



STANDING COMMITTEE ON THE ECONOMY

Hansard Verbatim Report

No. 27 – May 9, 2018



Legislative Assembly of Saskatchewan

Twenty-Eighth Legislature

STANDING COMMITTEE ON THE ECONOMY

Ms. Colleen Young, Chair
Lloydminster

Ms. Vicki Mowat, Deputy Chair
Saskatoon Fairview

Mr. David Buckingham
Saskatoon Westview

Mr. Terry Dennis
Canora-Pelly

Mr. Delbert Kirsch
Batoche

Mr. Warren Michelson
Moose Jaw North

Mr. Doug Steele
Cypress Hills

[The committee met at 15:00.]

The Chair: — Good afternoon, everyone, and welcome. The Standing Committee on the Economy will be meeting today and myself, Colleen Young, as Chair. We have, sitting in for Vicki Mowat, Mr. Belanger. Other committee members here today are David Buckingham, Terry Dennis, Delbert Kirsch, Warren Michelson, and Doug Steele.

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

Subvote (HI01)

The Chair: — Today the committee will be considering the estimates and supplementary estimates — no. 2 for the Ministry of Highways and Infrastructure. And we will now begin our consideration of vote 16, Highways and Infrastructure, central management and services, subvote (HI01).

Minister Marit, you are here with your officials. And if you would like to introduce your officials that have joined you here today and begin with any opening remarks.

Hon. Mr. Marit: — Thank you, Madam Chair. I do have some opening remarks I'd like to make before we begin consideration of estimates for the Ministry of Highways and Infrastructure. And before I begin, however, I'd like to take a moment to introduce the officials I have with me. Seated to my immediate right is Fred Antunes, the deputy minister. To my left is Blair Wagar; he's assistant deputy minister of policy, planning and regulation division. Behind, I have Tom Lees, assistant deputy minister of operations and maintenance division. Penny Popp is also here from assistant deputy minister for design and construction division. Wayne Gienow is seated here, executive director, network planning and investment. Doug Wakabayashi is executive director of communications and customer service branch. Kelly Moskowy is executive director of corporate services, and David Stearns is executive director of construction branch.

This year's provincial budget keeps our economy strong and on track to return to balance next fiscal year. Our focus is on investing in the services, programs, and infrastructure that grow our economy and improve everyone's quality of life. Investments in transportation are central to this focus because our economy relies heavily on exports. Our transportation system also contributes to our quality of life by linking communities that are often separated by great distances.

As a demonstration of our commitment to our robust transportation system, my ministry's budget is \$924.5 million. This includes a capital construction budget of 343 million that will be invested in improvements to 800 kilometres of highways and roads across the province, and an estimated 330 million worth of work will also be completed on the Regina bypass.

This budget also allows us to make progress in achieving our four key goals of safety, improving road conditions, creating an integrated transportation system, and efficient travel for people and goods.

Since I became minister of this portfolio, the thing that's concerned me mostly is safety. We see far too many collisions, too many injuries, and too many lives lost on our provincial highway system. Traffic safety experts talk about the 3Es of safety — engineering, education, and enforcement. In recent years, on the enforcement side, we've added police resources, new laws for distracted driving, tougher penalties for impaired driving, and photo radar. With the ministry's CVE [commercial vehicle enforcement] officers becoming part of the provincial response team, they'll now be more engaged in enforcing driving infractions.

SGI [Saskatchewan Government Insurance] also introduced some outstanding awareness campaigns on the education side, and my ministry plans to work more closely with SGI to support their education efforts.

On the engineering side we've improved safety through record investments to build new infrastructure and improve the condition of existing roads. But a decade of growth has seen more people using our highways, increased truck traffic, and new demands on provincial highways.

With this year's budget we're making a major commitment to improving safety on some of our busiest highways. This budget provides about 50 million to start, to continue and complete, or plan for interchanges, twinning, and passing lanes on these key corridors. We're continuing to work on the new interchanges at Warman and Martensville. On Highway No. 7 we'll continue the twinning between Vanscoy and Delisle. And we'll start the planning work for passing lanes between Rosetown and the Alberta border.

We're going to start the design work for passing lanes and short sections of twinning on Highway 6 and 39 between Regina and Estevan, and two sets of passing lanes will be built this year between Regina and the Highway 39 junction this year. We're also building two sets of passing lanes on Highway 4 between North Battleford and Cochin. And last year we opened a couple of sets of passing lanes on Highway 5 between Humboldt and Highway No. 2.

This year we're starting the planning work for what will be a multi-year project to widen, repave, and build passing lanes along Highway 5 between the junction of Highway 2 and Saskatoon. We'll also start the planning work for passing lanes on Highway 9 and 10 between Melville and Canora. And we'll start the functional planning for the future Saskatoon freeway. This will allow us to refine the route and reduce the need for development restrictions.

In addition to these important construction projects, we've also been working on some key safety initiatives. We'll be introducing new integrated safety strategy. Using public input and working with SGI, law enforcement, and other stakeholders, this strategy will be focusing on reducing collisions with wildlife, collisions where there is poor nighttime visibility, single vehicle collisions, and collisions at intersections between provincial highways.

I've also asked Fred and his team to take a hard look at our work zone signing. We met with the public and stakeholders to

identify some changes we can make this construction season, like ensuring work zone signing is consistent across the province and providing direction that is simple, clear, and doesn't confuse people.

We're also now into the process of training our commercial vehicle enforcement officers to participate in the provincial response team. The PRT, as it is called, will supplement the RCMP's [Royal Canadian Mounted Police] resources to respond to requests from emergency services from people in rural and remote areas.

It's important that government continues to make investments that will keep our province growing. At the same time, it's critical that we keep the infrastructure we already have in good condition. That's why we will be investing about 118 million into 700 kilometres of repaving and preventative maintenance across the provincial highway network. This includes 280 kilometres of full repaving, 280 kilometres of pavement sealing, and 140 kilometres of medium preservation treatments like micro surfacing. Micro surfacing and seals are cost-effective ways of making pavement last longer and delaying the need for more expensive repaving.

Maintaining the province's investment in the paved network is very important to us, and so is taking care of bridges and culverts. Bridges that are in poor condition can result in weight restrictions that make gaps in the primary weight corridors. They also can cause safety hazards, of course. Culverts that aren't operating properly can cause flooding on both highway and adjacent lands. This year we're investing 61 million in replacing and rehabbing bridges and culverts. This will provide for replacements and major repairs to about 30 bridges. It will also fund numerous culvert replacements across the provincial highway system.

We're also earmarking 13 million to continue making permanent repairs from floods in previous years and to reduce the risk of flooding in the future.

Another strategy we're using to improve the transportation is integration. My ministry isn't the only organization that builds and maintains roads. When you include urban streets and RM [rural municipality] grid roads, Saskatchewan's total road network is over 190 000 kilometres. Towns, cities, and RMs face the same challenges that the province faces in responding to the challenges of growth and maintaining infrastructure.

In addition, we need to make sure that other modes of transportation like air and rail are integrated with the road network to make sure transportation supports our economy. This year we'll provide more than 22 million in funding to municipalities to support their transportation systems. We will provide 700,000 through the community airport partnership, leveraging a total of 1.4 million investment into local airports. This program provides funding to community-operated airports that don't qualify for funding under federal airport programs.

We will provide 6.7 million to urban municipalities through the urban highway connector program. This fully funds our operation and maintenance commitments on the highway connectors within towns and cities. It also includes construction projects at Prince Albert, Melfort, and Moose Jaw. The

municipal roads for the economy program provides 14 million in funding to RMs for heavy-haul corridors, bridge replacement, and Clearing the Path corridors.

The bottom line is that we all want our transportation system to be efficient. We want people and goods to be able to get to where they have to get, going safely and efficiently. Our businesses and agriculture producers need to get their products to market as cheaply as possible without having to worry about weight restrictions in order to remain competitive.

This year we have a number of projects that move that goal forward. The Regina bypass remains on time and on budget. This past fall, phase 1 was completed, including the Balgonie and White City overpasses. The Pilot Butte overpass opened a little over a month ago, about 20 months ahead of its original schedule. The project's on track to be completed in 2019. This year we estimate about \$330 million worth of work will be completed.

One of the biggest problems we deal with obviously in our highway system is our TMS [thin membrane surface] highways. They once kept rural communities out of the mud and dust. Today they often aren't strong enough or wide enough to handle the trucks that use them on a daily basis. This year we'll upgrade another 100 kilometres of these highways to pavement.

We've made great strides in upgrading our TMS highways; however, there's still too many of these roads that have very low traffic volumes, that can't handle heavy trucks, and it's difficult for them to compete for dollars with busier economic corridors. We've been looking at innovative fixes other than full rebuilds to address more of these roads. Treatments like Rotamixing, light pavement, and converting to super grids give us new, more cost-effective options.

We've also been working to develop partnerships with rural municipalities. We can do more when communities come to the table and it gives rural municipalities a say in what standard the road is built to and how it is operated and maintained. In many cases the RM is in a better position to maintain these roads at a better level of service. This year we will be delivering partnerships on the McKague access in the RM of Barrier Valley, and on Highway 361 and 318 in the RM of Reciprocity. We also have active discussions ongoing with a number of other rural municipalities.

We are also investing 61 million to build, operate, and maintain the transportation system in northern Saskatchewan. This includes 6.5 kilometres of grade rises in various locations on Highway 123. Parts of this highway run through the Saskatchewan River delta, making it prone to flooding.

We'll also complete nearly 30 kilometres of clay capping on Highway 165 from the Highway 2 junction. This is the main east-west highway in the North. In addition we are seeking federal funding to build a winter road to Wollaston Lake. This will eliminate the need for an ice road.

And we are also seeking funding to repave and lengthen the runway at Fond-du-Lac. Fond-du-Lac is one of the communities in the North where air travel provides the only year-round connection to the rest of the province.

As you can see, we have a very busy year ahead. My officials and I would be happy to answer any questions committee members have. Thank you, Madam Chair.

The Chair: — Thank you, Minister. I'll now open the floor to any questions that are directed at the minister. But at any time, if one of your officials is speaking, at the very beginning if they wouldn't mind mentioning their name and their position first. Thank you. Questions? Mr. Belanger.

Mr. Belanger: — Thank you very much, Madam Chair. Just a question. I just would like to get a bit more information on the commitment to Fond-du-Lac. Obviously that's something that's of concern to many people that were impacted by the tragic air crash. And just to articulate if you can for me, what kind of commitments there are with the announcement. And when we talk about the detail, maybe include the start and a completion date as well, please.

[15:15]

Hon. Mr. Marit: — Thanks. The airport project . . . This is what the project will include is repaving the runway and apron, the taxiway, the runway expansion, and a new lighting system.

Now we've completed . . . Here's what we've done. We have completed some of the geotechnical work last fall in preparation for the design work to be completed this summer and fall. Then we will be making an application to the federal government and we plan to submit that application by the end of November of this year.

Mr. Belanger: — And I'm assuming that the application would be for money expended on the project or request for further spending to lengthen and widen the runway as the chief had asked for.

Hon. Mr. Marit: — It won't be part of the application, but we are planning on doing that as part of the expansion, and the lengthening will be part of our project. But it won't be eligible for the federal funding program.

Mr. Belanger: — All right. And is there a cost that we could share with the public? Is there a dollar amount?

Hon. Mr. Marit: — Not at this time just because we're still doing the design and finishing up on the geotech and putting the design together. So we won't have a cost, probably not until later on in the year.

Mr. Belanger: — All right. And is it also a fair question to ask what improvements are entailed? Like are you lengthening the runway and widening it? And based on that information, what parameters did you follow? Was there a report indicating that if we did this it would lessen certain challenges?

So if we . . . I think, obviously the direct question: if we lengthen the runway by 500 metres and widen it by 100 metres, it would really save a lot of . . . It would enhance the safety of that airport. Like I'm just trying to understand the parameters in which you made as a result of this commitment, like which parameters you followed.

Hon. Mr. Marit: — What we're thinking of here on the design on the lengthening and widening is obviously just so that bigger aircraft can land into that community and obviously reduce cost to the community in delivering goods.

Mr. Belanger: — Okay. And was the commitment a result of safety concerns?

Hon. Mr. Marit: — No. The only reason for the expansion is obviously to allow bigger planes to land. The regulations that are there now are for the aircraft that are allowable to land there under federal regulations, and that's what we're bound by. So expanding it both widthwise and lengthwise will obviously allow larger aircraft to land in Fond-du-Lac.

Mr. Belanger: — Now I understood that. And first of all, for the record, as we've advocated, in particular the Athabasca Basin has been struggling for years as you've alluded to; that there's larger aircraft and heavier loads that are landing on some of the airstrips in the North. And for years, a lot of the leaders have been advocating for the proper transportation system, that if we can't have a all-weather road to the far North, then we should have state-of-the-art airport including the safety features of proper lighting and so on and so forth.

So I know that the community won't be disappointed as a result of some of the investment today. I'm just trying to ascertain from the perspective of, is the investment enough? I'm not denying that the investment isn't appreciated. I'm just saying, if you're going to do this, we need to do it properly and with safety in the back of our minds. So that's the question I ask is, what parameters were followed to ensure that safety is paramount? And that once we do the investment, it meets the needs for many years, which of course you made reference to bigger aircraft and heavier loads.

Hon. Mr. Marit: — I think that'll all be worked out through the design process. I think we have to work with the community but also the commercial carriers to see, you know, what type of aircraft they want to put in there. And then it'll fall under federal regulations as far as what we have to do. So that'll all kind of work out through the design process that we're working on right now.

Mr. Belanger: — And again, I'm assuming that there's heavy consultation with the local leadership, the chief . . .

Hon. Mr. Marit: — Yes.

Mr. Belanger: — And the band council members.

Hon. Mr. Marit: — Yes, very much so.

Mr. Belanger: — All right. Certainly I would imagine that in our summer break that we'll be heading out to Fond-du-Lac and visiting the folks there, and be hearing a lot about the crash. And obviously, our prayers and sympathy to the entire community, especially the family who lost that young gentleman. And it was always a time for reflection, but it is also a time that action be undertaken to address some of the concerns as expressed by local leaders, as it pertains to the Fond-du-Lac airport.

And there's other communities that have had similar challenges in the basin. I know with the larger centres, that there's always the dialogue that the leaders speak of. Have you had and been privy to any discussions with some of the other airports in the basin as to what plans you have for them?

Hon. Mr. Marit: — Just with a couple. But I have to tell you that I have already scheduled two days where I'm going to travel to every airport. We're doing that in June. Those dates are set. And we have told . . . And I've met with just a couple of the community leaders that have been down, and they're anxiously waiting for us to get up there and obviously to talk about their issues. And I want to see first-hand as a minister too, just what they're challenged with as far as their airports. Also probably meet with the commercial carriers that provide the service there, and their challenges. And I've met with some. And of course, lighting seems to be one and also surface is an issue, as you probably well know, too.

Mr. Belanger: — Just to refresh my memory but also for the sake of others that will be reading these transcripts of this particular function of estimates, what is the relationship, as you've mentioned the federal cost-sharing program, what basically are the pillars of that relationship? Is it mostly for safety? Is there certain issues that are cost shared and others not? Could you explain that in as brief time as possible?

Hon. Mr. Marit: — I'll try to do it briefly. It's challenging in the way that in working . . . And Blair probably has a better handle on it, in working in it. I think working with INAC [Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada] has been very helpful in a lot of ways in trying to access funding. The challenge we have with it, with the federal government, is where do we go, to what pillar, to what stream do we go to find the money? And it's one of the things that I've made a pretty strong commitment with. We haven't signed the new integrated bilateral agreement yet with the federal government.

This is one of the things that I've asked for in the transit component is that we'd be allowed to move some money into northern airports. As you well know, it is their only lifeline. And we feel it's very important that we'd be able to move some of that money stream into the northern airport side so that we could upgrade, so that everybody could take the bigger planes. But hopefully we will. I don't have that . . . I haven't got that answer yet. I'll try and meet with the minister here in the next month or so, that hopefully we can make that work out. But that's where we're at.

Mr. Belanger: — There seems to be a growing belief that the federal Liberal government is going to be investing in northern Canada's economy, but more so into the infrastructure to enable that economy to thrive. So there's been a lot of discussions, well more in particular in the further north regions of our country, in Nunavut and Northwest Territories and the Yukon Territories and northern Quebec as well.

How are we positioned as a province as it pertains to our northernmost communities when we talk about the federal Liberals' desire to do more on the infrastructure front? Are we considered part of that process, or is there a parallel cut-off in which we are not? And are your officials engaged in those discussions?

Hon. Mr. Marit: — Our officials are very engaged in that one. That one is challenging for us in a lot of aspects, from what the federal government sees in northern communities where we'd like to . . . And it's all about priorities. You're probably well aware that a lot of the northern communities where the federal government seems to be focused mostly is water and wastewater and housing and that strategy. And it's all important. We know that.

It's, I guess, it's my role I guess as Minister of Highways is to try and get the airport strategy as a priority also. And that's where I'm at right now. As I said in my earlier comment, is that's where we're trying to get the federal government to allow us to move some of that money into a transit piece so that we could really focus on the infrastructure side for those northern communities.

Mr. Belanger: — Are there any discussions on the actual Athabasca road? Is there any consultation, discussion with the federal government on that front?

Hon. Mr. Marit: — On the roads strategy it's very difficult under any of the federal programs because they didn't recognize infrastructure. They just haven't recognized it and that's the challenge we have. We're working with INAC on the Wollaston Lake road but that's not part of the federal government programming thing.

What I want to do with the northern communities in the engagement part of it is, those will all be application based if we can even get any infrastructure money. And the challenge we're having right now, when you look at . . . There is a pillar for northern and remote communities but if you look at it, the infrastructure side, like roadwork, isn't even in there, and it's very difficult. So that's the challenge we're going to have with it.

Mr. Belanger: — Yes, I know when there was discussions on the actual Athabasca road — and I travelled that once and I admire the skill and I certainly admire the courage of many of the Athabasca Basin residents that travel that road on a continual basis — but obviously it is still an important link to, I think overall, to helping people in the basin get to southern markets so they can buy cheaper food.

And I think it stimulates the economy. It has a lot of, you know, great value and why that road was originally punched through. Now when I say punched through, I'm literally saying that there was places in areas that you'd have to have a pretty rigorous truck, a four-by-four truck to get through. So we're still a ways away from calling it an all-weather road because there's obviously much more investment that is required. While the highway to points north isn't as bad as it is from points north and further north, there's still generally a large chunk of that road that needs a lot of attention.

[15:30]

That being said when there was discussions around how the province and the federal government could cost share this, as your officials may note to you from time to time . . . The history around the Canadian Coast Guard, which were commissioned to supply the remote communities of Canada's North . . . I

thought, if my memory serves me correctly here, that the Canadian Coast Guard were spending \$2 million per year dredging the Fort McMurray River as this was the route they used to supply the Athabasca Basin communities. As opposed to flying them in, they'd dredge the Fort McMurray River and they'd go up the Fort Mac River and of course they'd enter into the Athabasca Basin.

So to make a long story short, every year the Canadian Coast Guard, by virtue of them having the legislative responsibility to do so, spent I think it was about 2 million per year doing this. We argued at the time that perhaps our federal government should spend the money to actually put the dollars towards a road which would be a perfect and a final solution to supplying these far northern communities with adequate fuel and food and so on and so forth. Has any of the discussions with Canadian Coast Guard, has that bore any . . . or it bear any fruit in the last number of years?

Hon. Mr. Marit: — I would say there's been virtually no discussions with the Coast Guard on this at all. Like none.

Mr. Belanger: — Okay. And as well we also indicated at the time, and I want to get confirmation; my colleague from Cumberland would like to ask a few questions specifically. But at the time, we determined that when it came to certain communities in the basin, with or without a federal commitment for dollars, we would proceed with those highways. Is that commitment still there from your government in terms of some of the communities in the basin?

Hon. Mr. Marit: — I guess I just want to reiterate our commitment in this year's budget to northern communities of 61 million for northern communities and airports in our budget, which is up significantly from last year. It's 8 million higher, so that's about a 13, 14 per cent increase in funding for northern communities.

What we do in some of the strategy . . . You're probably aware of the area transportation planning committees around the province. We actually . . . And they're there in advisory roles. And the northern folks are heavily engaged in that and meeting with Glen and those folks on some of the strategies that they have. Our officials will meet and will try and work out where the needs are and where the money can best be utilized.

Mr. Belanger: — Now the Wollaston Lake project, I'm going to leave it to my colleague from Cumberland. He's got a host of questions for you, and we'll be proceeding with those questions in a short time here.

But I want to look at the notion around Lake Athabasca itself. The freight subsidy that was in effect, what's the status of the freight subsidy now? Or is it still in existence? Is it being used? Are you aware of any of the commitments made by the federal or provincial governments?

Hon. Mr. Marit: — We're not aware of anything on that. Just not.

Mr. Belanger: — I'll certainly make reference to the question for the minister of Aboriginal Affairs. I'm assuming that's basically where the question should be directed.

But I was just looking at the notion of combining the cost of food freight subsidy, and as well as the Canadian Coast Guard having the responsibility . . . And even though they may have walked away from that responsibility, the bottom line is that they had the initial responsibility. And I think the Athabasca Basin leadership includes not only chiefs and First Nations councils, but many of the municipal councils as well. They rallied together and they put together a fairly impressive plan that showed how building a highway was much more affordable, much more sustainable, and much more effective than continuing the old process of dredging up the Fort McMurray River and delivering goods through the western end of Lake Athabasca.

So it's really . . . It was a very compelling document. I didn't have the opportunity to read it all through but some of the highlights, and I skimmed through the document itself. It basically showed that there was some solid thinking and planning. And that's why I'm a bit surprised that the Canadian Coast Guard simply walked away from that. And you would assume that there would be some collaboration, either by INAC or by the province, to force the Canadian Coast Guard's hand in being part of the partnership that would solve this problem and put more money into not only the northern airports, but the road to make it a permanent and good link.

So is there any plans by your department to reconnect with the Canadian Coast Guard and see where things are at, or are you primarily focusing on INAC itself?

Hon. Mr. Marit: — I guess really we've been focused on the INAC side of it, and working with INAC to try and get this Wollaston Lake road finished. The one thing we've committed to as a government is we'd commit the ongoing maintenance of that road, which is significant as you well know. But that's what our commitment has been.

I know Blair's been in touch with INAC on this one, and we're still going through the process of, as you know and still . . . Hopefully we're still very hopeful on this project that we will see it through and hopefully be able to start the work, get it done this winter.

Mr. Belanger: — We have had a relationship with many of the First Nations and northern communities on the maintenance of certain highways going into their communities so I'm assuming that . . . You know again getting ahead of ourselves, and obviously the jury is still out as to whether we see the road built or not. That's a political argument you and I will enjoy over the next couple of months I'm sure. But the point being that if, in the event that the project does proceed, and here we are four or five years from now undertaking this process that, as part of the discussion, is the band heavily engaged with the maintenance and the contract attached to that link?

Hon. Mr. Marit: — Our intent is if we get this, if we're successful in getting this funding that it would probably continue on. Because right now on that Wollaston Lake, on that winter road, that is already, that contract, the contractor is local. And just to give you an example of the work they do — it's the Hatchet Lake Development partnership; that's who has it — they construct and maintain the ice road of which I have the numbers here if you want them.

Mr. Belanger: — Sure.

Hon. Mr. Marit: — Okay. To construct and maintain the Wollaston ice road is 244,000. The barge operation was just short of 290,000. The airport road and maintenance was just short of 120,000. Management's 120,000. And total cost is just shy of, well just over three-quarters of a million dollars. So that's the work that they're doing now. And it's also part of the Athabasca Basin Development partnership.

Mr. Belanger: — Okay. My colleague is now joining us and since we're on the Hatchet Lake and the Wollaston Lake road maybe I'll defer to him for questions specifically on that community because it's obviously in his constituency. So, Madam Chair, I'll turn the mike over to my colleague.

The Chair: — Mr. Vermette, you can proceed with a question.

Mr. Vermette: — Anyway again, thank you to the minister and your officials for being here. I guess I have a few areas I'm going to ask you questions on highways and maybe you can explain how this new dollars that are there can help some of the communities.

But if you could just . . . I know this has been ongoing. The Wollaston Lake road has been going back and forth for years and years. In probably 2008 it was announced, 2007, no 2008 I believe it is when it originally was announced, then money was redirected. It's gone back and forth many times. The leadership has, and PAGC [Prince Albert Grand Council], many have raised it as an issue and it's been a safety issue. You know, we lost a teacher on the ice road. And, you know, just in light of the fish industry that they're working with, and they're trying to do their advocating.

And I know there's been talk back and forth with federal and provincial, back and forth, and jurisdiction, and who should build and how we are going to do it. And one's ready and the other's not, and then one's ready and the other one's not. And I think at the end of the day, it's the community who suffers. Cost of living is so high. There's many reasons why. So I'm curious to see . . . Maybe you can give a little bit of an update and where we're at with it, and then I can make some more comments from what I know and we'll see where you go there. Anyway, appreciate that.

Hon. Mr. Marit: — Thanks for the question. I think it's important we have the discussion. And as I've said in my comments earlier, Blair has really been the lead on this file. He's been phenomenal on this, he really has. I just want to make some comments about Blair and the work he's done on this and working with the community and trying to get this through. And I just want to say from some perspective on the federal level it — and I'm sure you would know the frustration we're having too in getting this whole process through — but I'm going to let Fred explain the detail on where we're at right now so that you have a better understanding where we're at. Blair.

Mr. Wagar: — Blair Wagar, assistant deputy minister of planning, policy and regulation with the Ministry of Highways. Thank you, Minister. It's been a . . . I think, when I started in this role, we started working with the First Nation and the P.A.

[Prince Albert] tribal council on this as well, so it certainly has been a long time in making.

The approach that the community took, and the First Nation, was unique in terms of coming to the table with some solutions as well. And together we approached INAC as well, and there was an interest from INAC based on some of the funding that they had. A bit unique for INAC as well in that they typically fund projects that are on reserve. This was a road connecting reserves so it was a bit unique and they needed to do some work to be able to make that application work. So I mean we really appreciated them doing that with us.

So where things stand right now, there was a tremendous amount of planning work that went in, a proposal that came from the First Nation essentially, to build the road in phases, first phase being a winter road. We worked together to agree that we should probably be accelerating a bridge, and I don't remember the name of the river — I'm sure you can tell me what it is — but a bridge over the . . .

A Member: — Redman River.

Hon. Mr. Marit: — Redman River, thank you. To have that bridge there then created the opportunity for us to, for future phases, just work slowly at being able to find ways to improve that road along the way. Very similar to how the Athabasca Basin road evolved and got to the standard that it is right now.

So working together with the First Nation, we were able to put an application together. The application went in to INAC and that's where we stand right now. INAC is working through their budget process. We haven't got formal word back yet as to whether that's a funded or unfunded project. Some got some early indication that it might be on their plan, but it's not clear to me yet as to whether it's on the plan funded, or on the plan unfunded.

The opportunity to get it on the plan is good news. The fact that it may not be funded yet is a bit of concern. However it is a winter project, so early in the year . . . We're hoping between now and before the winter construction season starts that we can get a decision from INAC to be able to proceed.

[15:45]

Mr. Vermette: — I think you kind of identified the frustration. And it's good to see that you're frustrated because I think that could help the project and help the community and the leadership. And I know everybody's . . . whether it's petitions, they've come here, they've lobbied, they've met with ministers. I mean the list goes on. I mean they can tell you a story that probably no community would ever have to go through to say, please help us; we're at the end of a place where there is no road; we would like a road.

And I think about is there currently . . . I believe it's 14 kilometres, if I'm correct, has been . . . Once we're done here you can give me the numbers on that. And I guess it's the frustration part of it. And again I go back to this. I'm glad you're saying you're frustrated because should . . . and hopefully everything goes good, I mean with the plan, and the federal government does the part. As you said, this is unique.

You know, it's not on reserve, so INAC's playing a role. And I give credit to chief and council, PAGC for constantly, you know, doing what they can do.

And I know it's been frustrating and, you know, they've tried to work with the current government and ministers. Many of them that have been in, you know, in your role as a minister for Highways, and I know it's frustration on their side of it too. But they've always been very respectful in trying to work in a positive way, and I encourage that.

And again, the Aboriginal people are very respectful and will wait. But I do know that there's issues and, you know, they look at economics, the cost of living. They've got an industry, the fishing industry where they have an opportunity, you know, to do some great employment for their community members. So there's an opportunity. It's not just about the road; it's about economics. And so much could change for them. And I know they've said even though that the road comes in, there's other challenges, and they will face that together as a leadership and as a community. And I give them credit.

I'm just hoping at the end of the day, you know, there will be a commitment by the minister and yourself to work on that to say, should . . . And I'm not going to say the federal government's not going to do it. Like you say, you're waiting. And I hope it's very positive, and I know they'll be working hard from the leadership to push and do what they can. And many of them I know, you know, will do that.

Again is there going to be a plan should it not come? Again here we go. We go into dollars, and there's a little bit of more money in the budget. You know, if we're going to say that, everybody'll want a piece of, you know, those dollars. What's the plan if it doesn't go through? And is there a plan? Because I'm curious to see, you know, where are they left at the end if it doesn't happen. But if it does happen, great. We know that, you know. So I'll let you.

Hon. Mr. Marit: — We're sure not giving up on the INAC one. We're really not. Just in discussions here with Blair and in discussions I've had in previous months, we've felt very optimistic about it. It was just . . . I think Blair hit it on the head. It's a project that's just not on reserve. So they're having this whole . . . But in discussions that I know Blair and I have had before, you know, I would hope that INAC sees the importance of this project. I would hope then that if, in light . . . I don't want to say no, that it doesn't happen. I think that's where . . . As I said earlier to your colleague, I think under the new federal integrated bilateral agreement is where we really have to go to try and find some federal dollars to partner with for these roads to get done.

Right now, as I said earlier, the federal government isn't recognizing road infrastructure in those pillars. We are hopeful — we haven't signed yet — we are hopeful that we can get some money, you know, that we'll be able to have some flexibility within the program to access dollars from either one stream or another to be able to get some projects like this done.

You know, I'm still hopeful that we can get INAC, and until we've exhausted everything there, the one thing we . . . And Blair said, we've worked very closely with the community.

We've helped them with the applications, and we're continuing to do that and we will continue to work with them. And maybe it's even . . . You know, if we can get help even from yourself at a federal level to say, lookit, this is important to the community, we will exhaust every stream we can to try and get this project to go.

Mr. Vermette: — Well I guess . . . Yes, I have been and always will be supporting the community to get the road. Also the MP [Member of Parliament] we can work with. The MP up there as well I know has brought it. So I'll make efforts to contact her and just seeing if there's any pressure again she can put on, by all means do it, and that way . . .

I guess when I think about it, do you have an idea what the costs would be if the province was to do this road, and originally would have said, okay, let's go ahead and we're going to build the road? We're not going to care about jurisdiction here, as we . . . you know. And we talk about many are using Jordan's principle as an issue now and I think it's very important to say that. They go ahead and do it if it helps the community. And it's used different ways, and I just think about that. If we could have an idea what the cost would be and if you know that, I would be curious to know that if you and your officials could figure that out and then we can go a little further.

Hon. Mr. Marit: — We have done some preliminary estimates on just for the winter, just for the winter road, and that includes the bridge. But this project is in excess of 20 million for that 100 kilometres with the bridge and that, as you know, just gives you a winter road. It doesn't even give you, you know, a seasonal road or a three-season or a two-season. It just gives you a winter road. So that obviously comes with some challenges. So that's our earliest estimated cost, is around 20 million.

Mr. Vermette: — Do you have a figure that . . . Okay. Initially the winter road, 20 million as you're saying. Do we know what it would cost to complete an all-weather road so that it's . . . Do you have an idea on that figure?

Hon. Mr. Marit: — Yes. We have done that preliminary too, and we're probably right around 100 million.

Mr. Vermette: — Are you prepared to take a suggestion?

Hon. Mr. Marit: — Always open to suggestions.

Mr. Vermette: — I like that, that you say that. Maybe, maybe — and don't take this the wrong way — but maybe we could find a little bit of money from the Regina bypass that maybe doesn't get used up, to go to a road that would help a community, you know, that's needing . . . about safety and about economics and it's about affordability. Because the cost of living up there is unbelievable. Even I think about the power rates and heating in wintertime, it's unreal, the calls we get into my office and the concerns with the rates of power and stuff.

And I say that kind of in a way to poke a little bit, but also to say about the seriousness, and I mean that seriousness about getting that road for them. Hopefully, you know, some way, at some point, yourself will, you know, as a minister, will say yes and your staff here, you know, will say, you know, time to go

on.

And I'm not saying no to or in any way saying that the answer from the federal government will be no. But just watching this whole file for the years I've watched it, as long as I've been a member of this Assembly, it goes back and forth where you feel like there's hope and then it's not. And then there's an announcement and then it's not. I'm frustrated with it, and have been. I can imagine the leadership and the community members, how they feel about it. So we'll see where you . . . I'll finish there. I'll come back after.

Hon. Mr. Marit: — Well I guess, you know, we look at it this way: is there other ways we can do these projects? Is there other deliverable ways we can do it? Can we in essence really look at even a P3 [public-private partnership] type of model for a northern road? Is there opportunity to bring the private sector, INAC, bring the community leaders, bring everybody into this thing to say, lookit . . . I mean you hit on a lot of, you hit on a lot of things that are important to that community as the Regina bypass is to around the city of Regina: safety, economic driven. There's a lot of key factors, and I think that's the same.

So I think we have to look at all opportunities and ways that we could do it, and I think we have been. And I commend the team that we have at the ministry that has engaged in the discussions with the community leaders to look at all types of funding streams that we can try and lever some money to get these projects done. We know how important it is to these communities. It's their lifelines. We just have to find the mechanism and the ways to get there.

Mr. Vermette: — And that's exactly, you know, again we'll wait and see and it is, it's going to be, you know . . . There's some time and they waited as long as they have waited through the frustrations. And I say that and I'm hoping that it comes positive. And I can only take you, you know, and I'm saying your commitment to, and your staff, to say we're working hard. And I'm not saying you're not. Please don't take that that way and any way when I question. I just know the frustrations that it's been. It's a go-ahead and then it's not, and then it looks good and then it's not, and they've come different ways to try to manoeuvre in a partnership, and then it's been no.

So it's been very frustrating. And I watch and, you know, even my own self with putting petitions and the questions. And they've come here as the lead chief and council, PAGC. They've sat in the Chamber to see questions asked, and hoping. So I'm going to leave it on this one with that one on good faith that it's going to happen. That is very positive, and we'll continue moving that way. Should it not happen that way, and then I guess we'll have an opportunity at some point to again go back to yourself and the officials. So at this point, I'm hoping everything comes together once and for all. And it's the right thing to do.

And sometimes I understand there's different reasons, but in this case, I just see it's about safety, it's about economic benefit. There's so many . . . Cost of living. There's so many things that would help that community with services. The list goes on. And they've had a strong argument and case for that, not only with the provincial government, but I believe with the federal government as well. I know they've given me a little

update as they work through with the federal. So with that we'll hope that it's very positive on the end.

I'll shift into another area if I could . . .

Hon. Mr. Marit: — If I could, Madam Chair, I'd just like to respond to that. And you raise some good points and I couldn't agree with you more. And I think I just want to say this too. I want to say this for the team within the ministry that's been working on this: they're very frustrated with this too. They've worked very hard and very diligently and worked with the communities, and I think it's a good project. It is a good . . . Unfortunately it's time delays and everything else that goes on, as you well know, but I just want to go on record as saying that my team has worked very hard on this application, to do everything we can to make sure that this is a go for the community of Wollaston Lake.

Mr. Vermette: — I'm going to say, you know, as long as you've sat here as the Minister of Highways, and I know some of the officials would have been there before you or the ministers, so there's other ministers, prior to them, that they would've worked under, and I hear their frustration. They weren't always happy working with those ministers. So maybe you're the minister that's going to help them get that road done. So we'll leave that on a positive note.

I want to talk about the highway and the road into Stanley Mission, 915. That's probably about 39 kilometres going into Stanley Mission, the community. It's a tourism community. It's a reserve. It has a municipality. That community, the road — and I travel it quite a bit — so that road has taken a pounding. And I realize there's an agreement with the band to service that road. But sometimes I think it's not just . . . And I don't know, and I don't know how often we've called into some of your . . . the staff supervisor, and asked certain questions about that road and the condition.

And I know there's never enough to do the main roads, but unfortunately that road is getting just worse and worse and pounded worse and worse. The traffic that's on there . . . At some point, do you have a plan? Or do you know, with your officials, is there any way to look at surveying what really, you know, what does that road need to bring it up to a good level? I'll just leave that with your officials and see where you're at.

[16:00]

Mr. Antunes: — Fred Antunes, deputy minister. So this particular roadway, I think it's about 36 kilometres long. So we actually work with the First Nations, that we provide the material and they actually do the maintenance on that road. So we work with them on kind of what the improvements are and how they're going to do the maintenance.

We've put together, worked again with the community in putting together a cost estimate to upgrade that roadway. It's about \$8 million. And I think we've worked with them on putting together an application as well on that project.

Mr. Vermette: — Oh right on, I'm glad to hear that. So \$8 million. So there's \$8 million for the North, and that's for that road? Wow. You guys are good. You knew I was going to

ask that question. Oh, you guys are good.

Mr. Antunes: — I didn't say we had the money to do it. That's how much it costs to do it, to do the project, is \$8 million. That's the cost of the improvements.

Mr. Vermette: — Oh, okay. Well I heard the minister say something about increase of about \$8 million. I thought maybe . . . Oh, okay. Okay. Anyway, no I'm just joking.

But no, on a serious matter, yes anything you guys could do. Like I know that it needs some work.

And you're saying that the material, you provide all the material, like the gravel when it's needed on there. Like who determines that? Who would determine when gravel's needed? Because sometimes, I'll tell you, I wonder where the gravel is.

Mr. Antunes: — Yes. So we provide them with the materials. So we'll provide the gravel, stockpile the gravel, and then they just take the gravel and use it to gravel the road as they need. So it's really the community is making the decision on when they do the improvements or when they do the blading and that type of stuff. So it's up to the community to do that.

Mr. Vermette: — See, I've asked about this. And this is good that I have you here because I've talked to, you know, one of your senior staff in La Ronge. And that's kind of the understanding I had, and I wasn't sure.

Who makes the decision when they're going to grade, when they're going to put on material? Do you know, is it Highways' trucks that put the gravel on? Or they have their own trucks that put the gravel on and they determine grade? I'm curious to see because I'm going to meet with them further. Yes.

Mr. Antunes: — Yes. I'm not particularly sure whether or not they use our gravel trucks, but we have provided equipment in the past. But basically it's up to them to get the equipment that's required to be able to put on the gravel. You know, we agreed to them, here's how much money we're going to spend to maintain that road over the year. We provide the gravel. They supplied the labour and the equipment. Sometimes, if we have equipment that they don't, if they don't have equipment that we may have that they need, we may help them with that. But we leave it up to them then to maintain that road.

Mr. Vermette: — And why I bring it up is because I've had a few phone calls from concerned residents over there. And I've also said to the council that I will be meeting with them once I can get back home. And I'm going to set up a meeting with them to talk about the road because I wanted some details on how do we find out exactly. And if it is their decision, you know, with the material, when to put it on, how much . . . And is there enough material and, you know, are they waiting for some reason that they don't want to use up the material? So I just want to find out from them how they determine that. And they might have somebody within the band itself that works for them in maintenance that can make those calls and have a good understanding of it.

And I know that I'd said I was going to be asking about, you know, where we're at with an assessment of that road, where

we were at with the agreement and see where it is. So I'll meet with them. I'm going to get some information.

But let's just say that we find that there are issues. Who would I best direct that with if it means a meeting with them, myself, to meet with the minister, your officials? Just somebody to have a contact would be nice to have so I could say there are some issues and can we move on this and correct them. And maybe it's a simple miscommunication and that's all I just want to check into. I know they're trying to do their best to serve the road that serves their community and their residents.

Hon. Mr. Marit: — I'd take that one. Larry Young in the North, I just saw him today at lunch and he's a great guy. He works very well with the northern communities. And I would have no problem, if you're having some issues or challenges, I would appreciate you bringing them to me.

Mr. Vermette: — Thank you. I appreciate that. Of course there's always other roads. I know Cumberland House road was a bad one, and I see their frustration, you know, for many years in the community about the road.

I know that you were given a letter, I received a cc of that, and great on them. It goes to show you, I think His Worship has said, when we met with Highways and the minister, there was some, you know, commitment from him that he just wants to make sure there's a good road for his community members and, you know, park the politics, as he would say it, and let's work together to do this. And again I know that there's been some work done on there.

And the letter states, you know . . . And it's fine. It's all right for me to criticize yourself and your department when things aren't done, but I guess also when things are moving in a positive way for them, that's what they want. If that changes, I guess we'll criticize you. If it continues in a positive way and work gets done on it, he's happy. No pressure on me, I'm happy; it works out.

And I think, I've always said that I'm hoping for Saskatchewan residents. We serve all the communities. And again we have to do that in areas where they're not . . . we'll criticize. In areas where there's good work from yourself and your ministry, give credit where credit is due. And with respect, I mean that. So if you give us an update on Cumberland, that would be great.

Hon. Mr. Marit: — Yes. You're probably aware I did go up there last summer and I drove that road. And in fact, when we were driving it, that was in July, they were coring the road right at that time. We stopped when they were coring and they were just bringing up pure mud. It was just . . . So I know we went in and did some improvement spots last summer. But there's quite a bit, you know, work that we're going to be doing.

We have tendered a grade raise which will address two very low spots. One is about 5 kilometres long. I've got the kilometre markers here — one's about 5 kilometres long, and the other one is about 2 kilometres long — that they're going to do grade raises on. We also are working with Cumberland House and the band up there to make another application to receive funding for that community as well.

So, as I say, the team works very well with the communities when we can to try and get things going. I'm glad you raised the point that we did some good work and we looked at some issues up there. I know we did hire some local people to go and look at that whole delta drainage, and I hope that all worked out well, trying to alleviate, get rid of that water so that we do have a decent road up there. I saw it first-hand, and I did see the challenges there.

Mr. Vermette: — You know, and again thank you for the meeting that we had and your commitment to working on it. And again obviously that just goes in good faith sometimes working with His Worship and yourself, as the minister, your officials, ourself as the MLA [Member of the Legislative Assembly], we had a good meeting. And again, in the real world of things, we hope that's how it works, and sometimes it doesn't unfortunately. But sometimes it does work, and I think that's important to give credit where credit is due sometimes with yourself and your officials.

So having said that, another area . . . We'll watch that road and we'll see, you know, how it goes with Cumberland House. And hopefully it's positive. So we'll leave it at that. I don't have anymore, you know, at this point, comments about that. I wanted an update, and I'm glad you gave that.

And I see you're going to continue doing some work. So they'll be happy to see that as the equipment goes in and you guys move forward. Should that stop, I guess, then we'll be back here. Other than that, we'll move on a positive . . . [inaudible]. As His Worship says, park the politics, and let's get some work done.

So anyway having said that, another area I think about is Pelican Narrows. We had about 7 to 8 kilometres commitment of paving through the community. The road has been so bad, and just so much traffic. And back and forth, over the years, I'll just give you a little bit of history to the minister, and you might've been updated by your officials, but I just want to give you a little bit of background information.

There was a commitment by the previous government to pave 7 to 8 kilometres, then it changed. Then government changed. Then it was saying about land jurisdiction, and it needed a band council resolution and all the different things and the reasons why it couldn't be done. And it still, to this day, hasn't been done.

I wouldn't mind an update and seeing if maybe, with yourself and your officials, you guys can find a way to say, maybe it's time we deal with that road. And once and for all, let's finish the commitment we all said we were willing to do. So I'll see what you have to say about that, and we'll go further after.

Hon. Mr. Marit: — I'll leave it to Blair to make a comment on this, just to bring it up to speed.

Mr. Wagar: — I don't have deep, deep understanding of all the details, but this road has been a part of the discussions and negotiations that have been going on with the Peter Ballantyne, and so I'm reluctant to get into too much detail just because of those discussions that are occurring.

But in terms of the work that the ministry's been doing, I know that we've been positioning ourselves to be able to deal with that particular road. You're right in terms of some of the history around the jurisdiction of that road. And so we've been kind of standing by until the discussions and settlement occurs between the province and the Peter Ballantyne. And then from that point on, we'll take some direction from that settlement as to how we proceed and when.

Mr. Vermette: — Well I don't want to get in the middle or cause any problems with the negotiations that are going on. And I'm not quite sure what negotiations you're referring to, to be honest with you. I'm not sure, so if you could give me a little bit of background just so I understand what you're saying.

Mr. Wagar: — So what I'm understanding is the discussion that the Peter Ballantyne Band has with SaskPower in particular but there's a broader discussion going on there around the dam from the Island Falls dam.

Mr. Vermette: — Well not to muddy the water, but I'm confused. With the project that would go through the community, 7 to 8 kilometres of paving through the community, a commitment that was made before . . . It sounded like even when government changed, it was still something that was looking like they might be doing, but then my understanding, it was a BCR [band council resolution] that they needed. Or was it INAC, waiting for something from INAC? Like I've heard different things that were slowing it up, like it could've went through. But so I'm confused how this . . .

Mr. Wagar: — It's tied up in jurisdictional issues that the actual right-of-way that goes through the reserve is still in Canada's name. It's not our jurisdiction technically, so that's kind of what's being tied up, and that is that we're not able to proceed in doing upgrades to that road until that jurisdictional issue is sorted out. And some of this project now and the commitment to do it is tied into some of those negotiations that are happening with the settlement with between the province and Peter Ballantyne.

So generally we can't proceed with that work until it's clear that we have jurisdiction of that road, and that's being discussed as part of that overall settlement.

Mr. Vermette: — So you mean that the federal government, just so I understand, and the band then says that roadway that goes through the reserve will now be provincial property?

Mr. Wagar: — That's what needs to come out of that settlement is clarity on that. And then the transfer take place and then we would proceed with, when we would be able to proceed with making those improvements . . .

A Member: — If there's going to be a settlement.

Mr. Wagar: — Yes, if there's going to be a settlement. Yes.

Mr. Vermette: — No, and I appreciate that. So when I'm done here, I'll get a hold of, I'm going to get a hold of the chief and find out exactly, have a better understanding from his . . . what he's willing to share with me, to have a better understanding of what it is.

Because when I think, I just think, okay, here was the commitment. Let's do the 7 to 8 kilometres so it . . . That road's so rough to that community, it's unbelievable. I go there quite a bit. So I was hoping, like, it would be a simple process as yes. So something's now muddied the water so I want to find out what it is. And I'll get a hold of him and ask for what his understanding of it is. Because I . . . Yes anyway, it just seems to be something has changed from before and . . . [inaudible] . . . But my understanding was all it was, was a BCR to go in there with INAC. So I'm confused now.

[16:15]

Mr. Antunes: — Yes, Fred Antunes, deputy minister. Sorry, this is part of a larger settlement that they're dealing with on the whole aspect, as Blair indicated, around the Island Falls dam with SaskPower. So until that's resolved and we can actually get the title transferred to the province, we're not in a position to be able to make that investment. But you know, once that happens, then we'll . . . Once the land is transferred to us, then we'll be able to proceed with the investment. So we're just waiting to see what happens with those negotiations, and we're positioned and ready to be able to make that investment when that happens, when we get the land transferred.

Mr. Vermette: — Okay, I'll, yes, I appreciate that. And I will be asking them for, you know, an update so myself to understand it better. And if it means stay away, don't touch it, it's fine, whatever, but . . . And hopefully at the end of the day it isn't because, well we've . . . And I'm trying to understand it this way. It's saying, well you have to do this before we're going to help you here. And so that's why I want to be clear that's not what ends up happening, like there's going to be a consult because you're not doing this. That's all. I just want to make sure that's not where we're going. There's obviously legal reasons why you're saying, and that's . . . I just want to clarify that.

Mr. Antunes: — Yes, I guess if I could just comment on that. Our position really hasn't changed over this on the years. It's always been the same issue, is that until we have title to the land we can't make that investment. So you know, we're waiting for that to happen. So once the band council makes the resolution, the Government of Canada has to transfer it to us, and then we can go ahead and make that investment.

Mr. Vermette: — I guess there's a number of areas I could, you know, continue to go on and I realize that's . . . I don't want to take more time, but one area that I know has been creating a lot of issues for the community is Southend and the airport. And I know your officials probably have, on that airport, have a lot of . . . I hope they have a lot of background information on it. I know there's been requests, proposals and stuff for an airport out there.

In light of, you know, the seriousness of the airport, that was a private one, and then there's . . . Anyway it's a long, I guess, standing issues and when you think about medical transportation, the ambulance that have to . . . patients that are injured. At certain times the airport's usable; sometimes it's not. Many challenges that that community has, and I know that our leadership has always spoke, you know, trying to work in different ways, and it hasn't seemed to surface for some reason.

And I don't know what the reasons are, but I just want to make sure, represent that community. I speak up for them with the airport that, you know, for them it's crucial and at some point, you know, things where you look at a community as well, that you look at Southend for an airport.

I don't know if that's in a planning portion, if you've had any discussions further or if that has just been kind of, the answer is no, it's not happening. So I'm just curious. And again that could be a partnership again. We talk about if we're doing these federal partnerships, maybe there's an opportunity to do something that . . . working with the band, you know. We'll see, anyway. There's new leadership now with Peter Ballantyne, the chief and council. I'll be contacting them as well over there to have meetings with them to figure out exactly. I've sent them . . . Yes, we'll see where we go on that.

Hon. Mr. Marit: — I don't know if you're looking for a comment on that. My understanding is that airport is a private one, right? At Southend?

Mr. Vermette: — Yes.

Hon. Mr. Marit: — I haven't had any discussions on any expansions into Southend as far as from the ministry at all, from my officials. So I would be interested to see where the band would want to try and entertain doing something with the federal government to do something there. And I don't know the logistics around the private airport, like who owns it and all that other stuff. There'd be some challenges there I'm sure.

Mr. Vermette: — Maybe a suggestion, and I don't know if . . . I know there's been proposals from their director of health. They've had different people talk about from a health perspective as to why the community needs an airport that's longer . . . what's currently there from the private. And there was issues back and forth where they tried to see, would the government take it over, could the band take it over from the private individual.

I remember there was discussions back and forth for years, so I don't know if you guys are aware of, you know, with some of your officials. You might even have some of the . . . It was the binders that they had documents. I mean they had everything. I met with them and they had everything, ducks in a row, to explain, you know, why. So I'm not sure if you've gotten that binder or any of that information because, if not, I sure hope . . . I would encourage them to make sure, you know, being as a minister in your role now, to try to see if you could work with them in any way.

Hon. Mr. Marit: — I'll let Blair make comment. He's got some knowledge of it.

Mr. Wagar: — So yes, I have some history with working with that community in terms of some of the demands including . . . And I'm going back from memory a little bit here.

The airport that was there was associated with an outfitter, and then that outfitter, that operation had changed hands a few times. And then there was some concern about the ongoing operations and maintenance of that airport, especially during the transition period.

So the ministry at that time — this was a few years back now — had facilitated some relationship working with the First Nation and the health authority and others because there was some concern about being able to still access that community for air ambulance and other health-related emergencies. So the ministry at that time stepped in for a short period of time to help with that transition, including providing some funding for that airport, and support to help with that transition.

That transition has occurred and our funding had stopped. And we did also spend a bit of time talking about a net new airport location and facility. It was at a quite a substantial cost, obviously, to build a brand new airport. I'm trying to remember the numbers. I want to say it was probably a 4,000, maybe even 5,000-foot runway, which is quite substantial. I know that there was some pretty significant geotechnical challenge with being able to put that airport there. And I think it eventually, in terms of a net new airport, almost became unworkable, if I remember, just because of some of the physical constraints to be able to put that size of airport in there and to build a smaller one that would fit.

Just like we talked about some of the others, the bigger the aircraft, it probably wasn't going to make sense for them to build something smaller. So that discussion, I think, kind of came to an end and the focus turned back to the airport that they had right now and looking after that airport and using that to be able to move air ambulance, emergency medical-type services using that airport. So from what I've gathered at this point in time, that that airport's currently being operated from a private sector perspective and offering those services to that community.

Mr. Vermette: — Now again I just want an opportunity to come in and just . . . Some of the communities that have shared over their frustrations, and some of the things, you know, again that they would like to see addressed. And I want to again say thank you to yourself, minister, and your officials. And for me, I have no further comments. If things, you know, are positive, that's great. If they're negative, well then I guess we'll be back here trying to say, you know, can you do something here.

But anyway with that, Madam Chair, I'd just like to say thank you for giving me the opportunity.

The Chair: — And I'll turn the questions back to Mr. Belanger.

Mr. Belanger: — Thank you very much, Madam Chair. And I thank my learned colleague from Cumberland on of course his time and his questions. And these are things of course that are really important to his constituents, and he continues to represent them very well.

I want to now go on basically on the FTE [full-time equivalent] reductions within your department. I wanted to know what the scope of the reductions are under the FTE and where are the impacts being felt. Now this is a very important question from my perspective because obviously in the North, maintenance of our highway system is so crucial.

As many communities . . . And I don't begrudge the fact that many southern communities have two or three entries into their communities. As I travel from Ile-a-la-Crosse, I'll find

communities that are much smaller than my own hometown have two or three entry points, but Ile-a-la-Crosse only has one.

So you know, I just hope that staffing (a) doesn't go down, of course, and the second matter of course is investment into capital infrastructure, into improvements and not so much maintenance, because you alluded to maintenance earlier, but that there be a recognition of the fact that in northern Saskatchewan, with one access point to some of these communities, with the remoteness, the challenges, and cost of living in northern Saskatchewan, and the fact that these roads are of vital importance in many, many ways. We were hoping that the Department of Highways would understand that and that we wouldn't see FTE reductions in northern Saskatchewan where again, even from the perspective of employment, and unemployment is quite high, so these jobs are highly valuable. So if you can break down for me what the FTE reductions are and whereabouts are they and which departments lost some positions, because obviously there's different components for Highways and Infrastructure.

Mr. Antunes: — So in 2018-19, the ministry had no change in its total FTE allotment. So there were no FTE reductions. We did reallocate three FTEs from the expense side to capital. Those are vacancies in the Grain Car Corporation that we had from last year. All we did is reallocate them to capital work. So there were no reductions in FTEs.

Mr. Belanger: — In general, when you look at the reductions overall, as you have people that may be retiring or people that . . . or positions that you may or may not want to fill, is there any plans by the department to not fill certain positions? And again I make reference to the, in particular, northern part of Saskatchewan.

Mr. Antunes: — No, our plan would be, as people retire, we would look at . . . you know, if they're essential services or essential positions we would backfill those, and in situations where we can maybe obtain some efficiencies, we would look at reallocating those FTEs probably to capital delivery if we could or other areas where we have priorities. So our intent is to, you know . . . [inaudible interjection] . . . Yes, sorry. So our intent is to continue to, you know, maintain our FTE process or . . . [inaudible].

Mr. Belanger: — Yes. I would point out that, from a northern perspective, as I indicated, we have no choice but to rely on these Highways workers to keep our highways as functional and operational as possible. And any job loss, even if one were to retire after 20, 30 years and you simply don't fill those positions, it does have a residual effect on all the communities. And so that's one of the reasons why, you know, if we see for example Highways starting laying off staff in the North, we say, well that's the last place they should be cutting because of the vital importance of these links to our communities.

So I guess in the scheme of things, we are really trying to watch what Highways do with their FTEs, and that's why the question was raised. As I've alluded to, and my colleague has on many occasions, we need those jobs in the North. So I would implore you as the minister of course, and certainly the administrative team, to keep as many of those positions viable and filled because we do need those staff members on the ground.

Mr. Antunes: — You know as we've gone through this last year, we have done a internal review — we called it the lines of business and process review — where we looked at the organizational structure and we kind of aligned ourselves so we could more efficiently deliver services to citizens. So we kind of aligned our operations and maintenance team into one group because they're the team that basically deals with citizens. And that's where, you know, people that you're referring to would fall in.

And as we've gone through this entire process of, you know, kind of moving people around to be more efficient in how we deliver work, any positions that we've found that we had an opportunity to reallocate, we've reallocated them to other priority areas. Like for example, you know, if we had some administrative people that were doing administrative tasks, we try to put them into say, capital delivery of projects where we can do it at maybe a lower cost, maybe some of the consultants.

[16:30]

But we've made no changes through that entire process to any of our operational staff so the FTE complement we had last year to deliver road maintenance is the same as what we have this year.

Mr. Belanger: — Yes, and so just to summarize, like you're explaining to me today and I need to understand is that is, as you look at the shift and changes within your FTE complement, that where you'd find somebody that had . . . there's an opening maintenance position that you wouldn't fill it from a management perspective. You'd align your skill set from your FTEs to the postings that are available.

Mr. Antunes: — Yes, I think the front-line staff, like if we've got people that are out delivering work on our crews, I mean we would need to keep those people, so we typically don't reallocate those positions somewhere else. I mean if somebody retires and it's a position that's essential to deliver the service, the level of service tenders that we have, we would backfill that position.

Mr. Belanger: — Now in their relationship, and I asked the question earlier, as you contract out to some of the First Nations on some of the lands surrounding their First Nations communities, I don't think there's a lot of demur from different people in some of these communities, but there's obviously the question of balance between private contractors versus government employees. There's always that worry — as you see evidence even within the Assembly building, with the janitors being privatized now, with the cafeteria being privatized — there's always that worry that along comes the opportunity to privatize road maintenance in the North, that we've set the precedents with First Nations agreements, so that gives us pretty much total control on how we pursue the private contractors versus government employees argument. Has that plan or thought process . . . What's your frame of mind on that front?

Mr. Antunes: — So I think what we've seen is, in the North we've gotten significant value out of having local residents help us with the maintenance activities. So we've got a number of agreements where, you know, the First Nations are basically

maintaining the roads for us. I don't see that diminishing. In fact I probably see it expanding in the future as we go forward and we look at how we deliver different services and programs. So I think there's an opportunity there for us to do more in the North.

Mr. Belanger: — Has there been any assets being sold, any significant assets being sold within the ministry?

Hon. Mr. Marit: — Yes, just to answer your question on that, in fact I think we just did this year. We just purchased a significant number of low-hour graders of which probably 80 per cent of them ended up going up North. So I think just the opposite's happening. We're replacing equipment up there.

Mr. Belanger: — Yes, that's very surprising on how many people monitor what Sask Highways is selling or not selling. And like we have got just tons of information of people always worried because we always harken the days when equipment was sold off and people were laid off. It's something that we obviously don't want to see a repeat of.

So I think it's important that we look at the FTE complements, the future plans around the private contractor relationship, equipment being sold or purchased for us or by us and for us. These are things that are of significant interest to a lot of groups of people out there. And they continue monitoring some of the activity of Highways, and it's surprising how many people pay attention to that.

The other question that you alluded to as the minister was the P3 model in which you're examining the value around a P3. And I've said it in the Assembly, as we've said it a number of times, P3s are to a certain extent, may be a tool that governments could use provided that we certainly have the opportunity to understand what we're paying. And so when you mentioned P3s being a possibility for a number of projects, could you give us an example of how you see a P3 opportunity working for your department? And what specific projects do you have in mind when you make reference to that?

Hon. Mr. Marit: — I was just referring to the model, that maybe it is something we should look at in northern communities. And I look at it even in my previous life, in the municipal world, where we looked at . . . In fact, I even had a term for it where I called it a P4 model, where we could have the federal government, provincial government, communities, and private sector investing in roadwork. And with that comes, I guess, comes opportunities for all parties, whether it's the private sector, or the community obviously would benefit from something like this. I think it's a model that we have to look at. The unfortunate part about it is, under the P3 model, is the scope that the federal government recognizes the projects have to be, and that becomes a challenge for Saskatchewan as a whole.

And I think it's a model that . . . And all I was alluding to in my earlier comments is as an option to look at. And I would like to look at that model in some way, if industry is ready to. You know, we can't move the resources where they are in the province; they are where they are. And industry wants those resources, and at some point they're going to need . . . They want the infrastructure in place, and so does the community. So

I think we have to work together to say, okay, if this is what you need, here's what we need, and here's what the community needs. So I just referred to it earlier, in my earlier comments, as I think it's an option we should look at.

Mr. Belanger: — The notion, if you look at some of the examples, and that's why I was asking about a specific example. You look at the Prince Albert bridge where there was at one time the discussion around a P3 model. And it was made by the former premier, indicating that perhaps it was one of the options that they could look at. And I just think that in his waning days as our premier, he just threw that out there just to not have to deal with the issue of the day and, you know, obviously I think people sensed that.

But there's a bit of a kickback on that concept because there's a couple of principles that I think Prince Albert brought forward indicating that, well this is a provincial highway. It's not the responsibility of the city and it's not just the city residents that use it. It's used as a gateway to the North, and vice versa as a northern gateway to the South. So the mayor and the council of P.A. would argue that it is a provincial road. It's a regional initiative so why should the Prince Albert taxpayers pay that bill as part of a P3 agreement. That was his argument back.

So I was just wondering, if you look at the relationship you've enjoyed with your previous life, how is the relationship between the cities, the towns and villages, and the RMs differ from a relationship around construction of a road? Is there a vast difference in terms of attitude or is it pretty much the same?

Hon. Mr. Marit: — You know, I can't speak for all parties and I sure don't profess to do that. I think we just looked at it from a rural perspective when we saw resource development happening where it was happening, that in many cases we didn't have the road network to help that resource to expand. And we did have examples where the resource sector was ready to come to the table. Unfortunately now we don't have a P3 model to work with. I mean PPP Canada [Public-Private Partnership Canada] no longer exists. But I think it's a great opportunity for us to look at at the end of the day.

There is only one taxpayer in the province and we all know that. And everybody wants infrastructure and they need it. So how do we get there? And I think it's a model that should be looked at when you're looking at either resource development . . . And that's where I was really referring to it in my previous life is when you had resource development. When you have community and issues around that and you still have resources, usually that's why the communities are there. I think it's something that, as I said earlier, I think it's just a tool in the tool box that should be looked at.

Mr. Belanger: — Again as you embrace your new role as the Highways minister, obviously you have a lot of experience in your old world, as you describe it, as a municipal leader. But from SARM's [Saskatchewan Association of Rural Municipalities] perspective, how much money do they spend, if you're able to even give me a rough estimate, per year on highway maintenance? Is there a figure you'd be comfortable with sharing?

Hon. Mr. Marit: — No, I wouldn't. If you're talking just from

the municipal road, not the highway, just the municipal road network, no, I couldn't give you a dollar amount. I'm sure that number's there. We could probably find it out through Government Relations. They would know through looking through all the financial statements of the municipalities.

But I mean you're going to bring in everything into it then. You're going to bring gravel into it, you're going to bring equipment into it, you're going to bring everything into it. It's probably a staggering, staggering number.

Mr. Belanger: — As you look at the example around some of the communities that have certain aspirations, we talked about the municipal transportation infrastructure. There is no component there that says, okay, based on your P4 model, when you look at the . . . You mentioned \$21 million in grants to support municipal transportation infrastructure would include 6.7 million to urban municipalities such as Prince Albert, Moose Jaw and Melfort. You made that opening statement. The urban highway connector program, there's no component of that that is required for the municipality. It's all provincial money?

Hon. Mr. Marit: — No, that's cost-shared money. And what that program does is looks at a highway that runs through a municipality to some regard, and then we look at cost sharing the funding. And then we bring it to, you know, a new spec, and then we turn it back to the municipality.

Mr. Belanger: — And what's the relationship in terms of percentage of the cost share? Obviously you'd assume the government would pay more, right?

Hon. Mr. Marit: — It depends on the traffic volumes and the type of road. And then it'll depend on what the cost ratio is on that.

Mr. Belanger: — Now obviously as you look at some of the challenges around some of the northern communities, the volume of traffic wouldn't be the same as, say through Melfort. There's no opportunity for the North to take advantage of a program of this sort.

Like for example if the main road that runs through my home community, it goes right to the church which is at the southern-most tip of Ile-a-la-Crosse. That's a provincial highway. Now the town needs money to clean it up because there's a few water main breaks that basically they had to get to and they wrecked the pavement. So in that instance it is a safety concern because there's busted up pavement in two or three sections.

Would they be eligible for this program? And based on the traffic volume count, there's not a whole lot of traffic that runs through that main community, but it's still a major problem for them.

Hon. Mr. Marit: — Yes, that falls under a different . . . And I kind of thought it would. It falls under our purview anyway because it's the highway. The urban highway connector program is just that. If the highway goes through a community, the highway continues on one side and then the other side, then that part inside is what we call the urban highway connector.

That's what the urban highway connector program is about. When you've got a highway going right through the community like yours and ends there, then that becomes under the purview of the Ministry of Highways. Yes.

Mr. Belanger: — Okay, because I can tell you that there's two major spots that are in pretty bad, bad shape on the main highway, and that despite having the highway done a couple years ago. And the reason why I would point that out is that that is a direct result of water main breaks along the main highway. And has there been any discussion or ideas around how we deal with the investment on pavement and two years later we're ripping up that pavement to fix a water main break? There's no discussion around engineering, or how we could possibly do highway crossings when it comes to water and sewer in a different fashion, so we don't have to rip up our newly laid pavement? Because we've seen it happen tons of times throughout Saskatchewan. But is there any kind of discussion around that concept?

Hon. Mr. Marit: — There's probably other comments to make on that. I think it's a discussion we have to take on what we call integrated planning and in discussing with communities, you know, where the highway goes through it, or is part of it, saying okay, we're planning on doing some work here. We want to do some work here. What's your plan? You know, are you going to . . . If we do this, if you're going to do waterway, if you're going to do waterlines underneath it or sewage lines underneath it, here's our plan to say, okay, in year 2 or 3 we're going to be here to put a new asphalt lift on. Do you want to be ready to replace your waterlines or your sewer lines at that time? And I think that's all part of a discussion we have to have.

[16:45]

And I know in some communities it works out well. I think under the urban highway connector, I know that discussion does go on. I think it has to happen in other communities as well, if we're planning on doing something like that. In some cases we don't have time frame. We're challenged with it, if something happens, that we just have to go in and fix it, and that's what we have to do.

And Fred just gave me an example. At Creighton, we're actually doing that this year. We've engaged with the community to say, okay, here's what we're going to do, and work in partnership with it. So yes, there's more to do on it, you bet, but I think we're definitely going the right way.

Mr. Belanger: — Yes. One of the things I think is important, Mr. Minister, is the sense of my reference is that the Highway 908 . . . I think it's 908 running into Ile-a-la-Crosse. I'm pretty certain that that's the number. But anyway, as you know, we have the regional hospital and people land there for emergencies and they pick up for emergencies. For the more critical injuries, they pick up at the airport in Ile-a-la-Crosse and transfer to Saskatoon. So that link from the hospital to the airport has got two really bad spots on it, very bad. And we've been getting a lot of concerns and complaints.

So I'm hoping that part of the maintenance . . . recognizing, you know, you always get in trouble when you talk about your home community. But the fact that it is a regional hospital site,

there's a lot of flights out of there for medical emergencies. Ambulance operators have been complaining about 908. I think it's 908; correct me if I'm wrong. But they've been complaining about the condition of that road in the sense that patients have been . . . just end up having more problems just driving in the back of an ambulance. So I would hope that there would be some kind of action plan to address that. It's for regional patient safety, and I would hope that you'd undertake, at least commit to fixing those bad spots.

Hon. Mr. Marit: — Yes, I can assure you that if there's any issues there, we'll look at it. We definitely will. And maybe our regional manager's already aware of it. But I can assure you we will look at it.

Mr. Belanger: — Getting back to Prince Albert, Moose Jaw, and Melfort, you talked about a \$6.7 million commitment. Can you give us an explanation of those projects and a description of how the money's being spent in each of them?

Hon. Mr. Marit: — I will turn that over to one of the officials to give the breakdown on it.

Mr. Antunes: — In Moose Jaw we're going to be doing some repairs to landslide on Highway 363. In Yorkton we're going to be doing some intersection improvements and a rehab at Highway 9 and York Road. In Melfort we're going to be doing a rehab on the service road. In Prince Albert there's a rehabilitation on 2nd Avenue West from 15th Street to 17th Street West. And in Canora we're doing some subgrade repairs. And there's a couple of other communities where we've got some repairs that we haven't identified as . . . They're smaller repairs and we haven't detailed them out yet. It'll depend on work that's required this year.

And in addition to that we always . . . You know, our ongoing maintenance commitment is \$3.2 million out of that pool for the urban highway connector. And then we have a towns urban highway connector program. There's another \$200,000 that we invest in that. So that's to fund the operations and maintenance of those highway connectors.

The other projects I talked about were more capital-type projects and I didn't give you the dollar values because some of the projects haven't been tendered yet, so we don't want to let people know what the potential cost might be before we tender the work.

Mr. Belanger: — Just on 2nd Avenue West, the project specific for Prince Albert, could you give us a breakdown on what you've got planned there and like, what the distances are . . . [inaudible].

Mr. Antunes: — Yes, I think that it's just a couple of blocks — 15th Street to 17th Street — and it's a rehabilitation on 2nd Avenue.

Mr. Belanger: — And that means . . . When you say rehabilitation, can you give a description of what that means?

Mr. Antunes: — Yes. You know, it's basically resurfacing, so restoring the pavement to a like-new condition, going in and ripping up the old pavement and putting down new pavement.

And the city may be doing . . . I'm not sure if they have planned to do some sewer and water as part of that. I don't know those details, but that may be something that they may be looking at doing in conjunction with this work.

Mr. Belanger: — And that's a good segue to my other question. When you look at the notion that . . . How is Highways' relationship when it comes to, for example, if there's a tender given to a northern community for doing some project? And like how much communication is there?

And I'll give you an example: in Ile-a-la-Crosse when we built a road, the community came on board and said, yes, we'd like to do some of the side roads as well. So as the companies come in, they got extra work from the communities. And the community benefited because the companies were there already doing the work and they just simply added a few more truckloads of asphalt and did the road. Is that collaboration, would you describe it as being highly efficient and paramount to some of the local discussions you have with different groups that you're involved with?

Hon. Mr. Marit: — Very much so. It's something we have undertaken this year with every tender that's gone out near a community. We've let that community know that there's going to be a paving contract going out in that area. And if they want to pave a couple of streets in their town or look at anything like that, then we give them . . . Once the tender is awarded, we'll give them the name of who's doing the tender and they can go and see if they can get a better deal on asphalt or work with it. As you know, mobilization does cost money, so we are doing that.

I know first hand where some communities have already engaged with the contractors that were awarded contracts to get a price on asphalt to do, in some cases it's four, five, six blocks of pavement work that they want done in their communities. So it's a good thing.

Mr. Belanger: — Does Highways have the same basic approach as the private contractor would do? Like say, for example, if Highways was to go into a community and say, we're going to rebuild, with our own manpower, rebuild a certain section of road, but while we're here, if you guys need our equipment to do extra work, at a cost, then we would do that. Is it the same kind of relationship?

Hon. Mr. Marit: — You know, I would hope that if we do . . . We don't do much of that work anymore. It's more or less all tendered out. But I know in my previous life again that municipalities had a good relationship with the area managers for Highways. If they needed . . . In some cases, you had some communities that had a paved road into a park, right, and they just had to do some patching. They'd go and talk to the regional manager of Highways and say, gee, can we get a couple of loads of cold mix from you? So there's those kind of relationships that are ongoing and they're throughout the province, and they're just common sense things.

Mr. Belanger: — So you would encourage that, obviously not massive projects, but you'd encourage the common sense, realistic sharing of resources. And can I say that you're willing to donate all that equipment and manpower too?

Hon. Mr. Marit: — No, no, we're not going to compete against the private sector on that. We can't do it for . . . As I said, there's only one taxpayer and there's a cost to doing business.

Mr. Belanger: — Okay, I want to just shift again. I was thinking of Prince Albert area. The current bridge that was built, could you just give us a background on what the costs were. And obviously the people of St. Louis and area love that idea, but what allocation was made for the new bridge and the final costs? Because there was a few delays with a few of the girders being twisted or something of that sort, but that didn't come out of the additional costs. That was part of the contract. Is that correct?

Hon. Mr. Marit: — I just need clarification. You're talking the P.A. bridge or you're talking the St. Louis bridge?

A Member: — Oh, St. Louis bridge.

Mr. Antunes: — Yes so the cost of that project . . . And I don't have the details about how much just the bridge cost, but the total cost of the project, which included a number of roadways, and that was a very complex geotechnical situation at that bridge so that really drove the cost, it was over \$100 million. That included the roadways so it's not just the bridge costs.

Mr. Belanger: — And you wouldn't be able to break that down for me?

Mr. Antunes: — Yes. I don't have the bridge cost here with me, but we have that. We don't have that cost with me but if you want that detail, we could provide that detail.

Mr. Belanger: — Yes, thank you. Madam Chair, I think note that the undertaking has been offered by the department to get the information to me. And I would hold the department to that because I've asked for information in the past and I'm still waiting for some of the information. But anyway, as time will tell, we'll see if we get that information.

Now what allocation are you making in terms of spending on the older bridge? Because I understand that this is the last standing winged railway bridge in Canada. What allocation are you making for that bridge?

Hon. Mr. Marit: — You know, at this time I don't think we've got any money allocated for that bridge. I know there's been some interest by local groups to turn it into a walkway or something like that and I don't know where that process is at right now.

Mr. Belanger: — So you're saying that there is no money being allocated to the old bridge.

Hon. Mr. Marit: — Not at this time, no.

Mr. Belanger: — Okay. Because obviously there's been . . . I think there's a commitment made by the MLA for Batoche — had a function in St. Louis — that there was going to be commitment for that bridge, and I just want to get confirmation. Is there or is there not commitment for that bridge that is indicated by the MLA from Batoche?

Hon. Mr. Marit: — Yes. I have no . . . We have nothing in our budget for the bridge there right now, so . . . at St. Louis.

Mr. Belanger: — So I just, I think it's important that people know that, but thanks for answering the question.

I want to go to my favourite topic, which is the Regina bypass, for a bit here. Before I get there, I know you spoke briefly about this but I just want to get confirmation from you. There are concerns about the stretch of Highway No. 5 between Saskatoon and Humboldt from some of the paramedics and the municipal leaders. The minister had signalled that there would be plans to twin Highway 5 coming out of Saskatoon to junction 316, which is east of the city, and plans to widen the highway from junction 316 to Highway 2. Just from our research it doesn't seem to be in the spring tender, so what's the plans for the project?

Hon. Mr. Marit: — We're in the process now of the design on that. Obviously it's a massive project for widening and passing lanes along that route. We're hoping that within the next two to three years that we can have this project out for tender.

Mr. Belanger: — If we had any . . . Obviously paramount as you indicated to the function of government, in particular Highways, is safety, safety, safety. That's been one of the issues that have been, you know, certainly spoken of at great lengths in this Assembly. And we all know that in many parts of rural Saskatchewan that there are intersections that continue to be very, very, very high risk for collision and damage, notwithstanding the tragic event in Humboldt. And our prayers continue going to that community and to the entire people impacted, the entire families impacted by that devastating loss. But not so much setting that aside. Now's not the time to talk about that as we're still in the grieving process.

But there are many areas in rural Saskatchewan and in the North that continue to be problematic. Have you as a minister looked at the challenge province-wide and have you got a sense of where we're at when it comes to the number of intersections that are high risk and what people need to know?

Hon. Mr. Marit: — The Ministry of Highways does a very detailed inspection of intersections on a rotating basis. Every three to four years intersections are viewed. And in that process obviously we look at sightlines. We look at any changes.

[17:00]

I think this year when we looked at our safety program and the funds in there, there was just over 50 different projects that we did. I think it was 49 or 48 were intersection related, where we either looked at signage or we looked at turning lanes or acceleration lanes or things of that nature. So the ministry takes the intersection piece very seriously. And as I said, the intersections are reviewed every three to four years, all the intersections. Thank you.

Mr. Belanger: — And obviously we look at some of the challenges as we speak of trying to continue to build the economy of Saskatchewan, which is every person's interest in this Assembly, and of course throughout south Saskatchewan that we obviously have to make sure we have the infrastructure

matching the demand on our highways in this case.

As it pertains to your role, are you responsible for the Highway Traffic Board as well?

Hon. Mr. Marit: — No, the Highway Traffic Board falls under Justice.

Mr. Belanger: — Okay, so when it comes to the notion of specific questions around the highway traffic Act and the trucking industry itself, you wouldn't have any role to play as it pertains to trucking overall?

Hon. Mr. Marit: — We really look after, I guess, the weights and dimensions and obviously the enforcement of that through our commercial vehicle officers. And that's what role's under us, the Highway Traffic Board. Any incidents that doesn't fall under us, it falls under Justice.

Mr. Belanger: — So in terms of, when you talk about safety in the trucking industry in general, as you know, it's important to them, it's important to us, but who would be the minister responsible for truck safety? I'm talking about the transportation bigger trucks — the 18-wheelers, and semis, and so on.

Hon. Mr. Marit: — I guess I'd need clarification from you on what aspects are you talking? If you're talking the dimensions and weights of the trucks, if we stop a vehicle on the road, our vehicle officers will do an inspection of that vehicle. How that vehicle gets on the road would probably fall under SGI for the most part and so would the drivers.

Mr. Belanger: — So in terms of the relationship with the Saskatchewan Trucking Association, like say for example, training, inspections, history of the trucking firm, like who would be ultimately responsible for that?

Hon. Mr. Marit: — That would fall under SGI.

Mr. Belanger: — So you would just simply do the weights and the dimensions of the vehicle. You would corroborate with SGI and then . . . I'm just trying to understand because you have the Highway Traffic Board, and then you Highways, and then you have SGI. Somewhere in the midst of that, one of the group has to be the leader. I'm just trying to figure out which one it is.

Hon. Mr. Marit: — Yes, I'll let Blair give you a little more update, just a little more detail on the technical stuff.

Mr. Wagar: — So it is, as the minister was saying, it's a joint effort between ourselves and SGI in a large part, and the responsibility for the industry is shared. So as the minister said, when it comes to infrastructure protection or how the road is utilized from a weight and dimension perspective, the ministry has regulatory responsibility for that. When it comes to the driver qualification, the vehicle standards, the vehicle inspections, the six-month periodic motor vehicle inspection, those largely fall under SGI.

When it comes to hours of service, the ministry, within our trucking policy group, sets some of those rules. There's federal rules for hours of service, depending on whether a carrier

crosses borders or not, or whether it stays within the province. There's provincial rules for hours of service, and that's a role that we play around hours of service. Trip inspection — the walk around, daily walk around — that a driver does before they drive, those are regulations that our ministry is responsible for. Definitely is a shared approach to how we manage it.

In terms of driver records, again that's SGI. And the safety of that particular individual driver and their qualification, again SGI. When it comes to carrier profiles, so the safety record of a company, that's done by SGI as well. And we work in collaboration with them if a company is running into some issues. But for the most part those facility audits, when they actually go out and sit down with the carrier themselves, review their carrier profile, they conduct a records audit on them to see if the company itself is complying with the rules; that's led by SGI as well.

Our commercial vehicle enforcement staff which is within the Ministry of Highways, they enforce both the weight and dimension rules, as well as all *The Traffic Safety Act* rules. And so when they're dealing with trucks and drivers at the roadside, they do roadside inspections right then and there. All that information that the officer generates at roadside, again the commercial vehicle safety inspection at the roadside, as well as any charges that that officer may lay, all of that information ends up on SGI's carrier profile. So it is a completely integrated safety management plan that the province has jointly managed by the ministry and SGI.

Mr. Belanger: — Yes, and it certainly is a learning process for many people that are out there to basically say, well who's the lead on the whole notion around truck safety. Some of the stats that we're getting that, you know . . . And obviously this is important to the trucking industry. You know, we're not slighting the trucking industry at all. I think they have a very important amount of work, but there's obviously . . . Always paramount to people is to ensure that safety is there. And when you hear stats like every 16 minutes someone is killed or injured in an accident involving a large truck, these are issues that, you know, and research that has been done very well.

And there's a number of issues where we talk about the relationship between the trucking industry and of course the pedestrian traffic, and of course light vehicle traffic and so on and so forth. If one were to come forward with, you know, with a concept when you talk about the larger trucks, in particular what they would basically refer to as a trailer brake saver in the tug test recorder, have you had any exposure to that concept, and are you aware of any department that may have had interaction on how we could make the trucking industry even more safer?

Hon. Mr. Marit: — I haven't heard of these. I think this is a discussion that's going to . . . is much bigger. Because now I think if you want to do something for truck safety, you've got to talk national. You have to bring all the provinces together to talk about truck safety. When you look at the amount of trucks travelling through this province . . . I don't know what the stat was when we looked at truck-trailer incidents in the province of Saskatchewan — but don't hold me to this — but my recollection was that it was close to 40 per cent of the incidents that happened in the province of Saskatchewan were

out-of-province trucks and drivers.

I think this is the discussion that we have to have with our colleagues across the country, that we have to, if we're going to do something on . . . And whatever it might be, I think the discussion has to take place, that we have to have something that's consistent across the country, whether it's how the driver gets their 1A licence, or how they proceed down the road to be a driver, and even who is giving the 1A exams, and things like that. I think this is a bigger discussion as a result of incidents that happened. But I think it's something that has to happen.

Mr. Belanger: — Yes, and while this is not the question directed to you as a department, but perhaps you can give me the department that I should speak to if I were to ask the question, has there been a relaxing of standards when it comes to authorizing 1A licensing and heavy transport standards in the province of Saskatchewan?

All the while being familiar with the minister's assertion that this has got to be a national movement. And I understand that. And what if each province is balking and making certain moves for, you know, whatever reason that there are out there.

Who would I direct the question within government? Is it SGI? Or is it the Justice department as to whether there was a relaxing of standards in the trucking industry over the last 5, 10, 15 years?

Hon. Mr. Marit: — You know, I have my 1A licence as well, and I think this . . . Obviously this is something you'd probably have to ask SGI as it falls under their purview. But to say whether there's been relaxing of standards, I would challenge that to some degree.

Mr. Belanger: — No, and I understand there's a bunch . . . There's just so many things that are determined as you look at public safety or traffic safety. And I'm not arguing the point that this has got to be national in scope. But you know, very simple things like a tug test, you know, to make sure that your trailer is solidly locked in place as you'd understand being a driver, and as well not using the phrase they call spike break. These are some of the things that really have, you know, there should be some discussions. And I'm hoping to do that with SGI when the opportune time comes because there's a lot of evidence to indicate that there are things that we can do that would make things safer. But there's got to be good collaboration and corroboration by people like the Saskatchewan Trucking Association.

And like, the stats speak for themselves and you're right in the sense that there are a lot of out-of-province incidents, that there are out-of-province drivers that impact Saskatchewan drivers as well. So it's got to be a national initiative. But somewhere along the line, one jurisdiction has to stand up and say, well we need to put in certain features to make our industry even safer.

Hon. Mr. Marit: — Well, no. You know, I agree with you to some degree. But if one province does it, goes . . . I would hope that, you know, with such a national trucking industry that we have in this province . . . That's why I made the comment that I think we really have to look at harmonizing this across the country.

You know, I'm not going to get into specifics of what I've heard. I just met with my colleagues at WESTAC [Western Transportation Advisory Council] last weekend in Manitoba and we had this very discussion about standards across the country, and they are different. They're drastically different. I would say that the province of Saskatchewan is probably one of the highest. I would challenge some of the other jurisdictions. But until we can come to some consensus on what those standards are going to be, it's going to be challenging.

Mr. Belanger: — Yes. We've got some very valuable information that we've met with numerous groups on and have had some very good discussions on as it pertains to what can be done provincially and in the hopes that having a national leader to begin to talk about things of this sort. And there's some very good ideas out there on how we can improve trucker safety overall.

And we probably will be approaching SGI on this particular matter because I do know that there's been a number of federal MPs engaged with this. And they are familiar with the phrase of spiking the brake and doing a proper tug test, the whole bit. So yes, I'm not a long-distance trucker at all, but I'm a long-distance driver. That being said, I think we're going to spend a lot of time on this particular . . . time with the appropriate agency. And the only reason I'm sharing this with you is that, as the Minister of Highways, you're familiar with all the challenges around safety, and this is another component that I think we need to have discussed.

All right now moving along, I want to spend a bit of time on the Regina bypass. And just basically in terms of the lawsuits themselves, I wouldn't mind getting on record that there are still 28 lawsuits related to the Regina bypass. And just an update, have more been added, or have some been resolved? Are you able to share with us where they're at?

[17:15]

Mr. Antunes: — So yes, we have 23 lawsuits actually. Two have been resolved, and one has been resolved pending the claimant filing an appeal. But three have been resolved.

Mr. Belanger: — And is there a dollar value, are you able to share with me the dollar value of the ones that have been settled?

Mr. Antunes: — Yes, so I think with the two that have been solved, since there's only two, you know, we do have some concerns around privacy for the people that were involved in the court cases that have been solved. The one case has been dismissed, so there's no additional cost there. But on the other two, because there's some concerns around privacy, you know . . . As we have more, maybe we'd be more . . . some of those concerns go away.

You know, we can tell you that, in terms of the budget for the amount that we expect to spend for land, we're still on track with our budget. So we don't see us exceeding that budget that we had, that we publicly stated which, I believe, was \$100 million for land. So we're still on track for that.

Mr. Belanger: — And while these are specific for the Regina

bypass, province wide are we involved with any other lawsuits on any other deals or land acquisitions, or lawsuits in general?

Mr. Antunes: — Yes, we do have other, you know, let's use the term "lawsuits" as opposed to claims. Because in the construction industry sometimes somebody says I have a dispute, and all of a sudden it becomes a claim. So let's use the term "lawsuit" where somebody's actually filed something in court. So I do believe we have a few others on other land issues.

And we also have some, because we're in the construction business, we do have some claims related to construction. And then we also have some people that have filed suits related to, whether there's been a personal injury or different things like that, related to a motor vehicle accident. So you know, this is something we deal with on a regular basis.

Mr. Belanger: — And none of these claims are from a subcontractor, basically saying that they have not paid me for the work that I have performed on a certain piece of highway. And while the main contractor hires the subcontractor, the department doesn't deal with the subcontractor making a claim against them on the project. It should go to the contractor; is that how the process works?

Mr. Antunes: — We have no contractual relationship with the subcontractor. So the subcontractor has to go through the general contractor, and so that is the relationship. You know, what we try to do is we try to get clearance letters to make sure that at the end of the day we hold back money from the contractor to make sure all of the subcontractors have been paid. Sometimes things happen and, you know, we either get . . . Things happen and sometimes that doesn't occur, whether the subcontractor has not been paid, and maybe so we've been told that they have. So that sometimes occurs.

But generally the relationship is between the subcontractor and the contractor, and we do ask for a labour material bond from the general contractors to make sure that we can cover off any of those types of issues.

Mr. Belanger: — And who ultimately has the say to adjudicate that process? It would be Highways first, and then if they couldn't adjudicate it properly, then it goes to the courts? Is that how it works?

Mr. Antunes: — So, are you talking about a subcontractor claim or are you . . .

Mr. Belanger: — Yes, yes, right.

Mr. Antunes: — Yes, so the subcontractor claim, what we would try to do is we would try to intervene with the contractor to help them resolve that issue. We don't have any, you know, other than holding the money back, we have that power. So we would try to intervene and try to get that worked out. If it didn't work out, you know, we have the bond so we could look at doing that. So the insurance company would step in there. And in other cases, I mean, they could file a claim in court, and then it would be the courts that would decide what the value is and how much they're entitled to.

Mr. Belanger: — How would you determine that problem area

as it pertains to the work that Highways hands out each year? Is it consistent? Is there, like say out of all the contracts that you let, there's a 10 per cent problem areas in this front? Or is it less than that?

Mr. Antunes: — It's a rare occurrence.

Mr. Belanger: — I want to go a bit back to the Regina bypass. In terms of the borrow pits east of the city here, I understand that some of the borrow pits are going on sale, are being sold by, I imagine, a private realtor. And do you know how many have been sold and how many buyers may have shown interest in those borrow pits?

Mr. Antunes: — So the ones that are for sale are being sold by the Regina bypass partners. So they're not our borrow pits, so we're not aware of the details of what they're selling for, you know, how many interested parties there are. We don't have those details. It's a commercial decision that they are making. It's up to them to dispose of those borrow pits.

Mr. Belanger: — Now in the event that they don't dispose of them, and at the end of the day if you look at some of the challenges around, I would point out as I travel down Albert Street, the city's having this huge debate with a developer around an open pit. And it's privately owned property, but there's still an open pit there. How would you respond if there was no buyer interest? How would that site be mitigated or fixed up because it is a big pit? What would be the steps on that front?

Mr. Antunes: — So I'll turn that question over to Dave Stearns so he can give you more details about what our standards are for mediating borrow pits.

Mr. Stearns: — Good afternoon. My name's David Stearns. I'm the executive director for the construction branch as well as the ministry rep for the Regina bypass project.

First of all, in the project agreement of course there's standards laid out for the sloping of the borrow pits. And when they're a deep type, of course they have to be fenced, and that kind of thing to make sure that they're safe. In the case where the Regina bypass partners have gone out and procured land, of course that's completely up to them as a landowner how they're going to deal with it. There's actually the other type of arrangement where they've gone out and made some sort of an agreement with the landowner to utilize the material. And of course the landowner in that case becomes . . . you know, deals with it.

Typically these deep-type borrow pits are viewed as an asset in terms of they do become a water source. I can't speculate on what they might be used for, but of course with that particular water source, I'm anticipating it would be some sort of attraction.

Mr. Belanger: — Right. And the permits would be . . . And we've heard the story that this would be, a borrow pit would fill up with water and then you'd have, it'd become a water source. And that's pretty much the only value that borrow pit would have.

Has there been occasions in cases where you have a borrow pit and nobody's interested in buying it? It just sits on the property and the owner begins to want to get rid of it. Does the government eventually take that site back?

Mr. Stearns: — No. When the landowner owns the land, it's up to them what they want to do with it. And they may treat it as an asset that they might try to market or whatever, or they might utilize it for themselves as a water source. It kind of depends where we are in the province.

All I can say is that if you look at some of the new modern neighbourhoods in terms of stormwater detention and that sort of thing, I am aware where the borrow pit may be clay-lined or that kind of thing and very well could be utilized for other uses such as landfill or that sort of thing. But that's completely up to the landowners and how they deal with it.

Mr. Belanger: — Now, are there other . . . Like, based on past practices, because obviously there is maybe logic to the notion that, well if I have a borrow pit and fill with water, maybe you can create a community around it. Like that's the optimistic point of view. But there maybe, there's probably occasions where a borrow pit becomes problematic for a certain region or for a certain community. Have we had instances of that sort in which this has become a problem, or is it this is so unique because the Regina bypass project is big, now we're at the situation?

Mr. Stearns: — Well first of all, we've got a large range of sizes of borrow pits out there. So if you're talking in terms of rural Saskatchewan, for the most part, landowners are looking forward to seeing those borrow pits and they use them for whatever it is: crop spraying and that sort of thing. It's kind of . . . It's viewed that way. Of course some of the borrow pits that were related to the Regina bypass are quite large, so they actually start to lend themselves to other possible uses. But again, I can't really speculate on what the landowners would do with that.

Mr. Belanger: — And under the remediation process, like you mentioned earlier that they're fenced, you know, for safety reason. Now if I'm a landowner, I've got a big borrow pit in the back of my property and I can't sell it and obviously I hope it becomes valuable for a pond or water collection site, whatever the case may be, but there's still around the notion of safety, like you know, is there . . . But you don't monitor that at all? Once a borrow pit has been deemed finished with, then your concern ends there?

Mr. Stearns: — In the case of the Regina Bypass Partners and their commercial arrangements or agreements with other landowners in that case where they haven't taken ownership of the land, we wouldn't be aware of those details. But I would anticipate that it's kind of standard to have some sort of arrangements along that line. In the case where Regina Bypass Partners themselves are the landowner, and what they do with that of course as a landowner or any landowner, they're responsible for their properties. So really that's about as far as I could comment on that.

Mr. Belanger: — I want to spend a bit of time with the anticipated flooding. We've got a few minutes left. The water

challenges we faced several years ago was absolutely phenomenal. I had travelled throughout particularly the Humboldt area. As we saw, I think one particular highway was washed out two or three times and ended up costing the Highways or the ministry something like 6, \$700,000 to do 3 or 4 kilometres. What is the forecast or what is the challenge with water this year? Is it going to be up there or are we having difficulty this year? What's your prognosis?

Hon. Mr. Marit: — For this year we had a few isolated situations up in the Northeast, but nothing serious where we, you know . . . We had one north of Kamsack on Highway No. 8. I think there was two places there that obviously are going to cost us some money where we lost a pipe. And our understanding is that'll go through the federal disaster assistance program. But we are challenged from the Ministry of Environment federally on some of the . . . Fisheries and Oceans on some of the changes that they'll want us to make to that.

Mr. Belanger: — In terms around the challenge immediately around Humboldt . . . And we've driven through that area to see where there was a few lakes, now there's a sea. Are we having any particular difficult times in the Humboldt area in general? With the amount of water that's being collected, obviously illegal drainage is creating more of a problem. But is that area, is it really having a tough time with water challenges overall?

Hon. Mr. Marit: — From our perspective? From Highways' perspective? We did a major lift there on Highway No. 6 at the Quill lakes and I'm sure that's where you're talking about. But we're seeing this year, the levels are actually, you know, they've come up some but not to the degree we thought they would come up. So obviously the runoff wasn't as severe as what we thought it was going to be, and so we're comfortable with our highway infrastructure around the Quill lakes right now. It's actually looking in pretty good shape.

Mr. Belanger: — And the whole notion around illegal drainage, has that caused any problems with any highways, you know, in southern Saskatchewan?

[17:30]

Hon. Mr. Marit: — Yes, I think really for highways concerns, it's just coming off the wet years that we've come off of that, especially in that area. It's so flat that the water's just got nowhere to go so it just continues to spread out. So I think it's just a combination of some very wet years with a lot of runoff and a lot of rain that have challenged us in some areas.

The Chair: — It now being 5:30, we'll look to adjournment of estimates for vote 16, Highways and Infrastructure. If you would like to finish . . . Yes, go ahead.

Mr. Antunes: — Sorry, I do want to make a clarification, so I don't want to think that I misled you. So we were doing the math real quickly on the St. Louis bridge and the total that we had was wrong. The total cost of the project was \$60 million and the bridge was \$25 million. So that should take care of the undertaking that we had. So that was \$25 million for the bridge and \$60 million for the total project.

Mr. Belanger: — So that 60 million, you indicated 100

million?

Mr. Antunes: — That was wrong. Yes.

Mr. Belanger: — Yes, because that \$40 million you can take it north; it's left over from there. I wouldn't argue that point.

The Chair: — All right. Now that we've concluded vote 16 on Highways and Infrastructure, there's no further questions, Minister, if you'd like to wrap up with any closing comments.

Hon. Mr. Marit: — No. Thank you, Madam Chair, for the deliberations and thank the member for the questions. It was a good session. Thank you.

The Chair: — Mr. Belanger, do you have any closing comments you'd like to . . .

Mr. Belanger: — Yes. Certainly I think one of the important points is we do have another hour and a half with Highways estimates and we'll work accordingly. And there's a bunch of questions we have and we're trying to make sure we give the minister as much time to follow through with his commitments as we can before the next round of estimates. So three weeks is a lot of time in this world.

So anyway thanks, Madam Chair, and we'll forward to the next round of questioning on Highways.

The Chair: — Thank you, everyone, for your time this evening, and now I'd ask a member to move a motion of adjournment. Mr. Buckingham — I'll take them all — so has moved. All agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Chair: — Carried. This committee now stands adjourned to the call of the Chair. Thank you.

[The committee adjourned at 17:32.]