells me that I think you've got some real serious problems in this area, Mr. Minister. You have a letter sent to your executive director expressing — 18 months ago — expressing some very serious concerns about the inspection unit. It appears that really nothing has been done to correct that situation. Now the regulations were out of date in 1995 and nothing has been done.

I understand that the executive director was hired to update those . . . one of the duties was to . . . or requirements was to update the regulations and now you're telling us that hasn't been done. Mr. Minister, how are you going to deal with this serious situation you have in your department?

Hon. Mr. Osika: — Mr. Chair, again, referring to that letter, it was based on that letter that the member is suggesting the regulations were outdated. That is the expertise in that letter that suggests all those regulations were outdated. The executive director was brought into the department in 1999 to ensure that these regulations were in fact, following the new Act, that there was some new work initiated and created for the new regulations that would come in and allow that Act to be proclaimed.

But again, I . . . the suggestion that the regulations were outdated is based on the letter that you've received, on the expertise in that letter. Is that . . .

Mr. Hart: — No, Mr. Minister. The . . .

The Deputy Chair: — Order. Order.

The committee reported progress.

The Assembly adjourned at 22:27.