



# **STANDING COMMITTEE ON THE ECONOMY**

## **Hansard Verbatim Report**

**No. 4 – June 20, 2016**



**Legislative Assembly of Saskatchewan**

**Twenty-Eighth Legislature**

## **STANDING COMMITTEE ON THE ECONOMY**

Mr. Gene Makowsky, Chair  
Regina Gardiner Park

Mr. Buckley Belanger, Deputy Chair  
Athabasca

Mr. David Buckingham  
Saskatoon Westview

Mr. Larry Doke  
Cut Knife-Turtleford

Ms. Bronwyn Eyre  
Saskatoon Stonebridge-Dakota

Mr. Delbert Kirsch  
Batoche

Mr. Doug Steele  
Cypress Hills

[The committee met at 15:00.]

**The Chair:** — Here we go. Good afternoon, everyone. This is the Economy Committee, and I'd just like to state at the beginning we have one substitution this afternoon. Mr. Hargrave is here for Mr. Steele.

**General Revenue Fund  
Highways and Infrastructure  
Vote 16**

**Subvote (HI01)**

**The Chair:** — This committee's going to resume consideration of the estimates for the Ministry of Highways, specifically of vote 16 Highways and Infrastructure, central management and services, subvote (HI01). Minister Heppner is here once again with your officials. I'll leave it to you. If you have any opening statements or if you'd like to re-introduce members of your staff for the record, go ahead.

**Hon. Ms. Heppner:** — Thank you, Mr. Chair. I have no opening remarks. The officials that are with me today are the same that were here with us last Wednesday, so they should be recorded already, but I will ask them to introduce themselves before they answer questions.

**The Chair:** — Great. I was going to mention that, but thank you very much for that. I will now open the floor to questions for members of the committee. I recognize Mr. Belanger.

**Mr. Belanger:** — Thank you very much, Chair. Just to note that the last three-and-a-half hour session we had, we spent quite a bit of time on some of the southern highway issues that we had questions on and about. So I want to spend a bit of my time that we have remaining just on the northern part of the province. And I've got some questions on that, and as well I have a few other questions based on the central area of the province.

The first question I'd like to get is, or propose at this time, is just to get an update on the Far North road. Obviously there's a lot of history to this particular road, and we have heard a lot of different people speaking of the challenge that travelling from Black Lake, Stony Rapids out to Prince Albert . . . It's often a 12, 14-hour drive. And I'd just like to get an update as to where the highway, and what the shape of the highway is. I think it's Highway 905, if I'm not mistaken. And just in terms of the financial commitments, just give us a synopsis of where we're at with that particular highway. In particular the area I'm looking at is between the Wollaston Lake landing and then right to Black Lake.

**Ms. Ehrmantraut:** — Jennifer Ehrmantraut, associate deputy minister. The northern roads that you're talking about are the all-season roads up in the North. And we're spending our regular maintenance money which includes regular graveling, regular blading on those roads. So there's no capital upgrades on any of those roads that are planned for this year, just regular maintenance as well as regular winter maintenance.

**Mr. Belanger:** — Could you advise me as to the value of those

contracts and how they're broken down and who receives those contracts? I understand, for example, the Athabasca education development training council has a portion that they maintain. Could you or are you able to break that down for me today?

**Ms. Ehrmantraut:** — We don't have any of the details of those information here today, but we can get that for you.

**Mr. Belanger:** — All right. And is it fair to say, like is there even a ballpark figure as to what the values of those contracts are and who is providing the contracts?

**Ms. Ehrmantraut:** — I don't have that information at my fingertips today, but we can get that information for you.

**Mr. Belanger:** — Okay. And that's quite important, because I wanted to ask about the link from Stony Rapids on the south side of Lake Athabasca, as obviously you're going in from Stony, going along the south side of the lake. Well it would probably be . . . I'm not sure of the . . . more or less it'll be Fond-du-Lac River I guess, as the lake does actually become a river as you connect between Lake Athabasca and Black Lake. I think it's probably referred to as Pine Point. What's the distance that's being explored right now in terms of going right from Stony Rapids along the south shore? Or it should be Pine Channel rather. And then of course, the theory is that you'd just across to Fond-du-Lac. What distance is the proposal now in terms of the highway?

**Ms. Ehrmantraut:** — This is the first time we've heard about any proposal for a road being built along there, so do you have more information about the proposal?

**Mr. Belanger:** — No. At one time there was a lot of discussion of that particular connection because obviously in the Far North, the two bigger communities, Stony Rapids, you know, being the central hub-communities, community itself, whereas you look at Black Lake, it's a much larger community. You know, it's an Indian band. But really the airport was built in Stony Rapids, so there is no airport in Black Lake. So what happens is all the traffic, the air traffic, basically goes to Stony Rapids.

And of course further west of that is Fond-du-Lac. And there was a proposal at one time to actually connect along the south shore, to go along the south shore of Stony Rapids and go as far as you can. And that way, you could actually make a connection either by barge service or winter crossing to go into Fond-du-Lac. Because right now they, you know, they do the winter road maintenance, but there's actually a land highway being considered. And it just escapes my memory as to what the distance was. And I thought maybe you'd have a historical perspective.

**Ms. Ehrmantraut:** — So I do have from Stony Rapids to Fond-du-Lac. This is about 85 km long. It's locally operated and controlled by the Athabasca Basin Development corporation. And they are responsible for maintenance of the winter roads. So it is a winter road from Fond-du-Lac all the way over, and the overland portion of the route, it can be very tough to navigate because it's very rocky in areas, and there is a lot of wet areas and muskeg in there.

**Mr. Belanger:** — While there was a concept and a lot of discussion around not the ice road but the land road, I just wanted to make sure that there was no plans to date, as of today, to look at that option and actually building a permanent land road along the south shore of, I guess it would be, Pine Point or Pine Channel. I just wanted to confirm that.

**Hon. Ms. Heppner:** — I've been minister for two years, and I can't speak to conversations that my predecessors have had, but it's not an issue that's ever been brought up with me. There's no plans currently for such a road.

**Mr. Belanger:** — No, I just know that the initial discussions, there was a lot of talk on that particular connection. And I just wanted to make sure that that discussion is now not on. And I just wanted to ensure that because obviously there was a lot of folks that wanted to see a permanent land road between Stony Rapids. Obviously you can never, ever escape the fact that you do have to have . . . well in this case, it would almost be a winter or a river crossing to Fond-du-Lac. But there was an ambition at one time to have a road along the south shore of Fond-du-Lac River which of course is part of the Lake Athabasca system. And I just want to confirm that indeed Fond-du-Lac land road is simply not on the radar as of today. Is that correct?

**Hon. Ms. Heppner:** — I'm just double checking on that but I met with . . . As I had explained at our meeting last Wednesday, I met with northern leadership and FSIN [Federation of Sovereign Indigenous Nations] last Monday to discuss northern roads, and this one was not raised as an issue with them either.

**Mr. Belanger:** — Okay. Now I want to shift the gears and actually head a little further west, rather southwest, just going to my neck of the woods. We spoke briefly about the Fort McMurray road last time. I want to spend a bit of time on Highway 155. I'm familiar with Highway 155. I travel that every week, and I can almost tell you every pothole and bump there is on that road. I can tell you the exact distance from each kilometre that the problem is. But I want to work my way north as we head south.

Now on the La Loche road north, it's called the Semchuk Trail, and that is the 955. There's a lot of exploration around Patterson Lake. Has the government committed any money in terms of maintaining that Semchuk Trail, and is there any more dollars — major dollars, capital dollars — that is being contemplated or requested on that particular stretch of highway?

**Hon. Ms. Heppner:** — Just for clarification, you had referenced 955, and then you had also referenced a trail. It might be just local terminology for 955. Is that the same piece of road?

**Mr. Belanger:** — Yes.

**Hon. Ms. Heppner:** — There is nothing currently on the books for capital work in that area. It would be regular maintenance.

**Mr. Belanger:** — Okay. And do we have an idea what that maintenance cost is because it's obviously maintained by Highways, or is it by a private contractor?

**Hon. Ms. Heppner:** — There would be crews out of La Loche that would be doing maintenance on that road, and there may be some contracting out. I don't have that information with me, but we will get back to committee if there is contract work on that, outside of highways crews.

**Mr. Belanger:** — There's a lot of optimism, and there's certainly a lot of questions, anyway, about the viability and opportunity attached with Patterson Lake. I think the company that's working out there is NexGen. NexGen is a uranium company that's doing a lot of investigation around uranium deposits in the Patterson Lake area. There's been just a ton of exploration happening there. And while oil right now is in the tank in terms of the value, there's also the Oilsands Quest activity up in that area as well.

And there's been a lot of talk as to what highway or what route some of these resource companies would prefer to use if and when their projects proceed to an actual implementation phase, where you're constructing a mine site and you're actually extracting resources, whether it be uranium or oil.

You haven't been privy to any of those discussions, or there's no company that has approached you, or you anticipate? Overall, when we look at the roads to the economy strategy province-wide, the interest in some of the resources out there, there hasn't been any consideration for that activity there, when you look at your long-range spending plan, whether it's a 5-year or a 10-year plan, if that exists?

**Hon. Ms. Heppner:** — Thank you for the question. I know that my deputy minister has spoken with the company that you reference, but they have given us no proposal or an idea of what their proposal might be for infrastructure that's necessary in that area. If they do, we'll obviously be willing to look at that.

We had an agreement on 914 to partner with industry on a road there that would help with industry in the area. And if there are similar partnerships that we can look at with other industry partners, we're happy to do that. But as of today, they've asked nothing of us and have not given us a proposal.

**Mr. Belanger:** — And that's pretty important, because you look at . . . When you made reference to 914, that of course is the road going into Pinehouse and further on up to the Key Lake mine, which is a mine that has been in existence for a long time. And there's almost a lot of comparison to some of the importance of 914 as there is on the Semchuk Trail, which is 955.

[15:15]

So that's the reason why I'm asking the question is that . . . Do you have numbers on 914 as to what you commit with your partners? Because obviously we've had partners that will come along and say, well we're prepared to invest in this particular highway. Would you guys invest with us to give us safer travel for our trucks hauling all the resources out? And on occasion, this has been done. So I guess I'm trying to find out for 914, what are the partnership arrangements? What's the value? And how long are these arrangements for?

**Mr. Govindasamy:** — My name is Nithi Govindasamy, deputy

minister of Highways and Infrastructure. A number of years ago with the sort of activity in the uranium sector, it was brought to our attention that a 57-kilometre zone connector between McArthur and Cigar lakes was necessary, including a 5-kilometre bypass around the Key Lake mine.

And so the ministry — this was before my tenure started — the ministry did have some fairly intensive discussions and negotiations with Cameco and partners with respect to having that connector road built. That was 914, a 57-kilometre connector. At that time the agreement was structured in such a way . . . or the proposal was structured in such a way that it would include a 50/50 cost sharing arrangement between government — us — and the mining company.

And also at that time, the estimated cost to actually have that connector be built and basically function as a public highway was estimated to be about \$60 million. We made it pretty clear at that time, and it's clear in the agreement, that any provincial cost sharing to have that connector built would be contingent on a positive decision by the mining industry, in this case the companies that I've mentioned, to proceed with the construction of the Millennium mine development that is just close to that particular area. As well as the fact that it was understood that if the provincial government stepped in on any kind of industry partnership with the companies that I've mentioned, that that upgrading of that highway would become a provincial highway that would then provide a continuous public access from Pinehouse to the junction of 905 that the member had suggested earlier. So it would have to be under all those conditions.

The new corridor between Key Lake and Highway 905, if it had been built, would be operated and maintained at 100 per cent cost to the industry and subject to regular reviews, public reviews and reviews by the Ministry of Highways and Infrastructure.

We've done quite a bit of work on 914 with respect to environmental studies, general location of the road, and obtained preliminary approvals for the Key Lake bypass, etc. And we continue to basically continue with those studies, including not only a general location but estimating and assessing the costs of building this 57-kilometre connector on Highway 914.

And Cameco has obviously been an integral part of much of those discussions and negotiations. Unfortunately in the last year or so, given the state of the uranium industry, it appeared to us and it appears unlikely that Cameco and the uranium companies would be able to proceed with the original plans to construct the Millennium mine, and that those plans, while they are still there as plans, probably will not see any real execution until such time as the situation for the uranium industry improves substantially. So that's the situation on 914.

**Mr. Belanger:** — Okay. So on 914 — I just want to make sure I get this — you're saying to me today that there is a connector highway between McArthur and Cigar.

**Mr. Govindasamy:** — No, I'm sorry. I'm saying that a 57-kilometre connector has to be built between McArthur and Cigar.

**Mr. Belanger:** — Okay. Now Cigar just recently announced a bunch of layoffs, right? Is that the same operation where you lost 500 jobs? So I guess my question is what is the state of that highway now? Like you said \$60 million, cost shared 30/30. Have we fully expended the money, and what's the shape of the highway?

And granted, I'm not decrying the fact that Cameco's a good company. I certainly think the investment is important to note that it is a good investment. But \$30 million each — I'm assuming the 60 million is the total cost and partnership 50/50 as you indicated — \$30 million each. But did each of the partners contribute their full amount? Did Cameco contribute theirs and you contribute yours?

**Mr. Govindasamy:** — Let me just step back and explain what the situation is currently. I think I want to be clear and on the record that the road has actually not been constructed. So that 57 kilometres is the connector route that was planned to be constructed. And the MOU [memorandum of understanding] agreement that I referenced earlier is in anticipation of that 57 kilometres being constructed at some point down the road. Those plans are still there but have been sort of slowed down because of the situation with the uranium industry.

Now we have, in partnership with Cameco, done some work in terms of studying what the general location of that connector road would be. We've sort of looked at the environmental considerations that go, as you know, with constructing any kind of highway in the far north. We have done some of that initial planning work, but the road itself has not been constructed.

**Mr. Belanger:** — But there is traffic southwest of Cigar Lake. Like how far out is the actual, some of the . . . You were talking 5 kilometres of highway, or is it 15? Like how far southwest of Cigar are we, in terms of vehicles being able to travel in that area?

Because I know there has been some vehicular traffic between the two mines. And maybe it's a winter road, or maybe just there's a mapping out party. I'm not certain what . . . A couple of the guys were talking about how they connected between the two mines, and whether that was just a Ski-Doo excursion or whether there's actually vehicles run a certain distance between the two points. Do you have any information on that?

**Hon. Ms. Heppner:** — There's actually no official road there; nothing that's part of the provincial highways system. So if vehicles are travelling, they're doing that on their own volition through whatever conditions exist there and maybe pounding down a trail. But there's no provincial stretch of road or anything that the province would maintain in that particular area.

**Mr. Belanger:** — But there is a route that has been selected. Is that fair enough to say?

**Hon. Ms. Heppner:** — For the plan that we had to partner with industry, there would be a route selected for that particular proposal. But wherever the folks that you're referencing are travelling, I can't say where they're travelling, but it's not any kind of provincially funded or provincially maintained roadway of any kind.

**Mr. Belanger:** — No, no. You know, sometimes folks do these kind of trips. They travel between the two mines, and you hear the stories of their travels. And so I'm not certain whether they're just using a Ski-Doo or a truck, but they talk about travelling back and forth, and that there is some vehicular traffic southwest of Cigar Lake. And I just wanted to confirm, if there is any of that kind of traffic, what the condition of the road is and where it's at in terms of the partnership.

So basically am I to assume then that we're slow-walking this partnership agreement until such time that the uranium prices rebound and Cameco's prepared to come along and do the actual highway? And who would have the final decision-making power on this project? Obviously the province wouldn't go ahead without Cameco, but if Cameco says we're ready to go, we're going to build this, then the province would just follow their lead on this. Is that correct?

**Mr. Govindasamy:** — So based on the agreement that we have with Cameco, it is pretty certain that the road itself, the actual construction for the functional planning and design and construction of the road, will not occur until it's made absolutely clear to themselves and to us that construction of the Millennium mine is about to start.

And so at that point in time, if there is such a point in time, we would then have to reassess and re-estimate in terms of the costing of the highway because it's been a few years since the agreement actually came into place. And then we would have to look at the general location. We would have to look at completing the work that we've already begun in terms of the general location and the environmental studies that I mentioned. The whole planning process actually starts again, once we get a firm commitment from Cameco that Millennium mine is about to begin, or is going to be constructed.

And the references that I made to the situation, or the economic situation facing the uranium industry, directly has a bearing on Cameco's plans for the future of this particular highway. I can't say, sitting in my position, one way or another when that may or may not happen.

**Mr. Belanger:** — Is it fair to ascertain the increasing costs on an annual basis? As you indicated, the costs would be dramatically increased, I'm assuming, from two years ago to three years from now. Have you done any estimation as to what the costs could possibly end up being, given the increase in a wide variety of material and equipment and so on and so forth?

**Mr. Govindasamy:** — So this is, it's a bit of a hypothetical question. And I know the response is that, the answer is that we haven't done any recent re-estimation of what the costs might be. But my sense is that it wouldn't dramatically be different in terms of what some of the original costing may have been. But we would have to do that work to be able to be more certain in terms of what the costs may be.

**Mr. Belanger:** — Okay, so I just wanted to . . . The final question on that front is what work has been done to date? When you talk about a proposed route, obviously people have to kind of mark it out. There's discussions around how to build it, and there's also discussions around some of the environmental issues that you would raise on this particular

highway because it's obviously got two federally regulated uranium mines attached to it. What have we spent so far? And has the cost sharing been 50/50, or is the initial cost, all that, borne by Highways?

**Mr. Govindasamy:** — I don't have any exact dollar numbers that have already been spent in the planning stage, but we can certainly look at getting that for you. It is the construction site that has actually been agreed to as a 50/50 cost sharing, so my assessment is that the planning work that has already been done, or is being done, has been paid for by the Ministry of Highways and Infrastructure.

**Mr. Belanger:** — Okay. And obviously the industry thinks 5, 10, 15 years down the road. They're very adept at anticipating things. And they're good at ensuring that they protect their shareholders' interests obviously, because long-term planning is something they do very well. So have they shared with you any projected time frame in which they might anticipate the uranium prices crawling back to some decent levels where they can justify the investment?

**Mr. Govindasamy:** — So I think, just a general note, a general reference to the state of the economy, state of commodity prices and so on and so forth, I know the Government of Saskatchewan gets regular briefings through the Ministry of the Economy with respect to the economy as a whole, including the commodity markets, etc. I'm not sure that there's a lot of predictive value in any assessments that may be done currently with respect to any of the commodity markets.

We do receive information as a government from various, you know, various economic sectors on the state of the economy, etc., but there's been really no firmness with respect to any information provided back by the companies concerned with respect to when the turnaround may come, and to what extent the turnaround would then have an impact on the future plans to either restart mines that have been temporarily closed or to begin construction of a new one.

**Mr. Belanger:** — Okay. The other . . . And that's fair enough. But obviously I think, you know, generally one would assume — and it would be a safe assumption to make — that commodity prices and fluctuating nature of those commodity prices that over a period of time . . . And we've been involved with those commodities for years if not generations that we would basically have some idea as to, in concert with industry, where we think the industry is going to be in five or ten years. And that's the basis of why I asked you the question, assuming that there might be some information that you could share. And obviously nobody has a crystal ball, but you can certainly anticipate some of the prices coming back to decent levels. And that's the reason why I asked the question.

[15:30]

I want to go to further west as we leave the mine sites and go right into the Pinehouse, Beauval area. The minister spoke about public partnerships where the industry itself works with the government in ensuring that . . . For example, the Key Lake mine is a big mine. It's been operational for many, many years. And the traffic that goes along Highway 914, it's pretty busy, pretty steady. And of course you come into Pinehouse and then

you go to the junction and while some of the highway's volume splits at the junction of 914 and 165, some go down to the No. 2, which is the La Ronge highway, and go points south.

However some of the trucks also go west on 165 and then go into Meadow Lake and of course on to Alberta. And these are trucks, you know, hauling goods to and from the mine sites. Have you ever done a traffic volume test on those particular mines and seen where the vast majority of truck traffic is? I'm talking about the traffic that serves the Key Lake mine.

**Hon. Ms. Heppner:** — We do have traffic counts. Coming down 914, I'll start at the northern part. It would be just south of Key Lake mine. Daily traffic counts are 50. It increases to 90 closer down to Pinehouse. After Pinehouse, it's 175 on 914 to that juncture you spoke about.

165 heading west right after Pinehouse is 120 per day, increases to 300, then 590 at Beauval. 155 south of Beauval is 530 to the juncture of Highway No. 55.

If you go east from the juncture at 165, the traffic count's about 120 to 170. Highest count on 165 is 230 before it hits the junction of 2.

**Mr. Belanger:** — So between those two routes, you're saying 230 on 165 and 90 on 165? Or sorry, west on 165, I missed that number.

**Hon. Ms. Heppner:** — I can get a copy of this to you. 165 west of that junction, the initial count is 120. It grows to 590 at Beauval, 810 right after that, and then reduces because at Beauval traffic kind of splits off onto other highways. So south of Beauval to the juncture of 55 is 530. If you go east, it starts out at 120 and maximum count is just north of the junction of 2 at 230.

**Mr. Belanger:** — So as the mine has traffic going to and from, right at the junction at 914 and 165, am I . . . Is it safe to say that you have 120 per day heading east at that junction and you have . . . no sorry, 120 heading west at that junction and 230 heading east on that junction? Is that a fair assessment to make?

**Hon. Ms. Heppner:** — No. This might . . . I'll give you this. It's easier. Right at that junction, if you go east, the immediate traffic count is 120. If you go west, the immediate traffic count is 120, but on the northern part of 914 coming down from the mine is 50.

**Mr. Belanger:** — Okay.

**Hon. Ms. Heppner:** — So it obviously collects traffic along that highway but the mine traffic would indicate about 50 per day.

**Mr. Belanger:** — Okay. Now the reason I'm asking this question is that people are talking about the fact . . . like you look at the community at Beauval. If you have 120 vehicles going back and forth each day, and I'm assuming those 50 trucks coming out of the mine, what volume of those 50 trucks coming to and from the mine, whether they're hauling yellowcake out or hauling supplies in, what would be the percentage of truck traffic going west of the junction versus east

of the junction? Is it half and half, or is it 30 trucks versus 20?

And the reason I'm asking those questions, that is if you travel that particular route between the Pinehouse junction and Beauval there are two or three bridges and two or three areas of that highway that's in very, very poor shape. And my point being is that if we know what the volume of truck traffic is west of the junction of 914 and 165, then it would certainly lend the argument to the people that are saying we need to have our highway fixed to our community because you've got truck traffic, in particular big semis coming through our community, and it's not safe. So that's why I need to know those numbers out of the 50 going to and from the Key Lake mine each day.

**Hon. Ms. Heppner:** — We just tabled a copy of the traffic volume map with the Chair. It's also available on our website. At least on the website I think you can probably make it a little bit bigger, because it's . . . the numbers are a little bit cramped.

As to those 50 vehicles coming down 914 south to that juncture, we have the numbers of vehicles but we don't keep track of the types of vehicles on that so I wouldn't be able to say at that juncture how many trucks are going east or how many trucks are going west as opposed to passenger vehicles or light trucks.

**Mr. Belanger:** — Right. Now, and that's exactly the point because that kind of data we absolutely do need. And I'll give you the argument why. Because in the community of Beauval, as you . . . The community of Beauval is right on the main route; it's right on 165. And the mayor and the council there have been arguing on a pretty steady basis that as the truck traffic comes through their community — the community's right on 165 — that there are always people walking along the main highway, because they jog and they exercise. There's a lot of traffic coming in and out of the community of Beauval, and now we hear there's a 120 a day on that particular route including the truck traffic.

And then as you head just east of the community, the highway dips down and crosses two rivers — the same river, but it splits so that you have two river crossings and then you have an uphill climb after you kind of pass through this valley. So the road itself, right from the Beauval forks or Beauval junction, probably about 15 kilometres past that, you have a bunch of truck traffic, heavy-haul truck traffic, and it's really not safe because of the condition of the highway.

We've explained this to the former minister who's now the deputy Premier. And he said he was acutely aware of the risks and dangers of that particular stretch of highway. Just the sheer volume of the traffic is one challenge. But the other problem is that they haul all kinds of chemicals, and some of the chemicals they haul is pretty potent stuff, like hydrochloric acid I think is one of the chemicals that the mine needs on a regular basis.

So the mayor and council and some of the residents of that particular community, they are arguing that they need some improvements in that particular area right ASAP [as soon as possible] because the danger there is some . . . and if not sooner, someday there's going to be a major accident in that particular area. And then you have a river system, you have a community that's close proximity to the highway. You have a number of vehicle traffic.

So when we explained that to the former minister, he said that he was acutely aware of the danger of that particular stretch of highway. So I'm just trying to explain to you that this situation cannot continue to be tolerated because there is going to be some major problems there sooner than later.

So if you look at the stretch of road right from the Beauval junction to about maybe 10 kilometres up, there are some pretty critical areas where, if you have an upturned semi-trailer truck full of hydrochloric acid, that it's going to create some major, major problems.

So I wanted to see if you have an update for me over the last several months as to whether there has been any plan to make improvements to that particular stretch of highways, and where things are at in the priority of that highway when it comes to safety for all the truck traffic, especially the truck traffic hauling dangerous chemicals out of Key Lake mine.

**Hon. Ms. Heppner:** — I do have a list of projects on 165. There are five bridge replacements, and some culvert replacements including an emergency culvert replacement, but five of the bridges will be replaced. That's in this year's construction year.

**Mr. Belanger:** — Do you have the location of those bridges?

**Hon. Ms. Heppner:** — Yes. I can get you — this one's kind of written over — I can get you a clean copy of where they are. If you want to give me some time, I can table it with the Chair.

**Mr. Belanger:** — Absolutely.

**Hon. Ms. Heppner:** — Yes.

**Mr. Belanger:** — The thing that's important as well is that we're seeing a lot of forestry development in that area as well. And 165 itself, the forestry companies that come into the area and cut down the forest resource, you know, as they're hauling these trucks out with the forest products, it's tearing the heck out of those highways. It's tearing the highways up. Is there any maintenance fees or costs that these forestry companies have to cover as part of their licence to operate in that area?

**Hon. Ms. Heppner:** — We're just going to quickly change officials to answer that question. But we tracked down the information that you asked for specifically about how many trucks were on 165 and 914 as opposed to the total truck traffic. On 165 heading east is 30 trucks per day; on 165 heading west is 15 trucks per day; and 914 heading south to that juncture is 35 trucks per day.

**Mr. Wagar:** — Hello. My name is Blair Wagar. I'm the assistant deputy of planning and policy. So in terms of the forestry industry, we work very closely with them. The Ministry of the Economy, the Ministry of Environment, and Ministry of Highways together with all the companies work with the forestry industry to work through different priorities that they have for the road network. And of course they have many in terms of the 900-series roads. They've agreed that Highway 55 is one of the primary focuses for them right now because it supports the entire industry.

And in terms of partnerships, because of the nature of the forestry industry and where Saskatchewan is located compared to where the markets that they are serving are, being very competitive in transportation is really important to them. So through transportation partnership program there's permitting that we're allowed, that we allow them to operate at where they can haul heavier weights for certain fees associated with that. It's very specific to the company and the volume and the weights that they're carrying and the roads that they're driving on. So it's quite specific, as well as that money that gets collected gets reinvested into the network to try to support the road network overall and how the forestry industry operates.

**Mr. Belanger:** — What would you say that the fees for the extra heavy-haul permits would generate on an annual basis?

**Mr. Wagar:** — Yes. Sorry, I don't have that information specifically with me. It would vary from company to company depending on the volume and traffic and where they're operating themselves. So I don't have that specific information with me off the top of my head.

**Mr. Belanger:** — So you wouldn't even have a ballpark figure then?

**Mr. Wagar:** — I would be reluctant to get into guessing.

**Mr. Belanger:** — I can almost assume that the return on that is probably minimal if you look at the time frame in which these companies are allowed to haul, heavy-haul, probably more in the winter months than anything else. And that as part of the incentive package, that there's probably not a lot of cost to hauling a lot more weight out of the North. That really it's all about, you know, the economics of the forestry project that you're looking at as opposed to critical maintenance of the infrastructure. So I'm going to assume, without having those numbers here, that that amount generated is probably minimal.

[15:45]

And now I look at the Green Lake to Big River improvements that we see that's happening. And people ask me back home, well what's the highway for? Is it improving overall safety of that particular route? And I tell them, well one of things that I want to do is to make sure that if they're hauling the forest resources out, as I've just alluded to in 165, why are they only maintaining the highway 100 kilometres from that point? If it's meant to give the forestry company the incentive to set up shop, then why isn't this money being spent further north as opposed from Green Lake south? And that's one of the things that I . . . The question was asked of me.

So I see no capital plans for the North. I see a maintenance budget for the North. I see a lot of forestry activity, the vast amount of activity happening in the Northwest. But I see a fleeting investment into highways south of Green Lake which is our furthest southernmost community in my constituency.

Now I guess the question I would ask, is there a longer term plan or a longer term strategy around properly investing into infrastructure? If you're going to take out the resources, then at least put something back, and that something back should be safer and better highways. That's the message that a lot of



people in northern Saskatchewan have been telling me on a steady basis.

So I guess the question I have for the minister or the DM [deputy minister] or the ADM [associate deputy minister] is, how do you determine and what plan is there to reinvest in the northern roads that are being used to extract the resources, in particular the Beauval-Green Lake connection? That's one of the roads that really needs some focus, and especially the road 165 south . . . or sorry, east up into 914 and up to the Key Lake mine. So is there any strategy to finally invest in the real highways that the resources are being pulled out of?

**Hon. Ms. Heppner:** — Well, Mr. Chair, I have to take exception to the fact that the member . . . I thank him for his questions and interest in the North. I know that we have these discussions at estimates, and he's had them with my predecessors, but I just want to put on the record . . . He says that there's a maintenance budget for the North. Half of our budget, about half of our budget that's going into the North is capital. The budget's \$52 million. That's not \$52 million in maintenance. A good portion of that is capital. I have an entire list of capital projects that are going to be going into northern communities. As I just said, on 165, there's five bridge replacements alone plus some other work. But there is capital going into the North, so I wanted to make that clear.

The comments about 55, he had said it was an incentive, to incentivize the forestry industry. I would say that's not the case. No. 55 is a east-west corridor in that part of the province, and it's to make sure that we've got a good corridor going through. We obviously can't do the whole thing at once, but this is yet another section that we're doing to improve that roadway. We have to get our exports out of our province. And we need more than Highway no. 1, Highway 11, and Highway 16 in order to do that, and 55 is an important road for us. So those are some of the investments that we're putting there. But I just wanted to correct some of those statements. And I know that my deputy minister has some comments as well.

**Mr. Govindasamy:** — I wanted to add to what the minister has said in terms of looking at the economic activity generated in Saskatchewan, including economic activity generated by industries such as the forestry industry. We talk to the industry folks on a regular basis. We do know what the priorities are for industry with respect to being able to conduct their business in a economically competitive manner. These industries generate jobs in the province. In fact many of the First Nations teams and groups that I've met with in northern Saskatchewan on my travels suggested to me that these companies, you know, are a good source of employment for many of the folks.

And so when we look at highway development projects, we do take a look at the whole area as a whole and determine, based on the condition of the road, the economic importance of the road, as well as the type of economic activity that is generated in that area. We proceed to prioritize these roads. Highway 55 is an important road for the province as a whole and is not being done at the expense of other roads. The minister's already suggested that we have a fairly significant capital program budget for northern Saskatchewan, and that has continued over the last number of years. I know that I have had to respond to questions at estimates for a number of years now in terms of the

type of work that we've been doing and will continue to do in northern Saskatchewan.

Case in point, for a number of years we were aware that major capital works needed to be undertaken at Stony Rapids airport. I went up there and met with the folks, and I looked at the situation with respect to the kind of economic activities Stony Rapids airport generates for the northern residents. We entered into discussions and negotiations with the federal government, that came to the table recognizing the economic importance of that particular airport as well as Buffalo Narrows, and we made major capital investments. We had to redo the road as I've said at the last estimates discussion. We did not ignore that particular airport or the capital improvements that have taken place. And now those capital improvements that have taken place at that particular airport have been welcomed by the communities there. And I've met with them on several occasions, and they're very pleased as to the investments that have been done.

We can't be doing everything in one particular year or do all of the capital investments that we need to make in one go. So we've been very carefully looking at the requirements: the type of traffic situation that the member has mentioned, the economic activity that is generated, the needs of the population up there, improving the quality of life of the people. And we've made major improvements to a number of those roads.

123 comes to mind although this year it's been a bit wet. We did make some fairly major capital improvements to raise the grade in 123. That was a constant point of contention as to the condition of 123. We focused on it, and we have, to the best of our ability, improved 123.

And there's a number of other such examples where we have spent money, public dollars, improving the condition of the roads, and as I said we can't get to every road in northern Saskatchewan. The member is fully aware northern Saskatchewan has the majority of our gravel roads, which can be a challenge, and building roads in northern Saskatchewan can be a challenge all in itself. But certainly when we approach these sorts of investments, we look at the entire situation.

And culvert replacements and bridge replacements, as the member has suggested, are important. We are aware of traffic safety issues, etc., and so the bridge replacement program . . . Actually I am very pleased with the bridge replacement program in the ministry. We can take comfort in the fact that I have some of the best bridge engineers in the country, and I call on their expertise to tell me whether or not a bridge is safe, unsafe, etc., and so far they have been right.

Same with the culvert replacement program — we've had to replace hundreds, thousands of culverts. We've got 62,000 culverts that we have to deal with across the province, and there have been a number that have failed since 2014 when we had the big floods. We've been replacing them continuously, and a number of those culvert replacements are in northern Saskatchewan.

So just to sum it up, in terms of our capital investment program, in terms of our maintenance program, in terms of getting into partnerships with First Nations communities up there who help

us to maintain those roads, we have a robust program for northern Saskatchewan with respect to addressing the needs of northern Saskatchewan with respect to highways.

**Mr. Belanger:** — What's the total capital budget this year for the North when you talk about the culverts and the airports?

**Hon. Ms. Heppner:** — Of the \$52 million budget, the capital accounts for just under 24 million, 23.7.

**Mr. Belanger:** — Now this is the point that I would make. When we hear the language in northern Saskatchewan, when you talk about using the words significant capital, or we use the phrase that has been recently used, robust, you know, I respectfully disagree. That's not robust.

\$24 million for half the land mass of the province of Saskatchewan, in which the government is extracting resources out on a regular, continual basis, and some of the investments that you've made in particular, that I have alluded to here, are primarily for industry. And it will be for industry in the future. And people need to work. I'm not decrying that as well. But I'm saying that we shouldn't be using words like robust or significant capital when you look at the volume of spending on culverts and airports. Twenty-four million dollars for the entire half, north, of the province out of a budget of \$1.3 billion can hardly be described as robust.

So I would respectfully disagree with the notion that we are doing, you are doing well when it comes to northern Saskatchewan. There is no way that I would support that statement in the sense that . . . You look at some of the arguments being made from the safety perspective. Now even if we set aside industry's needs, the general truck traffic or general legal traffic . . . And I travel those roads on a continual basis as my colleague from Cumberland does as well. We probably know Highway 123 a lot more than the minister does. We probably know the condition of the English River First Nation more than the minister does. We know the difference between a petty investment versus a robust investment, and we don't see that in northern Saskatchewan. We simply don't see it.

The other issue that I think is important is what we do see, is we see the resources being hauled out of the North at a pretty steady pace, and we see the vehicle counts. We know that much of those vehicle counts are attached to trucks hauling resources out. So you've got to be very careful in the language that you use when you say robust investment because we know it's not robust.

And I would point out that sooner than later the people in the North are going to start getting more and more angry because we have a lot of traffic in that area that are everyday travellers, not truck traffic hauling out the resources. But we have school buses, and we have families in vans. We have smaller cars. We have all kinds of traffic on those roads. And we hear first-hand some of the challenges people have to manoeuvre our northern roads safely. The challenges are there on a continual basis.

So whether it's 123 or 903 or the Pelican Narrows main highway or whether it's the Turnor Lake highway, these are highways people are always talking about. So if I go back to

them and I say, well the government says that they have a robust investment in capital highway in northern Saskatchewan, how am I to respond to them? Could you give me some advice on that?

**Hon. Ms. Heppner:** — Well, Mr. Chair, I understand that the member doesn't like the language used by my deputy minister. But I'm going to say it's more. It's a 70 per cent increase from the NDP's [New Democratic Party] last budget in investment in the North.

The capital investment this year is almost 100 per cent increase over our capital into roads last year. The percentage of provincial traffic, 3 per cent of it's in the North, but they're getting 9 per cent of our budget. So we are investing in the North, as the deputy minister said. We can't do everything at once. We are making investments in the North: 70 per cent increase over whatever the NDP prioritized in their last budget, which is more. And we'll continue to invest in the North.

[16:00]

**Mr. Belanger:** — Now one of the things that is important to note is that . . . I just can't remember offhand what the total Highways budget was in 2007, but I can guess it's probably around between 3 and \$400 million. You got a budget of \$1.3 billion, and our argument is we do need more capital in the North. You've got triple the money in Highways, and you can use the comparison of the 3 per cent of the traffic, but where are you getting a lot of resources from is from northern Saskatchewan.

So the people that are in the North are saying two or three things on a continual basis. Number one is they support development. They think it's a great idea. They think it's great for the economy. It's great for them that they're getting jobs and they want to be part of the workforce of the Saskatchewan economy overall. And they think it's great. So you go to any northern community and every leader will say, yes of course we want development, but they will add that big three-letter word — but — we're just not here to have the resources taken out and the government not reinvesting anything in.

If there are deals made with industry, fine. That's the role of government to do that. But we're saying that if you're going to make a deal to give away the resources of the North, then you should invest in the basic things like highway infrastructure. And I'm sorry, but \$24 million out of a \$1.3 billion budget can hardly be described as significant. And that's the point that many northerners want to make.

That being said, I want to ask the question around Pelican Narrows if I can. There's another area. For years the elders have been complaining about the road going through Pelican Narrows, and that highway is 135. And there was a lot of work done to try and make improvements to that highway right through the community of Pelican Narrows. A lot of truck traffic goes through there as well, and I'm trying to find the numbers and the volumes of truck traffic going through Pelican Narrows. And I think the number is somewhere around 360, 300 along 135.

And that kind of vehicle traffic going through the community of

Pelican Narrows, the community has long asked for the main road to be paved. It's only about 6 or 7 kilometres at the most, 7 kilometres. And what does it cost to pave 7 kilometres? So they're asking and have been asking this government since 2007 to repair that or to put even a basic paving surface over it, because as the trucks go through the community, it's a danger to the local people. But it's also a lot of dust, and it's not safe. And for eight years through record revenue, nothing has been done for Pelican Narrows' main highway.

So these are some of the things that come forward as we travel, and to date there's been no improvement that I can see on the Pelican Narrows' main highway. And yet this was something that was identified many, many years ago. So I guess the question I would ask is, where is the Pelican Narrows paving project at as of today?

**Hon. Ms. Heppner:** — I'll let my deputy minister answer the specifics of that question. But in that lengthy preamble, the member said a couple times that our budget's \$1.3 billion. I just want to correct the record: it's 1.15. Five hundred million of that is for the Regina bypass, so there's \$650 million left for the rest of the province. And I just want to make sure that when we're talking about provincial highway system outside the bypass, the allotment is \$650 million. The total budget is 1.15, not 1.3, and Nithi will follow up with the particulars on Buffalo Narrows.

**A Member:** — Pelican.

**Hon. Ms. Heppner:** — Oh sorry. Pelican Narrows.

**Mr. Govindasamy:** — So I do recall the discussion that we had I think last year and the year before with respect to the 7 kilometres at Pelican Narrows. I think there's quite a bit of history on this particular stretch. I think this is a stretch, if I do recall correctly, that requires the band and a band council resolution and agreement from the federal government with respect to the land itself, with respect to where the road runs through.

And I think that's probably part of the reason why that stretch of highway has, you know, hasn't really been attended to because I think we're still waiting. And I'm going to check with my staff on this. We're still waiting for, you know, the paperwork and the agreement from the federal government and Pelican Narrows First Nations there with respect to the status of that particular road. As I recall, that was what the issue was and continues to be the issue today.

**Mr. Belanger:** — So I just want to clarify from the administrative process, is the BCR [band council resolution] holding up that particular project? I just want to make sure I'm clear on this.

**Mr. Govindasamy:** — So I'm going to check to see, to be precise in terms of what's holding it up. As I recall from my discussion for the past year, it is the BCR that was an issue. I will check on that and then be able to provide you with a response.

**Mr. Belanger:** — Because I'm pretty certain that the BCR wasn't really the problem that the PBCN [Peter Ballantyne Cree

Nation] were concerned about because they . . . I think if the band council, the chief-in-council want that particular road paved, I don't think the BCR would be the problem. I just think that the problem is really around commitment.

Now you mentioned earlier commitment by the current provincial government. You mentioned earlier that, as part of your answer, the BCR was one of the issues that you dealt with. But the other one was the federal government. What were you expecting from the federal government? Can you update us on that?

**Mr. Govindasamy:** — I think, as I understand the BCRs, you know, the band council resolution has to be passed, has to be sent to the federal government. And then there's basically a jurisdictional issue with respect to the particular road because it runs right through the band, and that's the federal government's role. And like I said, I'm going to check on that particular status of the band council resolution, and I will provide a response.

**Mr. Belanger:** — Okay. And has there been any requests from the Sandy Bay, the community of Sandy Bay itself? Because I think the distance between Pelican Narrows and Sandy Bay is roughly 60 kilometres. So as you leave the Hanson Lake Road, I think it's 50 into Pelican Narrows or roughly 44, and another 65, 70 into Sandy Bay. Is there any kind of highways improvements or dollars being committed to 135 overall for any part of that highway?

**Hon. Ms. Heppner:** — There is regular maintenance planned as well as on the capital side. There's some culvert replacements along that stretch of road.

**Mr. Belanger:** — Now if I could ask a question, Mr. Chair, and just a yes and no answer would be sufficient. Is there any major capital work planned for Turnor Lake Road, 909? Yes or no?

**Hon. Ms. Heppner:** — There's no capital on that particular stretch of highway, but the maintenance this year is about an 80 per cent increase over last year.

**Mr. Belanger:** — Is there any major capital commitments to 956, the Garson Lake road?

**Hon. Ms. Heppner:** — I think we discussed 956 last time. I'm not sure what kind of capital investment would be on that because we've built our side. There's nine kilometres left and, as I said, until Alberta builds their side, that 9 kilometres will remain unbuilt on our side. If Alberta steps up, we're happy to finish that, but there'd be no capital on that this year, as per our conversation on Wednesday.

**Mr. Belanger:** — Is there any major capital investment into the Dillon Lake road, Highway 925?

**Hon. Ms. Heppner:** — There's no capital for that section, but there would be regular maintenance.

**Mr. Belanger:** — Is there any capital improvements planned for highway . . . major capital improvements to Highway 908 to Ile-a-la-Crosse planned?

**Hon. Ms. Heppner:** — No.

**The Chair:** — I believe the minister mentioned that there wasn't any. So I wasn't sure if you were waiting for the next response or if you didn't hear that at all, Mr. Belanger.

**Mr. Belanger:** — No, I didn't hear that, sorry. But the answer was no?

**Hon. Ms. Heppner:** — Right.

**Mr. Belanger:** — Okay. Is there any major capital investment made to 918, to the English River First Nations?

**Hon. Ms. Heppner:** — No.

**Mr. Belanger:** — The answer is no. Anything planned for . . .

**Hon. Ms. Heppner:** — If I could clarify my remarks, on 918 there's a bridge replacement under capital.

**Mr. Belanger:** — Okay. And what's the cost of that?

**Hon. Ms. Heppner:** — I hesitate to say what dollar amount we've set aside as it's probably still going out for tender and obviously we don't want to affect those bids. Once the tenders come in and the project's been announced, I'd be happy to share with the member what the actual cost of it is, but before the tenders are done, it's probably not prudent.

**Mr. Belanger:** — Is there any major capital improvements planned for 965 to the Canoe Lake First Nations?

**Hon. Ms. Heppner:** — No.

**Mr. Belanger:** — The answer is no. Is there any capital improvements planned for 903 which connects Cole Bay, Jans Bay, Canoe Lake to Meadow Lake?

**Hon. Ms. Heppner:** — Yes. There are two bridge replacements as well as a culvert replacement.

**Mr. Belanger:** — Is there any major capital improvements planned to Highway 924 to Sled Lake and Dore Lake?

**Hon. Ms. Heppner:** — Yes. As I've said in the House, and I said during committee last Wednesday, 924 is going to be receiving extra attention through the \$30 million surge money that we have allocated in this year's budget as part of our campaign promise.

**Mr. Belanger:** — How much of that 30 million surge money . . . I'm assuming the 30 million surge money you're referencing, that's for the entire province, right?

**Hon. Ms. Heppner:** — Yes.

**Mr. Belanger:** — It's for the entire province. So how much of that would be committed to Dore Lake, Sled Lake? Just to let the record show, the \$30 million surge that the minister referred to is province-wide. It's not dedicated towards Sled Lake or Dore Lake. It's province-wide. So I guess the question I would have, how much of that \$30 million surge would be dedicated to Dore Lake, Sled Lake?

**Hon. Ms. Heppner:** — For 924, it's approximately \$600,000.

**Mr. Belanger:** — Now is there any major capital improvements planned for Highway 155, the main artery to the northwest?

[16:15]

**Hon. Ms. Heppner:** — There's a couple of culvert replacements on 155.

**Mr. Belanger:** — But no capital, and the answer would be no to, no major capital?

**Hon. Ms. Heppner:** — That is capital, and without giving the specifics, the capital for those two projects is over \$1 million for 155.

**Mr. Belanger:** — Now is there any capital being planned for the Southend community access road on 102?

**Hon. Ms. Heppner:** — Yes. I'm just checking location. There is work on 102. There is two culvert replacements. One is on the Southend access. And I do want to point out on 102, there's major capital being invested in that, but closer to the La Ronge end of 102.

**Mr. Belanger:** — Is there any major capital planned for 167 between Denare Beach and Flin Flon?

**Hon. Ms. Heppner:** — There's, on the capital side, there are two culvert replacements on that particular section.

**Mr. Belanger:** — Is there anything planned for 915 to Stanley Mission highway?

**Hon. Ms. Heppner:** — I said no. Sorry.

**Mr. Belanger:** — The minister said no. Anything planned for the Deschambault Lake community access road, 911?

**Hon. Ms. Heppner:** — Yes, there's a culvert replacement.

**Mr. Belanger:** — The Wollaston Lake highway, any plans for improvement to that particular road? Even though it doesn't have a highway number on here, we know that there is some work being done on that. But what improvements have you got scheduled for this year?

**Hon. Ms. Heppner:** — For building a road to Wollaston Lake?

**Mr. Belanger:** — Yes. What kind of resources are you committing to that? Is there any?

**Hon. Ms. Heppner:** — Well I think I had an extensive response last Wednesday. I could go through it again. But the Wollaston Lake road, I met with northern leaders and FSIN last Monday to discuss this, and they had proposed a plan for a partnership. I could go through this all again, but in the interest of time, you might want to read *Hansard* from last Wednesday because the answer would be the same.

**Mr. Belanger:** — Okay.

**Hon. Ms. Heppner:** — But while I have . . . I just want to clarify something on the discussion about the Pelican Narrows road. We are waiting for a band council resolution. I know that the member asking the questions had made a reference to, and this is a rough quote, “that the problem is the commitment of provincial government.” I want to assure the member asking the question and committee members that it is not an issue of commitment on the part of us. We are waiting for a band council resolution. I just wanted to clarify the record on that.

**Mr. Belanger:** — The other issues . . . I’ve got about another 20 different communities I want to ask questions on, but for the sake of time . . . We’ve got a few minutes left.

I want to shift my focus just a bit while I have the few minutes left, is around the highway traffic committee that was instituted by the province, and we had a number of our members be part of it. And I think the member from Cumberland, Mr. Vermette, and I believe the member from Saskatoon Riversdale, Ms. Chartier, was part of that committee in which they went and had a bunch of hearings around the province around highway traffic safety. And this committee had a lot hearings and a lot of . . . They were subjected to a lot of information, some very compelling arguments, and some very emotional stories as well, emotional experiences. So I guess the question I would ask is, based on some of the recommendations made by the highway Traffic Safety Committee, how has your department incorporated some of their recommendations and some of their findings into how you manage the safety aspect of our highways?

**Ms. Ehrmantraut:** — The Ministry of Highways has been working with SGI [Saskatchewan Government Insurance] as well as Corrections because a number of those recommendations weren’t just for Highways. So we’ve been working really closely with SGI to make sure that we address what was in the report.

**Mr. Belanger:** — Okay and would you be able to share with us . . . Obviously you would certainly understand, from SGI’s perspective, what a dangerous highway would look like and what challenges certain drivers under certain conditions. How would you describe the northern highway system overall when it comes to traffic safety? Would it be fair to characterize that there is, well there obviously would be demands all throughout the province, but is there any alarming stats or alarming statements that the report would state as to what particular safety threats that one would expect from a poor northern highway system?

**Hon. Ms. Heppner:** — I’m not sure. Maybe some clarification from the member asking the question, but it’s my understanding that the highway safety committee, in their reporting, gave recommendations, the majority of which would be through SGI, but those are province-wide. I don’t believe there is anything northern specific. If he has something that we’re not aware of, that would be great, but I’m not sure how his question pertains to the recommendations from the highway traffic committee.

**Mr. Belanger:** — Well one of the things that I was curious to find out today is that, based on a per capita basis, is there more problems for SGI, say from a northern perspective in terms of claims or safety issues that you would have, again on a per

capita basis, that you’d have for other regions of the province? Because obviously my argument would be that I would assume that SGI would point out that some of the highway conditions in the North are problematic from the insurance perspective, from the safety perspective. I just want to see how problematic it is from their perspective through this traffic safety committee, whether you’d be or whether you’re able to share some of that information with us today.

**Hon. Ms. Heppner:** — Well I think this question should probably be directed to SGI. Obviously I don’t have stats that SGI holds. If they have any kind of enormous concerns about spikes or increased claims in the North, they haven’t contacted us to discuss that with us. But like I said, those questions should probably be directed to SGI and their claim stats. Anecdotally, and I stress this is anecdotally, the letters and phone calls that I get into my office about vehicle damage on provincial roads are all in southern Saskatchewan.

**Mr. Belanger:** — All right. I just want to point out again that we haven’t changed our mind in terms of the position that we’ve taken. And I’m not necessarily indicating this from my own perspective. A lot of northern leaders will tell you that in northern Saskatchewan, poor highways is still the number one issue for many of these northern communities and companies as well.

We are seeing a lot of resource extraction happening in our backyards. We’re seeing a lot of lax responses to some of the issues that we’ve been bringing forward. A good example that I would point out is the Wollaston Lake road. It was announced by a previous minister saying that they were going to proceed with this, and then all of a sudden, unceremoniously, six months later the commitment was yanked. And the only thing that came out of the capital announcement that year was the connection of that road between the two northern mines.

So again, I could have rattled off another 10, 20 smaller communities throughout the North in terms of capital commitments, and all I can say at the outset is that thank goodness there’s a thing called culverts — because if there wasn’t culverts, then there wouldn’t be any capital planning and commitment to the North. So you know, again I’ll point out that, yes, we’ve got culverts, but the fact of the matter is that a lot of these highways are in very, very poor shape and they’ll continue being in poor shape.

And again, adding insult to injury, all we’re seeing in northern Saskatchewan is the fact that all our resources are being hauled out, and as they’re being hauled out, our roads are being smashed up on the way out, to add insult to injury. And then you wonder why the northern people get angry about where things are at. At the same time, they’re trying to champion development, and they feel that development is really important for the northern economy and for the provincial economy as well. And unselfishly they always point that out, the fact that they think that the North can contribute to the overall health of the provincial economy.

So when we see it in northern mines, we see people from all throughout Saskatchewan working at these northern mines. Well the northern people want to be able to share that opportunity, and they’ve expressed that on many occasions. At

the same time, they obviously want to maximize the employment opportunity for the local people as well, so there's always a delicate balance on that front.

But one of the things that continually, and will always frustrate them — and which is not experienced anywhere else in the province — is the fact that we are seeing a large-scale removal of resources from the land base with no reciprocal reinvestment into critical areas such as a good transportation system. And that transportation system is beaten up. It's aged. And when we hear the phrase, robust surge in spending, the people in the North, they shake their heads because they obviously have seen this particular response time and time again.

So I would implore the minister on a couple of points. I'll share them just before I close my comments here. Number one is that the north is not going to continue standing by, accepting the lack of commitment to northern highways. We are seeing more and more people getting more and more angrier, and the leadership becoming more engaged. And although they're trying to find partnership, it comes down to commitment. And that's the fundamental position that many northern people have taken.

You ask any northerner, how is the commitment to highways in northern Saskatchewan? You'd be hard pressed to find one or two of them saying that it's robust or significant. They won't use those words. So no matter what language is being expressed here in this committee, it is not shared by any northerner; I can tell you that today. We know you are not investing in northern Saskatchewan. Culverts aside, the investment is not there. And that's kind of my final point I'd like to make, Mr. Chair.

**The Chair:** — Thank you very much, Mr. Belanger, for those questions. I'd like to thank the officials for the answers. And, Madam Minister, if you'd like to have the second last word, I'll let you say a few words if you'd like to.

[16:30]

**Hon. Ms. Heppner:** — Thank you, Mr. Chair, and as always I thank the member for Athabasca for his closing remarks where he helps to instruct the actions of the Ministry of Highways.

I do want to mention though, and I know that there's been disparaging remarks made by the opposition in the House and kind of getting there again today about . . . that culverts aren't important. I realize they're not interesting. You don't see pavers out. But they directly go to the structural integrity of our roads. If we weren't building, replacing those culverts in northern Saskatchewan and other places across the province — as the deputy minister has said, there's 62,000 of them — our roads would cave in because the culverts are old and falling apart. We would have drainage problems which would erode the road beds. So while the member from Athabasca thinks it's not very interesting, and doesn't count that this is capital investment going directly into the communities that he has talked to us about, Mr. Speaker, I would say that to the structural integrity of the road they are absolutely 100 per cent important.

And I understand the concerns of those in the North about resource extraction, but I think if you talk to folks who live in southern Saskatchewan in the oil patch, they see exactly the

same things. This is not a unique situation for the North. This is everywhere across the province where there's extraction, and so this is not unique to the North. And unfortunately the member for Athabasca has ceased to listen to the comments that I'm going to be making, but that's his choice.

And I do want to end by saying this, Mr. Speaker. I thank the northern leaders that I've met with, because I can tell you, they haven't been angry. They've been thoughtful. They've planned ahead. The proposals they've given us are well planned out. They're doable proposals. There are some of these take some time, but I want to thank them for their involvement in their communities because they've been great partners of ours and I look forward to partnering with them in the future.

Mr. Chair, I want to thank again members of the committee for being here this afternoon and particularly, as always, to the staff in the Ministry of Highways for their help in answering questions today. They make my job infinitely easier, so thank you, Mr. Chair.

**The Chair:** — Thank you very much, Madam Minister, and again on behalf of the committee, thank you for being here today. We began promptly at 3 p.m. and we'll close at approximately 4:31 p.m., so that's our time for today.

Just briefly I'd like to table a document that the ministry provided. It is labelled ECO 4-28, Ministry of Highways and Infrastructure, 2014 traffic volume map, average annual daily traffic.

I would now ask a member to move a motion of adjournment. Mr. Buckingham has so moved. Are we all agreed?

**Some Hon. Members:** — Agreed.

**The Chair:** — Carried. So this committee will stand adjourned until tomorrow, June 21st at 3 p.m. Thank you all.

[The committee adjourned at 16:33.]