



STANDING COMMITTEE ON INTERGOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS AND JUSTICE

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**STANDING COMMITTEE ON INTERGOVERNMENTAL
AFFAIRS AND JUSTICE**

Mr. Warren Michelson, Chair
Moose Jaw North

Mr. Doyle Vermette, Deputy Chair
Cumberland

Mr. D.F. (Yogi) Huyghebaert
Wood River

Mr. Russ Marchuk
Regina Douglas Park

Mr. Kevin Phillips
Melfort

Mr. Warren Steinley
Regina Walsh Acres

Mr. Corey Tochor
Saskatoon Eastview

[The committee met at 19:00.]

The Chair: — Good evening and welcome to the Standing Committee on Intergovernmental Affairs and Justice. My name is Warren Michelson. I am the Chair of this committee. Other committee members include Doyle Vermette, the Deputy Chair; Yogi Huyghebaert; Russ Marchuk; Kevin Phillips; Warren Steinley; Corey Tochor. We do have a substitution tonight for Doyle Vermette. Warren McCall will be sitting in for Doyle Vermette.

This evening the committee will be in consideration of estimates and supplementary estimates for the Ministry of Government Relations. Before I begin I would like to remind the officials to introduce themselves if they are called upon to answer any questions for the purpose of Hansard.

We will now ask the minister to introduce his officials, and we'll resume the consideration of vote 30, Government Relations, central management and services, subvote (GR01). Welcome, Mr. Minister.

**General Revenue Fund
Government Relations
Vote 30**

Subvote (GR01)

Hon. Mr. Reiter: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. With me at the front table to my right is our deputy minister, Al Hilton. To my left is our assistant deputy minister, Karen Lautsch. At the table behind me is Assistant Deputy Minister Keith Comstock; my chief of staff, Angela Currie. And also from the ministry we have Jeff Markewich and James Froh.

Mr. Chair, I read my opening statement into the record last week, so I'd be prepared to take any questions from the committee.

The Chair: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. Are there any questions for the minister? Mr. McCall.

Mr. McCall: — Thanks very much, Mr. Chair. I'm joined immediately with my colleague from Athabasca. As the minister well knows, he's got a lot of things going on in his portfolio with Government Relations. And my colleague I believe has some questions off the hop for Northern Affairs and some related subjects.

The Chair: — Mr. Belanger.

Mr. Belanger: — Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. Just first of all, welcome to the minister and his officials. I've got about 45 minutes of questions here.

But the first question I have is that, as you probably are aware from the northern perspective and being the Minister Responsible for First Nations, Métis and Northern Affairs, like one is very familiar with the report from I think it was the U of S [University of Saskatchewan] in the sense that basically identified areas of Canada where there's some extreme social and economic challenges. And some of the studies have been

around for a while. And the most recent one was by the U of S in which it likened northern Saskatchewan to an area that is that of the Third World in the sense of the employment strategies.

I certainly don't share the opinion that the North is a place where there is no hope or that there is chronic, consistent problems because obviously living there you certainly have a different perspective. But from the pure analytical perspective, it doesn't look positive for any governments, federal or provincial, in terms of what the raw data from the U of S studies indicate as being, I guess I would use the word not complimentary towards fostering independent communities and of course creating a dynamic economic plan.

So in light of all that report, I'm sure the minister has a copy of the documents and the report that the U of S identified northern Saskatchewan as being an area that has some extreme economic and social challenges. So the first question I would have is in terms of those particular challenges, why are we now looking at basically eliminating the Northern Development Fund grant program as well as doing away with the Aboriginal employment development strategy? And what have you put in place to replace those two programs that deal specifically with northern Saskatchewan? When I mean northern Saskatchewan I don't mean Prince Albert or Melfort. I mean northern Saskatchewan as defined under the northern administrative district.

Hon. Mr. Reiter: — Mr. Chair, several points you made there, Mr. Belanger. On the first one, the first program you referenced is actually in the Ministry of the Economy. The second one, the Aboriginal employment development program, that program was discontinued a number of years ago now. I believe it was 2010 I think when it was discontinued. And I think generally it's been the direction we've been moving that we just feel that there's a number of other programs that frankly are more beneficial.

I point to programs like northern career quest that we believe is going to be very successful in creating employment in the North; a number of other programs we've done, which certainly I'm sure we'll get into in a number of minutes, to help in the North with any number of things. I just point to one that our ministry is intimately familiar with. In revenue sharing, while there was a slight decrease this year as there was across the province last year, the percentage increase for revenue sharing to northern communities was very significant. I believe it was in the 16 or 18 per cent range. There was a reason for that in that northern communities generally, you know, have a couple of unique situations that many other municipalities in the province don't. They tend to not have as much of a commercial tax base that many other municipalities do. And then there is just simply the issue, as you're well aware, of distance, transportation costs, and distance between municipalities.

So you know, back to the point about sort of which programs, we just find that a number of programs that we have that we're targeting — I use northern career quest as an example — we think have been working well, and I would suggest that I think the numbers are bearing that out. The most recent statistics I have is it's saying for the 14th consecutive month, off-reserve Aboriginal employment has grown. It's added 800 more workers and it's increased 1.9 per cent year over year. There

has also been a lot of success with Aboriginal youth in the job market, 900 new jobs in March of 2014 compared to March of last year, and it's the 10th consecutive month of year-over-year gains there, so while I am absolutely concerned that, you know, I think the unemployment rate is too high, I think we're incrementally making improvements.

Mr. Belanger: — Thank you very much. I would point out that in northern Saskatchewan there's a number of I guess strategic issues that we have been trying to deal with when it comes to the economy overall. There's two questions that I want to connect with the economy.

The first question is on highways. As you would know, when it comes to northern Saskatchewan under your portfolio, that you don't have, of course, the highways allocation, but we'll deal with that on a separate basis.

The second issue I want to connect to, what I think is important, is the relationship with the mining sector which is probably what I would say probably the major player in terms of creating economic opportunities for northern Saskatchewan communities.

So the two fronts of highways and the collaboration with, in particular, the mining sector, these are some of the things that ail the economy overall when it comes to northern Saskatchewan.

So on highways, what kind of collaboration do you undertake as the Minister for Northern Affairs within your portfolio in terms of working with the Highways minister to try and convince him to put more resources in northern Saskatchewan? Because a good example would be Cumberland House. I'm not sure if you've seen the pictures on Facebook of the highway itself. Now does that impact and affect the dramatic . . . or the economy in a dramatic way for Cumberland? Well absolutely it does.

So what kind of success are we having or are you having as a minister in advocating for some of the northern Saskatchewan communities when it comes to things like highways? How do you characterize your success rate and your relationship you have with the Minister of Highways in trying to get some commitment for northern Saskatchewan?

And the second part of the question is, were any of the officials in your ministry involved with the collaboration agreements with Pinehouse and the English River First Nations when it comes to the mining sector discussions that they've had? That would be interesting to know. So on highways and the agreements with Pinehouse and English River, if you could answer the question, that would be great.

[19:15]

The Chair: — Mr. Minister, prior to your answer, I would just like to maybe remind the minister that although you are free to answer the question accordingly after consultation with your officials, but we are in consideration of Government Relations and perhaps some of these questions might be best asked for the Minister of Highways, but you're free to answer.

Hon. Mr. Reiter: — Sure. Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'll address that part of the question first. I had the opportunity to watch some of estimates last night, which was Highways. But to address your answer, the Minister of Highways and I speak frequently and, you know, you mentioned the Cumberland road issue today. We had a brief conversation earlier today about the Cumberland road. You know, I would describe sort of the advocacy I do for the North with the Minister of Highways as it is with most of my colleagues. Our colleagues are very open and accessible to each other, and when issues are brought to my attention I certainly don't hesitate to raise them with my colleagues. On the Cumberland road, you know, it's absolutely . . . I can understand the concern there. But from the discussion — and you had a discussion last night with the minister about that — but from the discussion I had today, it's very clear to me that he's absolutely concerned, and their officials are concerned and they're making every effort to address that situation as quickly as they can.

As to your question on the collaboration agreements, my officials tell me that they haven't acted in any capacity in that regard, not an advisory role even or any such thing, that it's been purely a bilateral arrangement between the company and the community itself.

Mr. Belanger: — Okay, thank you. On page 70 when we look at the allocations, and I just want to clarify where these allocations are coming from. Like for example, First Nations gaming agreements, you gave them . . . Well it appears that \$73 million was actually allocated to them. The Métis Development Fund, 3.3 million; First Nations and Métis Consultation Participation Fund, 600. Those allocations, could you explain to me and is it fair for me to characterize the allocation as an example of the Métis Development Fund? Are those gaming dollars for both the First Nations and the Métis Development Fund? Because what I'm trying to ascertain here is how much is actually government dollars versus flow-through gaming agreement dollars. Because what I'm trying to do is here is determine exactly how much actual government money's flowing through the ministry versus gaming dollars.

Hon. Mr. Reiter: — The numbers that the member's referring to on page 70, the Métis Development Fund and the First Nations gaming agreements, now I'm assuming and I'm differentiating as you did between I think you referred to it as flow-through money versus government money. I'm assuming what you're referring to there is SIGA [Saskatchewan Indian Gaming Authority Inc.] profits versus the Saskatchewan Gaming Corporation profits. So the \$3.3 million you see under the Métis Development Fund, that's entirely out of the Saskatchewan Gaming Corporation side, so government dollars. And of the 73.3 million that you see, 12.6 million is Saskatchewan Gaming Corporation or, you know, in the terminology you used, government dollars. And the balance then would be from the SIGA profits.

Mr. Belanger: — In terms of the allocations under the 2.5 million, I'm assuming, for the First Nations and Métis Relations, what is that allocation? Do organizations get that, or do CBOs [community-based organization]?

Hon. Mr. Reiter: — I'm sorry, which dollars?

Mr. Belanger: — The top one, First Nations and Métis Relations. Would that be money that would be going to FSIN [Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations] or to the Métis Nation? The very, very top.

Hon. Mr. Reiter: — The 600,000 you're referring to right on top?

Mr. Belanger: — No, the 2.555.

Hon. Mr. Reiter: — Oh I'm sorry. Okay.

The line item you're referring to, \$400,000 of that is used for discretionary items, grant payments which I'll come back to in just a minute. The balance of that is for two main offices. It's the Office of the Provincial Interlocutor and also the lands and consultation branch. The lands and consultation branch deals with the duty to consult and also the treaty land entitlement issues. So that's primarily, that'll be office staff, so salaries and benefits and those sorts of things.

Now on the discretionary payment side, just to give you an example, there's an application process that organizations can go through to be awarded grants. To give you an idea, in the last calendar year, here's just some examples. The First Nations Power Authority had a solar energy demonstration project for \$45,000. There was a Yellow Quill library project for 20,000. Aboriginal youth leadership capacity building symposium, 20,000. Two and a half or rather 2,500 to the FSIN powwow. First Nations University health and science camps, \$2,000. The Métis veterans' monument, \$2,000. Northern Symposium for Safer and Healthier Communities, \$2,000. That's an example of the types of programs that are funded.

Mr. Belanger: — So within that allocation there is approximately \$400,000 for discretionary funding that really are attached to Métis communities or First Nations communities. Is that correct? Is there an application process? Like is this commonly . . .

Hon. Mr. Reiter: — Yes, there is. Yes.

[19:30]

Mr. Belanger: — I wouldn't mind getting a couple of the applications if I can.

The final question I have is just on the water quality issues. Obviously, as you are aware, under the municipal structure you have northern settlements and hamlets, and the advisers basically look after most of the communities in concert with their local advisory council. But in terms of the status of the drinking water issue for northern Saskatchewan, are there any alarms or concerns that your office has been advised of when it comes to northern water quality as these municipalities are delivering the water services?

Because smaller or larger communities I understand do this on their own. They're mandated to do so. I'm talking about the smaller communities like Bear Creek as an example where they have a water system. But are they compliant with all the regulations and rules of water quality and making their annual report and the continual monitoring of how the water's being

treated and distributed? Is everything okay on that front?

Hon. Mr. Reiter: — Just to clarify, are you asking then when you say any alarm bells, do you mean specific communities or do you mean kind of trends that are concerning?

Mr. Belanger: — Well both, because obviously the smaller communities don't have the resources that, say, a community of Buffalo Narrows would have where you have staff. The smaller communities wouldn't have those kind of resources and support mechanisms. So smaller settlements like Turnor Lake, Bear Creek, they have these water systems. Are they having any difficulty there? Is there any trends that would be alarming to government overall when it comes to water quality and the safe delivery of or the delivery of good, safe water?

Hon. Mr. Reiter: — Sort of two components to the answer on that one. And I'm going to get our deputy, Al, to help me in some detail in the second part of this. But the first part, sort of the communities in the North, as you know, there's the incorporated municipalities where the ministry and government isn't hands-on.

With the incorporated municipalities that strictly look after their own water supplies, the ministry officials tell me they're not aware of any issues with any them. Now on the communities where technically the minister by statute, but through the ministry, as you know, is responsible, depending on the area, there are potentially some issues there. And I'll just get Al to elaborate on that.

Mr. Hilton: — Al Hilton. This was an issue that was of significant focus when I appeared before Public Accounts not that long ago, and the Provincial Auditor had a keen interest in that. And I think, as I reported at that time, as a result of certain decisions that governments have made, that this government has made, we've made some really significant progress on the whole sort of water security side. And part of that has to do with investments we were able to make through the Northern Municipal Trust Account as a result of revenue-sharing decisions which gave a higher proportion of revenue sharing to northern communities, which put the Northern Municipal Trust Account in a good position to make some strategic investments.

We also have something called a circuit rider program where we send qualified operators around to various settlements to train the folks in how to operate systems. And we have other programs like the emergency water and sewer program, which assists northern communities in managing repairs to water systems which occur as a result of unexpected events. And as I mentioned earlier, we have this northern water and sewer program which provides capital funding.

So if you take all of that together, I think things haven't changed since I last talked to the Committee on Public Accounts. We continue to have two challenges. Uranium City is a bit of a challenge for very long-standing historic reasons, and we have some issues in Wollaston Lake. And I haven't been briefed, you know, in the last week about the status in Wollaston Lake right now, but certainly, you know, we could provide that information if the committee was interested.

Mr. Belanger: — Well thank you very much. And I'll close on

a couple of notes and I'll let my colleague take over. And I thank him for sharing the time with me today. But if I can just get an update as to the allocation process attached to the northern revenue sharing trust account because the theory is that forms the basis of trying to provide the communities with their capital grants program as well as improvements to their water system, just simply primarily because in northern Saskatchewan, running a municipality doesn't have the proper tax base to begin with. The fact is that many of them are very small and dispersed and, you know, they certainly have their challenges, but we still can't forget that there are other issues that the North has to deal with in terms of costs overall.

So if I can just get an update as to where the NRSTA [northern revenue sharing trust account] is now, what programs have been funded under the NRSTA, and as well an update on Uranium City and Wollaston Lake in terms of what efforts have been undertaken and will continue to be undertaken to mitigate the water challenges that you spoke of. And if I could receive that, that would be very helpful. Thanks.

Hon. Mr. Reiter: — To both issues, the Northern Municipal Trust Account and also the water issues in the two communities, Uranium City and Wollaston, that you asked about, I'm going to get Assistant Deputy Minister Keith Comstock to address those.

Mr. Comstock: — I have new glasses I have to . . . I can't figure out whether to look over or under them. My name's Keith Comstock, and thanks for the question.

Talk for a minute or two about northern municipal revenue sharing first. Through this fiscal year, we'll be funding the northern municipal revenue-sharing program in an amount of \$19.16 million. As you'll know, that's a small decrease from last year, about 2.8 per cent because of the change in Public Sector Accounting Board accounting treatments for PST [provincial sales tax] revenues. Our entire revenue-sharing pool went down 2.8 per cent, so each pool received a concomitant reduction.

The North received 7.456 of the total pool, which was a decision that was taken last year when the pool reallocation process went through — considerably higher than what they had traditionally gotten. And as the minister explained a little bit earlier, that was done for very good and valid reasons due to the particular challenges that northern communities face, distance and other things.

[19:45]

We go through a process each year when we allocate revenue sharing. That's a little bit different for the North than it is for the South. In the South, each one of the three pools for the cities, the towns and villages and the rurals have a fairly standard formula that you plug the one number in at the top. You allow for the variances that may have changed in communities reverting or changing status, if we've got a couple of new cities over the last couple of years. Once you allow for those things, then the numbers pretty much flow out at the end.

We take a bit of different approach in the North where before each year, before we make the allocation decisions, we consult

with northern leaders, consult with New North, consult with the members of the Northern Municipal Trust Account Board. And our purpose in doing that is so that we can get input from northern leaders on what their priorities are for that coming year.

You'll be interested to know that last year northern leaders agreed that part of the increase that they received last year needed to go not just into the per capita allocation that each one of their communities got, but they made a wise, what I think is a wise decision to make some strategic investments in some design work on water and sewer systems. And they also agreed that they needed to set aside \$250,000 for some capacity building on the admin side.

So this is the process that we're in the middle of going through now with northern leaders to talk about what priorities they have for this coming year. In light of the small decrease to revenue sharing, I don't anticipate any major changes in what preferences they will indicate. But we will, as we always do every year, go through that process and then follow through with them after that.

The northern formula itself is based on four key categories of municipal expenditures, and we use audited financial statements and other information that's available to my officials in the La Ronge office to come up with an allocation for each community. And that was a process that we put in place a number of years ago in co-operation again with northern leaders, and that's worked very, very well for us.

Now the other questions you asked was about Wollaston Lake and Uranium City. The water treatment plant in Uranium City was built in the middle '50s, and it was designed for a community of . . . Well it was designed for a city. It was designed to service 5,000 or more population, and now the permanent population in Uranium City is somewhere around the 100 mark.

We and the community leaders have some big challenges around, first of all the plant's pretty much obsolete, and so there has been a boil-water advisory in place in Uranium City for quite some time. We have been working and continue to work with officials from SaskWater and Environment to try and come up with a cost-effective solution for that community. We have not been successful in that yet, but our efforts continue.

In Wollaston Lake, the water treatment plant that the citizens of Wollaston Lake get their water from is owned by the band, by the neighbouring band. So our challenge there is that while we pay for and get water from the band, we don't have any control over how the treatment plant is operated. So we have folks in Wollaston Lake that test the water weekly, and when there is evidence that the water quality isn't quite what it should be, then we put in a boil-water order until those problems resolve themselves. But it's a difficult situation for our folks because they don't have control over how the water treatment plant itself is actually operated.

Mr. Belanger: — Thank you very much. That's all the questions I have.

The Chair: — Thank you, Mr. Belanger. Mr. McCall, do you

have questions?

Mr. McCall: — I surely do, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: — Please proceed.

Mr. McCall: — Thank you very much. Again welcome to the minister, officials, and I guess a special word of congratulations to Fire Commissioner McKay who'd been acknowledged yet again for the great work he does on behalf of the province. I can see him looking uncomfortable at the back of the room, as is certainly the case. You know, the good ones that do a lot of great work, they don't take to the praise very well. But I just want to get on the record commending Commissioner McKay on great work, and congratulations and many happy returns. And certainly we'll have some questions for that branch of the ministry's undertakings soon to come, Mr. Minister.

But I guess if I could, Mr. Minister, just to sort of back up, and if I could get you to return to (GR12) in vote 30. Under First Nations and Métis engagement, if we could just go through the expenditures entailed there to make sure that we're catching the full significance of what's under consideration tonight. But again, if you could describe what's happening under First Nations and Métis Relations. What portion is going to organizations? And again if you could just itemize the \$400,000 discretionary that's entailed in that expenditure.

Hon. Mr. Reiter: — If I could, just for clarification, did you . . . Specifically are you talking about the First Nation and Métis Relations, the 2.5, or did you want me to elaborate on the TLE [treaty land entitlement] and the Consultation Participation Fund or . . .

Mr. McCall: — The minister is getting a little bit ahead of me, but we'll get to that sure enough. But I was looking for the First Nations and Métis Relations, 2.5.

Hon. Mr. Reiter: — Okay. Certainly I'll do that. Just before I do though, I'd also like to elaborate on some comments you made about Duane McKay, the fire commissioner, if I could. You know, as you're aware, he won a well-deserved award today, a Premier's Commendation Award. And as you mentioned, when you praised him he looked uncomfortable back there. Immediately after the award ceremony there was a reception and he came over and asked our deputy, Al, and myself if we'd pose for a picture with him because he said, I'm feeling uncomfortable about winning this award. This is more about a team thing than about an individual. So I think that just speaks volumes for Duane and explains in great part why he is frequently commended for his work.

Now to your question, the 2.5, that's . . . The bulk of that is for staffing, salaries, benefits, those sorts of things, and two offices. There's the provincial interlocutor and then there's also the lands and consultation branch which deals primarily with issues around duty to consult and also with treaty land entitlement. That takes up the bulk of that money except for 400,000 which is used for other programs that are on an application basis. A little bit earlier I just ran through some of the examples of programs that had been funded in the past.

Moving forward, what our ministry . . . I'll just read this into

the record if I could. It's an explanation of what the programs will be doing. It says:

We offer First Nation and Métis community engagement grants for innovative projects that involve partnerships with Aboriginal communities and which advance the notions of safe community, strong families, student achievement, or economic growth. Under this program we may provide a maximum of \$15,000 for community projects or 45,000 for regional or multi-party projects. Funding cannot exceed 40 per cent of a project's total cost.

We also provide small sponsorship to First Nation and Métis community organizations or non-profit organizations to assist with public events that benefit Aboriginal people. Funding support ranges from \$500 for a community event to \$1,500 for a cultural celebration to \$3,000 for a province-wide conference.

I think that kind of encompasses what the intent of the program is.

Mr. McCall: — Thanks for that, Mr. Minister. I guess this is probably as good a point as any. In terms of dollars that used to be extended to the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations through the bilateral protocol, or dollars that used to be extended to the Métis Nation of Saskatchewan, are there dollars flowing from the ministry in any way, shape, or form to either of those two organizations at present?

Hon. Mr. Reiter: — Specifically to the Métis Nation or the FSIN, the province doesn't provide core funding, but the two programs that I just referred to — the community engagement grants or the sponsorships — both organizations would be eligible to apply for funding for specific projects through those.

Mr. McCall: — So again, help me along here, Mr. Minister. Are there any dollars flowing currently between the Government Relations ministry and the FSIN and MNS [Métis Nation of Saskatchewan]?

Hon. Mr. Reiter: — When you say currently, are you referring to in the past year?

Mr. McCall: — Are there any past fiscal arrangements, either capacity or any flowing of dollars?

[20:00]

Hon. Mr. Reiter: — Just to clarify now, I'm speaking to our ministry, to Government Relations. There may be other arrangements with other ministries. There is of course the gaming framework agreements. So there is some money flowing, flowing through that. But other than that, our officials tell me there is no sort of signed agreements or framework right now in place with the Ministry of Government Relations other than the program I just announced, which officials tell me that they fully expect that both organizations will be applying for some funding under that, but that will need to be adjudicated and decided on.

Mr. McCall: — Okay. I guess one question I'd ask is, this is an interesting year of course for the Federation of Saskatchewan

Indian Nations. Been a fair amount of activity on provincial front, federal front, and this is the year when the federal funding cuts to their organizational funding have come home to roost. The FSIN makes an argument that when their funding arrangement is compared to a situation such as that in Manitoba, where you have three central type organizations doing the job of one FSIN, that there isn't a fairness in terms of the funding treatment from the federal government. Is the minister aware of that and has the minister made any arguments on the FSIN's behalf to the federal government?

Hon. Mr. Reiter: — I've had a number of discussions on that issue with Chief Perry Bellegarde of the FSIN. Discussions that I've had with the federal minister have only been sort of broad in that regard. I know the FSIN and federal officials, including the minister I believe, have I think had extensive discussions about that. You know, the funding you're referring to is of course, as you said, is federal funding, core funding to FSIN. But you know, there's no plans on the province's side to backfill any of that lost funding.

Mr. McCall: — Okay. Thanks for that, Mr. Minister. And as regards to the Métis Nation of Saskatchewan, again there's another story of a fair amount of activity up to and including the Court of Queen's Bench decision rendered by Justice Keene last month concerning the governance process of the Métis Nation of Saskatchewan. Is the minister aware of that decision and how does that decision impact the relationship between the MNS and the Government of Saskatchewan?

Hon. Mr. Reiter: — As I'm sure you know, I'm well aware of the recent decision.

Speaking to the issues there, certainly we're watching with a great deal of interest. The governance issues there, we're hoping that those will get rectified. We have, I guess I would call this fairly regular meetings with Métis Nation. I met last with their president on budget day, I believe it was. I'll be meeting with him very soon again. I think a meeting is scheduled for the end of this week and I'll be expressing those concerns to him. We certainly hope that they get those governance issues rectified, as I said.

How that's going to impact the relation with the provincial government, I can't say right now. I just, you know, I'm hoping that that situation is clarified soon.

Mr. McCall: — Of course there's . . . It's not just the president or the executive but the provincial council, and there are different parties in the equation. So I guess beyond meetings with the president, Mr. Minister, what role do you see in terms of trying to sort this situation out?

Hon. Mr. Reiter: — We'll be watching with concern. I don't see us right now, you know, it's not a situation where we'll be interjecting. As I said, I mean obviously the best solution is these matters get worked out. I'll be expressing those concerns to the president and whichever . . . I expect a number of officials will probably be at the meeting as well. But beyond that, it's not like there's any imminent action planned by the provincial government.

Mr. McCall: — Okay. Certainly there's the relationship

between yourself, the office of the provincial interlocutor, but there are other organizations that are operated and governed by Métis people in the province. I'm thinking of course of Clarence Campeau Fund that we'll get to here shortly. I'm thinking of the Gabriel Dumont Institute. In terms of the . . . And dollars do flow into those entities from the province. In terms of the governance situation with the Métis Nation of Saskatchewan, does that give the minister or the Government of Saskatchewan any pause for thought in terms of the way that those resources are being administered?

Hon. Mr. Reiter: — To your question about the two organizations, the Clarence Campeau Development Fund and the Gabriel Dumont Institute, as you know, the Métis Nation founded those two organizations but they have an independent governance structure now and have their own reporting requirements, their own requirements for transparency. And so we don't see as sort of the governance issues in the Métis Nation right now having sort of specific . . . causing specific problems for either institute. I'm just going to get James Froh from the office of the provincial interlocutor to elaborate though on that with both the Gabriel Dumont Institute and also the Clarence Campeau Development Fund.

Mr. Froh: — Thank you, Minister. James Froh, Government Relations. Just to add to that, over the years the Métis Nation has established a number of institutions, and Clarence Campeau and Gabriel Dumont and Dumont Technical Institute are exemplary examples of organizations that have served Métis people and have served in terms of growing and building the province over the years.

So when it comes to . . . The oldest institution is Gabriel Dumont Institute of Applied Research, Métis studies. And they have primarily a funding relation with the Ministry of Advanced Education, and they offer a number of different programs, mainly through their SUNTEP [Saskatchewan urban native teacher education program] program, the Saskatchewan urban teachers education program, which has actually successfully trained over 30 years thousands of teachers that are currently employed and a part of our education system and part of people who are actually working to make a difference in terms of student success in this province.

They also operate training programs and they do that in partnership not only with the province, but also the federal government through their own agreements. And that has had a significant, has significant importance, I think to the province and to Métis people and communities because it has resulted in people successfully preparing and successfully transitioning into employment.

[20:15]

And just as Gabriel Dumont has prepared people for employment, Clarence Campeau has prepared entrepreneurs for business. And that has also contributed to the provincial economy and as well to employment of both Métis and non-Métis people in the province. Clarence Campeau is accountable to the Government of Saskatchewan and it tables an annual report to the Legislative Assembly. It has been exemplary in terms of its transparency and accountability. And from what I understand, they continue to have a strong

governing board and they have continue to separate politics from the operation and in management of their programs.

Mr. McCall: — I thank the minister and official for the response. And I guess again certainly on our side we are well aware of the successes attaching to Gabriel Dumont and also the Clarence Campeau Fund. And I guess this is our concern, is that those successes are built upon and that they're not being impeded or given any sort of problem, given the governance difficulties currently being faced by the Métis Nation of Saskatchewan. That work should be . . . is, you know, there's a proud legacy to be built on there.

And again we want to make certain that the government is aware of the situation, that they've considered these impacts coming in from the governance difficulties. And again it's not a question of rumour or anything like that. It's a ruling from the Court of Queen's Bench that has found the governance process to the MNS wanting. So again we're looking for assurance from minister and officials that's there's diligence and oversight being provided, and that these successes are not impeded but built upon.

I guess I've got, speaking of proud Métis individuals, I've got my colleague from Cumberland here, who will be joining in the questioning shortly, but just a couple of other questions to ask the minister before I cede the floor to my colleague.

One of the perennial frustrations for individuals coming to this, in this forum is that of course your ministry has oversight of the gaming dollars but of course the policy decisions are made by the Saskatchewan Liquor and Gaming Authority. And certainly reviewing last year's *Hansard*, I know the minister is well aware of that distinction, as have been certainly various of his predecessors. And I guess the one question I'd have is this: is there any consideration to moving the First Nations and gaming agreements' dollars right out of Government Relations so that the dollars are situated with the people making the policy decisions?

Hon. Mr. Reiter: — Now to your point about, you know, differentiating between this ministry and SLGA [Saskatchewan Liquor and Gaming Authority], my understanding is that initially that change was made to separate the audit and oversight functions from the operation functions. But certainly as you mentioned, there was a great deal of discussion last year during estimates on this issue. So what I would offer to you is, if there are some questions that are sort of beyond the scope of what my ministry provides, I'd be happy to follow up on those with you and attempt to get those answered for you in writing after.

Mr. McCall: — Well I appreciate the minister's undertaking in that regard and of course . . . So we'll await the provision.

For that, I guess sort of in follow-up, there has been a fair amount of discussion related very directly to the gaming dollars under consideration in this measure of estimates before us here tonight in vote 30. What's the minister's involvement been over the past months in the considerations around the future of Casinos Regina and Moose Jaw?

Hon. Mr. Reiter: — There were some discussions, as you're

aware, around . . . involving myself and some of my officials, involving the potential for an MOU [memorandum of understanding] looking at considering the sale of the two casinos, Moose Jaw and Regina. As you know, it's been well documented in the media. And as far as we're concerned, I think the situation's closed.

Mr. McCall: — So the situation as regards to the sale of Casinos Regina and Moose Jaw, what considerations are being made around a possible partnership between SIGA and Sask Gaming Corp for management? Is the minister aware of any developments on that front?

[20:30]

Hon. Mr. Reiter: — I had a telephone conversation with Chief Bellegarde some time ago, I believe it was March the 11th, where he raised this issue. I informed him at that time that it's not the intent of the government to pursue an arrangement like that. I had a subsequent in-person discussion with him — forgive me, I'm not sure of the exact date, but in the last two or three weeks — where he had indicated to me that he was going to be discussing this with your leader, the Leader of the Opposition. And that's the last I've heard of it; I haven't talked to Chief Bellegarde since then.

Mr. McCall: — Thank the minister for the answer. In terms of certainly the gaming dollars that we're considering here tonight flow under the terms of the gaming framework agreement, the gaming framework agreement is renegotiated or has an open period every five years. The last open period was 2012. Is the minister aware of any changes that might be coming forward regarding the gaming framework agreement?

Hon. Mr. Reiter: — As you mentioned, the last time it was open was 2012. I just checked with my officials if they're aware of anything. I'm not aware of any pending changes, so my understanding is the next time it would be open for negotiation would be 2017.

Mr. McCall: — I thank the minister for the response. On a couple of other matters, Mr. Minister, and then I'll cede the floor to my colleague from Cumberland.

I guess just a very quick request, and there's been sort of a shifting involvement in terms of the way that the government has engaged with the whole question of the North American Indigenous Games. I think Minister Cheveldayoff, when he had served in the capacity as First Nations and Métis Relations minister, had played a very integral role in terms of the involvement of the Government of Saskatchewan on the NAIG [North American Indigenous Games] file.

I guess, does the minister or officials have any update for the committee in terms of how things are progressing for the North American Indigenous Games? I guess, you know, and I'd state, moreover, the acting executive director of the Indigenous Games, of course, is the past deputy minister of First Nations and Métis Relations, Mr. Ron Crowe, a pretty talented individual. But what's the involvement of the government on the lead-up to the North American Indigenous Games?

Hon. Mr. Reiter: — Because of some of the changes there is

funding, as you mentioned, flowing but it's not from this ministry. It's from the Ministry of the Economy, is my understanding. There's \$1 million I believe budgeted last fiscal year. There's \$1 million in this budget for it. My understanding is I believe it's on schedule for this summer. But if — again it's in a different ministry — but if there's something that I can provide to you, some specifics you'd like, I'd be happy to follow that up.

Mr. McCall: — Well thanks for that, Mr. Minister. And of course as you point out, or Mr. Minister points out, it's \$2 million of public expenditure and certainly a worthwhile cause. And you know, we'd certainly hope to see this marquee event go off as successfully as it should this summer. So I'll welcome the information coming back from the minister in that regard.

The one other question I have for the minister, and this is in follow-up to the whole question of fire safety on-reserve. And of course as referenced earlier, we've got Commissioner McKay here tonight. You know, Commissioner McKay and his team do a tremendous job throughout the province, not just on the fire safety side but on the emergency management side and certainly flood fighting or what have you.

But one of the challenges that I'm sure the minister is more and more aware of, in terms of the jurisdictional piece for on-reserve, off-reserve, and what passes for basic standards on-reserve versus off-reserve, arguably we've got an unacceptable situation as regards fatalities and loss of life, loss of property in incidents arising from fire in this province. And I know the minister is aware of this. I know that the minister had undertaken to discuss this with the federal minister, Bernard Valcourt. So my question is several-fold, but to start with, could the minister provide an update to the committee as to the outcome of this meeting with his federal counterpart?

Hon. Mr. Reiter: — Sure. The meeting you refer to that I had with Minister Valcourt, I'd describe it as a productive meeting. You know, you make some very good points in your question. You know, as you're aware, fire services across the province are a local responsibility, but when you get on-reserve, there's also the federal jurisdiction component in it as well.

You mentioned that a number of tragedies that have happened recently which trouble me greatly. It's just, it's a very important issue and so I did raise the matter with the minister, as I promised I would do in the House. We had a good meeting. I was pleased to see that, you know, we had a discussion around, he's open to discussions — and obviously there need to be a lot of discussions with all the stakeholders — but open to discussions for some type of building code on-reserve, which I think could be helpful. You know, we agreed to have our officials and their officials will be having discussions. There's a lot of work that needs to be done. I think you very ably pointed out some of the problems and challenges, but while it is federal jurisdiction, it concerns the provincial government greatly.

There's areas where we certainly try to assist where we can. You know, on the investigative side, frequently our Duane's folks support those investigations. Also in the education and training side, we think there's a possibility for us to do more work there to help as well.

Mr. McCall: — I thank the minister for that response. So I guess to seize upon the . . . I'm glad to hear about the possibilities around building code. And I'm glad that it was a productive meeting with Minister Valcourt.

Can the minister provide more details in terms of the possibilities around the education and training please?

Hon. Mr. Reiter: — Sort of. It's a technical issue, the training side, and so I'm just going to get Duane to speak to that.

Mr. McKay: — Duane McKay. We have a pretty good relationship with First Nations across the province in terms of providing services upon request. We do provide training with municipalities, and we have an open invitation to any First Nations communities that want to participate in those. And if there is a request for specific training on-reserve, then we'll provide the training as well. We have looked at, in fact we have hosted training on-reserve and invited municipalities, which really helps in terms of building some of their relationships.

In addition to that, we are working with Prince Albert Grand Council on a fire prevention program. You know, there's quite a bit of concern around technical training, fire service training and so on. But in many communities, the organizations are under stress in terms of being able to muster a response crew or to maintain the equipment. Our feeling really is that we should focus on preventing, and so we're beginning to work on fire prevention programs.

With the introduction or the conversation we're having with the federal government with respect to standardizing building codes and ultimately then the fire code, that should have some impact over a period of time. So that's really the area that we're focusing on at this particular time.

[20:45]

Mr. McCall: — I thank the minister and commissioner for that response. Again on the education and training piece, are the feds talking about committing specific resources to this or is this still on a discussion level?

Hon. Mr. Reiter: — The two streams sort of that we were discussing, the investigative side and then the education, training side that Duane elaborated on, there is no funding from the federal government, reimbursement to the province for that. But you know, the decision's been made by the province that we think that even though it's federal jurisdiction on-reserve, some things like that are just too important and it's necessary that we do our level best to assist.

Mr. McCall: — I thank the minister for that response. I guess, you know, a lot of questions to ask and a lot of activity going on in the ministry. But I guess the time has come for me to say thanks for my portion of the discussion. It's not to make, you know, James Turkheim feel left out back there, or Bill Hawkins, but certainly my colleague from Cumberland has got some questions to come and then we'll be joined I believe by the critic for Government Relations whom you're well familiar with. I don't know if he's bringing any Snickers bars this time, but we'll see how this goes.

But I guess the last thing I would say is this. Certainly First Nations and Métis Relations traditionally has had a very important role to play in this province, and the dollars may flow for something like the joint task force on the employment and education opportunities for First Nations and Métis people, but they may flow through other ministries, but certainly yourself and the folks you're working with have a very big role to play there. So we'll be looking for action on those fronts, those and other fronts in the days to come, Mr. Minister.

But I'll just sign off by saying thanks very much, and again the last time I've seen Commissioner McKay out on the field it was on Cowessess First Nation at the command post there, having a late-night bowl of chili, fighting the flood. But here's hoping for a relatively uneventful flood season in the days to come. But thanks, Minister. Thanks, officials.

The Chair: — Thank you, Mr. McCall. Before we continue with the questions, this committee will take a five-minute recess.

[The committee recessed for a period of time.]

[21:00]

The Chair: — Welcome back to the Standing Committee on Intergovernmental Affairs and Justice. We're here with the supplementary estimates for the Ministry of Government Relations. Minister Reiter is present with the officials. And we'll continue on with the questioning. Mr. Vermette, do you have some questions for the minister?

Mr. Vermette: — Thank you, Mr. Chair, and to the minister and your officials for being here again to acknowledge I have some questions.

I want to start out just with some opening comments. And I know you would've introduced your staff and gone through an introduction and maybe a little bit of history. I guess I just want to say for northern Saskatchewan, and I'm going to go from the side of the northern programs, positions over the last seven years.

In communities, whether it's La Ronge or any northern community, when you lose a position or, you know, whether for whatever reason we lose positions, we lose programs in northern Saskatchewan, it impacts a community greatly. And it can be, you know, one, two, three jobs, positions that get moved out of our communities and has a direct impact on the community.

And I guess people will say what they will say at the end of the day on what they're seeing, and trends. Some people are concerned with I guess the number of jobs that have left the North since 2007. And just sharing that little bit of . . . I know there's one program, one thing about the northern economic development fund. I believe as of April 1st, it no longer will exist. I've seen different other programs that have even shrunk for whatever reason in northern Saskatchewan, being maybe the program wasn't being accessed, no one was applying for it, certain funds.

And I realize sometimes you've got to change the way business

is being done, if you're not utilizing the programs, dollars that are allocated. But sometimes cutting those dollars and just not asking northern leaders, First Nations, Métis leaders, is there a way . . . Or fishermen, trappers. Is there a way those dollars could be better utilized, whether it's the subsidies, freight subsidies for hauling out fish? There's many different ones and I just . . . And I know that it's your responsibility, you know, for Northern Affairs as you're the minister; you're responsible for Northern Affairs, First Nations and Métis Relations.

And I open up with that just to give you an idea of how people are feeling when we lose positions or lose programs. Sometimes it's frustration. And I know for whatever reason, maybe they're not easy choices to make but we are impacted greatly when those positions . . . And I think we, if you look at the economic spinoff and, you know, losing certain jobs, then you end up losing families. The local economy hurts. Housing. So it does have an impact. And I think over time probably La Ronge, Air Ronge has been one area that was hit hard with, you know . . . I see and you know just seeing the difference in number of positions, hearing people talk that were either transferred.

We don't have a dedicated minister under your current, you know, administration. You've chosen to have . . . do it a different way as a government and that's fine. You know your . . . I guess your decision as a government to have a minister responsible and not designated and . . . [inaudible].

But I just wanted to make some opening comments about that and then, you know, see what you're saying about some of the programs that have been cut. And I'll just open at that. I just wanted to do some open statements and just leave it to anything that, you know, you see positions cut. Has there been a change in positions in northern Saskatchewan? And I mean we're going to talk about this budget but I wanted to make some opening comments about what we have seen and what I've heard from individuals. And I guess it's their perception of what they're seeing. So I leave that with you.

Hon. Mr. Reiter: — I was just clarifying with my ministry officials. They tell me last fiscal year there was — in our ministry now, I'll clarify that — in our ministry there was no reductions in staff numbers in the North nor is there anticipated to be any in this budget. You know, to cross-ministry, some of those questions that you raise may be better put in estimates for those individual ministries.

I would just say, you know, I certainly understand your point about small communities and positions and what that does. I come from a small community myself. You know, I mentioned earlier before you had come, when one of your colleagues was questioning, we recognize some of the unique challenges in the North, and that's one of the many things we've done to try to address that, is through revenue sharing. Last year revenue sharing increased percentage-wise dramatically for the North.

We recognize that there's a couple of issues in the North that make it very unique. One of them is that most communities in the North don't have a large commercial tax base, which puts them at a disadvantage. And secondary to that is just it's a matter of distance. It's transportation issues. So we recognize that. When we made major changes to the revenue-sharing formula last year just as an example, we recognized some of the

unique challenges in the North, and we look at this as just one way to help address those.

Mr. Vermette: — So currently then — and I thank you for the information you're sharing — how many staff, permanent staff that live in La Ronge that you're aware that reside there rather than if it's a position, part-time, somebody going in there to do certain jobs, how many staff right now do you have within Northern Affairs and First Nations and Métis Relations in La Ronge?

Hon. Mr. Reiter: — Our folks were just doing some quick counting. They don't normally do it that way, as sort of by community, but they did their quick addition, a couple different units and they tell me there's 12 in one unit and six in another, for a total of 18.

Mr. Vermette: — Could you, and I don't know if it's possible to do this and ask your officials, at some time could you provide for me, and go back — and if that's not possible, then I'll find another way to get the information — can we go back through 2007, '08, '09, '10, '11 and '12, '13 to provide that to the committee at a later date, if you would agree to do that?

Hon. Mr. Reiter: — I've asked the staff to attempt to do that and to follow up with you. I would just caution one thing though. There may be some difficulty with it. It might take a bit of time because, as you're aware, there's been a number of reorganizations. So you know, we want to assure that while it may look like, you know, a reduction in one ministry, that position could still be there in a different ministry. So I've asked the staff to attempt to do that, but I ask you to be a little bit patient waiting for the response because of reorganizations.

Mr. Vermette: — And that's fine. No, I appreciate that. If you could do that, that would be great. But having said that then, I guess, currently you said there was 12 in one department and six staff in the other department. What departments are those?

Hon. Mr. Reiter: — It's actually, it's not departments. It's actually branches within the same ministry.

Mr. Vermette: — Okay. And they are positioned in northern Saskatchewan or La Ronge? I just want to be clear on that.

Hon. Mr. Reiter: — You had asked specifically La Ronge so they were . . . because obviously there's people in other areas as well, so those were specific to La Ronge.

Mr. Vermette: — And were these positions and they're, I guess as a branch, are they in Mistasinihk the government building, or are they in other buildings in La Ronge?

Hon. Mr. Reiter: — Yes, they're all there.

Mr. Vermette: — Okay, thank you. Now I mentioned about a northern economic development fund, a grant program that will be cancelled the first of April here, 2014. What type of program was that, that individuals applied for?

Hon. Mr. Reiter: — This would be, I guess, another example of what I was mentioning with the staffing, in that instance with the reorganization. I don't have a lot of details on that program.

That program is actually under the Ministry of the Economy.

Mr. Vermette: — Okay, currently right now are there any plans that you're aware of . . . and of course being that within your ministry to advocate for northern Saskatchewan, as you know you're responsible for the North, and as a minister you're at the cabinet table and, you know, bringing the issues of northern Saskatchewan to the table. I assume the process, that's how it still would work if you were designated.

So do you have any idea what they're going to replace and can you advocate to, I guess, the Minister of the Economy, what their plans are? You know I'm just looking, is there any way . . . Do you have any discussions? Have you had any discussions with them, as being you're responsible Minister for Northern Affairs?

[21:15]

Hon. Mr. Reiter: — In a minute I'm going to have some comments I want to make first, but I'm going to ask Al to speak in a little more detail about sort of some of the cross-ministry efforts that have been made by the government to help in the North.

You know, as you mentioned, part of my role in this ministry is to advocate for the North. And I'm very proud and very privileged to have that opportunity in cabinet, and I take that very seriously. Before you joined us, there was a discussion from one of your colleagues about, you know, discussions that I'd had in the past on different issues in the North. In that case it was with the Minister of Highways.

So you know, as you can imagine, in northern Saskatchewan while it's part of my role to help advocate, many things are cross-ministry. So I have an opportunity, as I mentioned earlier, my colleagues and I, there's very much an open door policy where, you know, I'm free at any time pretty well to discuss issues in the North with any of the relevant cabinet ministers. So as I said, I take that very seriously and I'm very privileged to have that role. As far as some specifics of what we're doing on some of the programming, I'm just going to get Al to comment on that.

Mr. Hilton: — Sure. Al Hilton. Thank you, Minister. So within the framework of the government's overall agenda, be it the growth plan or be it the child and family agenda, there is a number of different components. There is the child welfare transformation. There's the agenda around improving the participation rates of First Nations and Métis people in the economy. There are initiatives around to improve educational outcomes, and you have the children first initiative that's going on. You have the initiative around crime reduction and building partnerships to reduce crime.

So within government these sort of broad agendas and the various components of these agendas have a variety of committees that support government. Representatives from our ministry including myself sit on all of those committees. And part of what we do is to ensure that the northern dimensions and the First Nations and the Métis dimensions of various files are considered and brought to bear on how we advance these initiatives. So that's a big part of what we do.

Another big part of what we do is in relation to northern engagement around resource development. And you'd be familiar with the EQC [environmental quality committee] program and the surface lease agreement program. And every year we publish a report that transparently describes the sort of economic and employment benefits that northerners are receiving from the resource industry in the North, particularly but not exclusively uranium mines. Plus we also administer the EQC program which ensures that, you know, northerners are actively engaged in decision making around how mining gets conducted in the North.

And we have some other related programs like the community vitality program. So both within the context of the government's agenda overall, in terms of its specific elements as well as our own mandate, we're kept very busy, you know, engaging with our colleagues across government on northern issues. In fact some of my staff might suggest that they spend too much time in committees, but . . . So there's a lot of inter-ministerial work being done on all these fronts.

Mr. Vermette: — Thank you for that. And that's why I brought it up, you know. When you think about it, and I realize as minister you're responsible and you have all your different departments and branches that you work with to make sure . . . And I know the frustration out there, whether it's our commercial fishermen, whether it's our trappers, First Nations and Métis feeling whether they're getting consulted, compensation when SaskPower is going on their traditional territory. There are a lot of issues are being raised, and we're trying to work and I know individuals are trying to work with the ministries.

But I think it's helpful that you said, you know . . . And I think sometimes people don't realize and maybe that's the part that they're missing, that you know, when your officials talked about staff sometimes, kind of say they advocate too much and they've got a lot of work to do. I think in light of, you know, the information, I'm going to also encourage those individuals when they're working with the ministries to get a hold of your ministry to help them with these so you can advocate at the table like that, you know, with the issues. Because I think sometimes they're frustrated that they're not being heard, and I think, you know, probably could use the support of your staff, your officials to assist them, and maybe yourself as minister, to raise those concerns at the table. Because they're feeling like, yes, they're viewing their concerns but they're not getting the responses or feel like they're being heard. And you know, you see the frustration.

And if maybe that's a way we can manoeuvre and work with your officials and yourself and your ministry to advocate for northern Saskatchewan, because I'll be honest, there are a lot of issues and people feeling they're not being heard, dealing with the ministries. I know my office deals with certain individuals when they have a complaint. And we try, you know, you try to work things out at the end of the day for the person that has the issue, to resolve it.

So I'm going to be encouraging individuals to not only talk to the ministry but to use your ministry as well with your officials. And you know, like you say, you've got different branches that can assist them. And I think we're going to be really utilizing

your ministry lots in the next while because I'm going to really encourage it that people should use it. You're there to advocate and, you know, you take that responsibility. And you know, it makes me feel good that you said you'd take that responsibility serious and you want to advocate for them at the cabinet table. So I want to thank you for that and for the information you've shared so far.

I guess going back, some of the frustration . . . And I know, whether it's commercial fishing, we were hoping in this budget there would be an opportunity. I know government had changed their mind on supporting the commercial fishermen. Subsidies have been taken away from there.

Have you had any meetings or your officials had any meetings with the commercial fishermen to ask, is there anything we could do in the upcoming budget of these dollars, the budgets that are allocated? Is there anything you could do to help out our commercial fishermen in northern Saskatchewan?

Hon. Mr. Reiter: — To your question about any meetings or requests for meetings or assistance offered by our ministry to the fisherman, I'm just going to get Richard to introduce himself and to give you some more detail on that.

Mr. Turkheim: — Richard Turkheim, Government Relations. I've not had any direct meetings with commercial fisherman or the Saskatchewan Co-operative Fisheries Ltd. group over the past year, nor have I had any calls from them. But we continue to provide assistance to individual co-operatives seeking help and ensuring that their registrations are current. In addition, the Ministry of Economy continues to provide support to the commercial fishers as well, path finding, in terms of helping them make contact with foreign investors.

Environment also continues to work with commercial fishers providing support for their annual conferences. And Environment and Health together are working to try and provide support to the commercial fishers in the sense of revisiting some current restrictions on lake limits.

Mr. Vermette: — Thank you for that information. And so just about a year there's been no communication — correct? — from them in any way or from your ministry to the commercial fisherman when I talk about the co-operative. And I'm talking about the northern Saskatchewan fisherman's co-operative.

Mr. Turkheim: — That's correct. No contact with me, but contact with our La Ronge office.

Mr. Vermette: — Okay, thank you for that. I want to go now to our northern trappers. We have a lot of trappers, about 30-some hundred trappers that trap in northern Saskatchewan. And they're pretty frustrated with not being consulted. When somebody goes on, whether it's harvesting wood, whether industry is going into their traditional territory, their trapline, whether it's SaskPower deciding to make it's, you know, the power line through their trapline, they haven't been consulted. And they're frustrated. They come in to their trapline to find out that somebody's been, activity's been in there and nobody has contacted them, you know. And I've been at many meetings, trappers' meetings where they're frustrated and they're wondering why.

So I would like to, you know, maybe to the minister: what are you thinking? Is there any way . . . What suggestion would you have being that you're, you know, working on behalf of northern Saskatchewan and advocating at the table with those ministries? Is there any suggestions you could make how we can utilize that duty to consult and accommodate traditional trappers and why they're not — as First Nations and Métis, you're responsible for that — why they're not consulting traditional trappers before they go on their traditional territory.

And I know there's a framework and all that stuff, and that's been explained to myself and some of the others. But we don't see why it's not . . . Like even though they may explain it and they think they're understanding, it's not very clear with the framework that they're using. So if you could try to help out that we could assist some of our northern trappers, how they get your ministry to assist them.

[21:30]

Hon. Mr. Reiter: — You know, the point you raise, the whole duty to consult framework is very important to the government. And it's a very technical issue, as you mention, so I'm just going to get Al to elaborate on that.

Mr. Hilton: — Al Hilton. I think, sir, I'll try to answer your question in two different ways. So from a pure policy perspective, the government has a duty to consult framework. And within that framework, Environment has their own operational framework. And depending on the impact that anything is going to have on traditional lands, they will send out a certain kind of notice. And we have the consultation fund there so that people who need financial assistance in order to engage in consultation with us can apply for it, and we will provide them grants to finance that. And we've looked at this program a couple of times and reviewed it because we weren't necessarily satisfied with the uptake that we were getting. So we put in this fast-track process and all the rest of this stuff. But effectively communicating with northern communities and other First Nations communities in a way that fully enables us to consult in the way that we want to according to our own policies is sometimes a bit of a challenge. So that's sort of the formal kind of part of the answer.

The less formal part of the answer is that we've done a number of things to try to address that, and Trisha can correct me if I'm wrong. But over the course of the last 12 to 18 months, ending a few months ago, we had a very extensive consultation process with First Nations and Métis communities as well as industry and other stakeholders, and we prepared what we call this proponent handbook. And the purpose of the proponent handbook is to assist industry in understanding how they can most effectively do their own consultations, quite apart from the government's legal obligations, just as a matter of good business practices. And through that process we also consulted, beyond industry, you know, First Nations and Métis organizations and northerners.

So what we're attempting to encourage is industry to, you know, as a matter of good business practices to consult with the communities they're going to be impacting on, you know, even if the quote unquote legal duty to consult may or may not exist. And I think what we've seen over time in northern

Saskatchewan are some companies do an extraordinarily good job of that and perhaps some not as good as what everyone would like. It's certainly our intent and our objective is not to have people surprised. Like when a trapper goes out on his trapline and he's surprised to see somebody there doing resource development, that's not a good thing. That's not something we want to encourage.

So we work really hard, both through formal, you know, policy processes to meet our legal obligations as well as we work really hard informally through all kinds of forums, EQC and others, to try to align the practices of industry with the interests of traditional users, you know, be they trappers or hunters or fishers.

Mr. Vermette: — Thank you for that. I want to go a little further with this because some jurisdictions in some provinces in Canada help their trappers in different ways so that they are not running into problems with industry when they go out to their traplines. So there's different ways that they do it.

I know that the Northern Trappers Association has applied for certain grants, programs to help them, to make sure they're communicating their message as an organization. And they're working with industry, with the ministries, and they haven't been very successful with getting any dollars to support them. I mean yes, they get some money when they have their convention. Don't get me wrong. Some of the ministries do, you know, put money into that type of an area.

But I think what needs to happen and maybe with the dollars that, you know, your department has, I'm going to see if there's any way or any suggestion you could make that I can go back to talk to the trappers. And you know, they're organized. They have an executive. They hold their meetings. They have trapper . . . the zones. And they have their individual N-9 And they all have, at the end of the day, they have their meetings, they have individuals who speak for them at certain conventions and everything else.

But I guess as an organization, they are trying to find what's the best way to work with industry, to work with the ministries and with the trappers to make sure there aren't the problems and miscommunications — in a positive way, to say let's work together. And I think this could work, but they need the support. And maybe we need to tap into your ministry to help them secure some of those dollars to make sure that this process is working for everyone's best interest so that we're not holding up the economy.

They want to support the economy, the growth and all that, but they also want to feel like they are being respected, and their concerns on their traditional territory. So I just want to see what you think, if there is a way we could get the trappers to use your ministry in a way — Northern Affairs, First Nations and Métis Relations — in any way to secure some dollars that would be helpful in the budget here, or a way that you could suggest advocating with them with some of the ministries to find some dollars to assist them when they put a proposal to you that's accountable and has all the checks and balances that you would want.

Hon. Mr. Reiter: — What I'll do in regard to your concerns or

the concerns that you're saying trappers' association have . . . Again, some of this is cross-ministry. So what I'll commit to you today is I've asked our officials to have someone contact the trappers' association. They'll arrange to meet with them, have a discussion about those issues, and then hopefully what'll come out of that is that — what I'd like to see and I'll ask the ministry officials to report back to me on this — is that, whether it be this ministry or Environment or perhaps another one, that the trappers' association has sort of a regular contact person that they can use in dealing with those issues. You know, I look to your comments if you think that would be helpful. If you do, I would happily commit to that right now.

Mr. Vermette: — Well I'll be honest with you. I'll take any suggestions that your officials and yourself as a ministry, you know, helps . . . They're asking for help, and so far they haven't been very successful with the ministries they've been dealing with. So yes, if there's anything you guys can do to assist them. I try to advocate for them. We try to raise it as best we can. And I know they want to do it in a positive way and they want to be accountable for it, but they want help so that their industry is protected and their livelihood and what they feel is their traditional right to do . . . gather, you know, and trap and fish. And I think I would agree. Yes, to me that's acceptable. And thank you for making that offer. I hope they can find and secure some dollars and some assistance from your officials.

So I guess the last area I want to comment on — and I'm going to turn it over, and I know my colleague has area questions and the time to fill in — you talked about the formula for northern revenue sharing and the way the formula, the increase in funding that the North got. And we know that there's huge infrastructure needs in the North. And you talked about, you know, the North benefited greatly. And I'm glad like, you know, any time we can have dollars coming in to deal with northern infrastructure because the infrastructure that's there now, I'll be honest with you, needs a lot of attention. And you know, I know that from some of the leaders. And they have other challenges. You talked about it yourself. They don't have the access to the business sector like some communities do and the business tax that they would get and different ways.

And I like that you said that you changed the formula. They benefited, but I also know just . . . And I don't know. Can you explain to me, there's been a . . . And I know they lost 500,000 or so out of their budget. What happened with that and why the loss? Was there a change in some way? If you explain that.

Hon. Mr. Reiter: — That's part of the change to the overall revenue-sharing pool. There was a change in accounting due to public sector accounting practices so the overall pool, how the calculation is done for the 1 per cent of the provincial sales tax to the overall pool, so all sectors dropped. We anticipate, based on forecasts that we're seeing, that that will be sort of a one-time blip. As the economy continues to grow, we expect that the revenue-sharing pool will continue to grow as well.

So you know, the point I was making, while you're absolutely right with the sort of the drop this year, the point I was making was when the revenue-sharing pool was recalculated last year, there was a substantial increase given to the northern part of that pool as opposed to the other sectors. And I, you know, I would just add to this. Because of the reasons I did mention

earlier, there's some unique challenges in the North. There's the fact that most communities up there don't have a large industrial tax base that some of the municipalities in the southern part of the province do. And then there's just the whole issue around transportation, the distance from various markets that cause some challenges. So when we arrived at that, at the formula and what we were going to do, the large percentage increase to the North, you know, our government was very pleased to provide that. We think it was necessary and it was the right thing to do.

And I think the one item I'd like to add to that is I was extremely pleased at the reaction from both urban and rural municipal leaders in the province to that, because bear in mind at the same time those leaderships want the largest sort of increase to their part of the pool that they can get. On both sides of that, they were very, very supportive of the large increase to the North. So I was just very pleased at their reaction to that.

Mr. Vermette: — Well I'm going to end on this note, and again, you know, we have a lot of successes in the North. Very proud people. They do a good job. We have the leadership — First Nations, our mayors — they're our leaders. Our young people are doing great. They're trying to do their part. They're working hard. Our elders, our seniors are doing their part. So at the end of the day, you know, they just want to be treated fair, and that's all they ask, you know, clearly. And we'll continue to work. Hopefully we can work with your ministry, realizing the strength that hopefully we get support and the partnership to move forward on some of the ministries that we're . . . some of the files we haven't got the response that we need to deal with it. So I want to thank you for, you know, offering to in any way you can to work, and we'll continue to work with your ministry and your officials and yourself to try to help northern people deal with the issues that are facing them.

So at this time I just want to say to yourself as the minister and your officials, thank you for providing the information that you have offered, you know, I have asked and you're willing to commit to providing, and again for answering the questions and supporting hopefully very positive some of the issues and challenges in northern Saskatchewan. So I thank you. Mr. Chair, I'm done. I'll turn it over.

[21:45]

The Chair: — Thank you, Mr. Vermette. Mr. Wotherspoon, you have some questions?

Mr. Wotherspoon: — Thank you. Nice to join the committee. I was with the finance committee, but nice to join. Thanks, Minister, for being here, and thank you to all the officials that are here tonight as well.

I know we're following up sort of at the final stages of the budget estimates here tonight. We covered a bit of the discussion around infrastructure funding, the need for predictable funds to flow to municipalities across the province. We touched a bit on revenue sharing and the impact of the, the impact this current year where it's been reduced this year, and we touched a bit on regional planning. We could probably get into a bit more on that front because it's an important area as well.

But I'm cognizant of time that we have here tonight that's rather, rather limited. I do want to just get your perspective on the role of your ministry and of government in supporting paratransit within the communities across Saskatchewan.

Hon. Mr. Reiter: — On that, there's a capital component and an operations component. Last year in the budget we doubled the capital component, and the operations component stayed the same. There's no changes to the funding in this budget. I believe, I was just told by the officials, the total amount budgeted is \$3.5 million for this year. I'm assuming that's what you want. If you'd like some sort of detail, we'd be happy to provide that as well.

Mr. Wotherspoon: — Sure. No. The funding's important and I know it's valued. The concern I think is just what is going on in municipalities right now is that the demand far exceeds the dollars that are attached to it provincially. So there's, you know, changing demographics also, just many that, higher incidence of certain disabilities. I know diabetes and those needing dialysis and all sorts of circumstances, that we have higher incidence here.

So the sad reality in communities is that many are turned away. And I understand as many as 1,000 a month in a community like Regina, and that's huge. And so it's an area that requires some attention and I think, you know, in the life of a community, it's important, but it's in the life of that disabled person that that provides the ability to connect with employment or groceries or some quality of life and basic level of dignity, or medical appointments. Those are really important.

I understand that once the funding was 50 per cent province, 50 per cent was the municipalities. I understand, quite some years ago, that funding arrangement or that funding model didn't continue. Right now it's about 31 per cent, I understand, on the province and basically municipalities are left in a difficult spot to provide this very important service, and I think it is one that we can look to the province to better support.

So I guess I just would like to get a bit of a perspective if this is on your radar right now as a concern within municipalities, if you're hearing from the cities on this front, and if you're actively reviewing policies on this front and considering bringing an increase to resources.

Hon. Mr. Reiter: — In just a minute, I'm going to ask Assistant Deputy Minister Keith Comstock to just speak a little bit further on some of the work our ministry folks have been doing and consulting with municipalities on this issue. Rest assured though, it is very much on our radar. We recognize the importance of the program. That's why the significant increase last year.

You know to your point, while paratransit is a municipal responsibility, again as government, we recognize the importance. That's why we've continued and enhanced the program.

You know, I would, just before I ask Keith to comment, I would just mention a couple of things. First of all, it's also one of those things where sort of the principles of revenue sharing are that, generally speaking, you give municipalities sort of

encumbrance-free dollars to spend in priority areas that they deem necessary as opposed to, do you consider somewhat less money for revenue sharing and more targeted programs. We've taken the approach that municipalities know best so, you know, I would point to that as an assistance for municipalities.

The other issue on this is, when we did the expansion last year — and again I'll ask Keith to elaborate on this when he comments as well — is that our folks in the ministry canvassed, my understanding is, every municipality in the province that potentially could be eligible for the program. There hadn't been an expansion like that done, I don't believe, in many, many years. And there was five municipalities that were interested and had applied, and all of them were accepted into the program. So with that, I'll just get Keith to add further on the work that he and his folks have been doing.

Mr. Wotherspoon: — Sure. But if I may just respond to your . . . So you know, it's an important area. And just around the revenue-sharing piece, just remembering that the reality of this year, yes there's more revenue sharing, but there are a lot of needs. We discussed this last, you know, last committee, that those growing communities are facing in a whole host of areas, and they do have a reduction this year in the revenue sharing that's there, and then flat dollars on the paratransit.

And I don't want to turn this into any great big debate of any sort. It's just a matter that it's not acceptable that 1,000 people needing paratransit are turned away on a monthly basis in Regina. I understand it's similar in Saskatoon; I understand other pressures in other cities as well. So there needs to be a better arrangement, supported with provincial funding. Municipal Affairs has been the traditional funder of that. Maybe there's a place for Health to play a role there. From my perspective, it matters less where the dollars come from, matters more that we enable the service that the community deserves.

But yes, so I appreciate your comments on it, but I just want to be careful for anyone observing back at home that, you know, there's tight fiscal environments for the municipalities right now as well.

Hon. Mr. Reiter: — I would just add, you know, I agree with you on the point it matters less where the dollars come from and just more that the service is provided. I agree with that.

The only other thing I would add, as you're aware, while there is a small decrease in revenue sharing, and we've been through this in the past, that's after a number of years of record increases. So I'll ask Keith now to, as I said, elaborate on the work the ministry folks have been doing on this important issue.

Mr. Comstock: — Thank you, Minister. My name's Keith Comstock, assistant deputy minister in Government Relations. Clearly, the transit assistance for persons with disabilities program is an important piece of our, one of the tools in our tool kit in terms of support to municipalities. It's even more important now than it has been with the Premier's commitment to plan for growth that we're going to try and make Saskatchewan the best place in Canada for persons with disabilities to live.

And towards that end, our ministry is one of the six ministries

or the flagship ministries in the development of the disability strategy. Transportation is one of the key components in the development of the disability strategy. It's because we own the transit assistance program, we're taking the lead on that file. So we've been consulting with municipalities. We have a meeting this Thursday with paratransit providers from across the province where we're going to be talking about the strategy, talking about some of the challenges and some of the opportunities that the actual providers of the services are experiencing. And I think that it's incumbent on all of us to stay open to the possibilities on this.

TAPD [transit assistance for people with disabilities program], the transit assistance program, has stayed relatively unchanged in terms of format and its approach towards providing the subsidy over the last number of years. And I think that, in the spirit of trying to make Saskatchewan the best place in Canada for persons with a disability to live, we need to kind of give ourselves the opportunity to think outside the box. And I'm not trying to presuppose what the strategy might say or what folks that are involved in this are going to come up with in terms of recommendations. But one of the things that we've talked about it is, are we providing the subsidy in the right way? Is it better to subsidize the service provider or is it better to subsidize the service user?

[22:00]

So that's the kind of paradigm, the kind of thinking that we need to do around this issue. Clearly I think, if you talk to employers, if you talk to municipal officials, they'll all agree that we can only benefit from enabling a higher participation in not only the economy but in community inclusion with folks with disabilities.

So it is an important part of the piece of the work that my staff are working on. And as I said, we've been working hard consulting SUMA [Saskatchewan Urban Municipalities Association], SARM [Saskatchewan Association of Rural Municipalities], New North, the other municipal associations, and again this Thursday with paratransit providers — a very extensive public consultation process that will take place through the months of April and May. And then at least a couple of my staff are going to be working almost full time through the summer on coming up with a recommendation. So I'm obviously engaged in the process. I believe in it firmly, and it is from that perspective of acknowledging that, you know, there's always ways for us to do better.

Mr. Wotherspoon: — I appreciate those comments and certainly appreciate the engagement of the ministry in this important issue. I've heard from too many constituents that haven't been able to access the service and then have been provided some of the global numbers that are impacting many right now. And certainly I think we all would look to that and say that it's not acceptable. So thank you for your engagement. We'll be tracking progress on this file and conclusion of those consultations hopefully with positive steps and resources.

I would like to shift the focus just to the work around weather-related crisis and challenges that communities face and preparation that communities undertake. I know that there's a lot of communities that have done reviews and looked at plans

that would be, from their perspective, preventative work to mitigate or prevent the damage and impact from weather-related crisis like high water and flooding. I guess just to the minister: what is the ministry doing to enable those sorts of projects?

Of course we need to be there when crisis hits and communities are impacted and people are impacted and households are impacted, but it's sort of after the fact. In an ideal world and of course, you know, we should be I think better supporting some preventative measures upfront that will make a difference in protecting communities and families.

Hon. Mr. Reiter: — To the whole mitigation issue, your point is well taken. Just a couple of things I would point out now. As you can imagine, there's some cross-ministry work in this going on. I would point out, you know, as I'm sure you're aware of the announcement today from the Water Security Agency in regards to the launching of the 2014 emergency flood damage reduction program. Minister Cheveldayoff announced that today and, you know, he was saying in the news release that for every dollar that we've invested in flood mitigation efforts, we've saved \$20 in damages. So that program is going to reimburse individuals for 85 per cent of the cost of approved flood mitigation projects. Communities and businesses are eligible for 75 per cent. And then it goes through and it gives some detail, which I won't spend the time on unless you request.

What the announcement today also did is it targeted sort of the high-risk areas for flood. And we've been attempting to be proactive on that as well. And Duane McKay is here, and his folks have been doing some work with sort of municipalities that are in kind of a higher risk area. And I'm just going to get Duane to elaborate on which ones that is and what our folks have been doing.

Mr. McKay: — Over the last couple of years, we've developed a pretty close working relationship with the Water Security Agency in terms of identifying the areas where there could be some risk for spring runoff. This year that risk focuses in just north of Saskatoon up to Prince Albert and sort of east and west from there. And as of today there's little pockets in some other areas of the province.

Over the last month we've been working with the Water Security Agency to hold regional meetings. We've held those meetings in Humboldt, Warman, and Prince Albert, which would have invited municipalities from around those particular regions where we could see some potential risk. In addition to that we have met with First Nations communities that have an annual emergency management forum. That includes communities from five tribal councils and two independent First Nations as well.

What we have seen, however, over the last couple of years is that municipalities are significantly more prepared than they had been in the past. I think in 2010-11, I think there was a little bit of disbelief that the flood would occur and the impacts would be as significant as they were. When we meet with communities, they have their plans in place. They've got some experience, unfortunately. And we find that the assistance required is significantly less as they know what's going to come and how to prepare for it.

Mr. Wotherspoon: — It's really an important area. You spoke about that one region that's under higher stress. You spoke about some of the other pockets. What are some of the other pockets right now that are of concern?

Mr. McKay: — Well Humboldt hadn't been identified, but that is a very kind of flat area. It's got a lot of water and a lake system in that area, so that's been identified. There's a little pocket near Rosetown that, as a result of some precipitation in March, that has been identified. So it's a small area we're watching. And then there's a small area up around Lloydminster that has been identified. We saw that a year or so ago at Maidstone area. So we're watching those areas. Those are identified as risks, not necessarily that there'll be flooding in those areas but the groundwater snowpack has potential for flooding in those areas.

Mr. Wotherspoon: — Thank you for that. The issue around Rosetown has nothing to do with the MLA [Member of the Legislative Assembly] there, by chance? No, okay. Highway No. 2, of course last year Highway No. 2 was impacted in a big way in various places but particularly one point that stood out was just north of St. Louis. What's it looking like this year for that spot and that highway?

Hon. Mr. Reiter: — Duane tells me that that area is of course still in the high risk. I do know Highways officials have been attempting to deal with that. You know, as far as sort of the most current information from Highways, you know, it would be better put to the Highways minister. But I know there's concern about that area again.

Mr. Wotherspoon: — The settlement of claims when there's damage that occurs is really important of course for municipalities, RMs [rural municipality], urban municipalities, as well for households and businesses and charities and organizations. I'm interested in getting an update as to where your ministry is at in settling outstanding claims on PDAP [provincial disaster assistance program] and sort of where you're at. I know that . . . Maybe going back a few years. What do you have outstanding that are a few years back? What are your oldest claims and what are timelines to have these resolved?

Hon. Mr. Reiter: — I'll just go back a number of years as you asked: 2010 claims that have been closed, 99 per cent of those have been closed; from 2011, 96 per cent of the claims have been closed; from 2012, 92 per cent have been closed; and from last year, 2013, there 61 per cent have been closed.

Mr. Wotherspoon: — So just, you know, recognizing that we don't have that much time here tonight to get into all of the specific claims, some of those ones that are outstanding a few years back, those are more difficult for the ministry to resolve, I suspect. Or what's causing those to not be settled?

Hon. Mr. Reiter: — In light of what you mentioned about the time, I certainly don't want to delay this. So Karen has the specific numbers for each type of claim and then she'll just give you kind of briefly sort of the substantial reasons behind that.

Ms. Lautsch: — Karen Lautsch, with the Ministry of Government Relations. In 2010, where we have the most claims

outstanding, would be our municipal claims. There's about . . . But you know, when I say most, that's 26 claims outstanding. And those municipal claims, as we've experienced through '10, '11, '12, and '13 — hopefully not in '14 — what we've seen is that the roads continually, in some places continue to be flooded. And so there's been issues in terms of draining the roads to get them to the appropriate dryness to build up the roads so that it can be permanently fixed.

[22:15]

The other issue is the availability of contractors. Some municipalities have struggled with getting contractors to be available to them. Issues like the availability of gravel, working through those claims. So that would be in 2010.

In 2012 we have some municipal claims open as well, and some private and individual claims. On the private side, typically those are claims where they've had some structural damage to their property. And by structural, I mean that their house may have experienced cracks in their basement that have actually required an engineering assessment to ensure that the house can be repaired properly. And that has caused some time delays in terms of getting the engineering work done and the designs done, as well as then having the property owners be able to get a contractor to come in and do the work.

So we've always been balancing between wanting claimants to be able to complete their claims and get them done, but recognizing that there are some challenges associated with moving some of this work forward.

Mr. Wotherspoon: — Thanks for the information. Would the ministry be able to endeavour to provide the information in written form just by property class, by claimant for each of the given years of what hasn't been settled out?

Hon. Mr. Reiter: — If I could just clarify, you're asking by category, right? Not by name.

Mr. Wotherspoon: — Oh yes, by category.

Hon. Mr. Reiter: — Sure. And certainly the ministry will provide that.

Mr. Wotherspoon: — And of course I mean we don't have a whole bunch of time through these estimates here today to go into depth on this file but certainly resolving those claims are really important, and I know that that's a goal of your ministry. I know sometimes there's been some challenges for a host of reasons but just the continued efforts to settle those claims in a fair way is really important, so thanks for your comments there.

Where is the . . . I know there's different needs of different municipalities. We've talked about some of them like the bridges in Saskatoon or the bypasses or now the bypass west, south, east in Regina.

What about a community like Lloydminster that's certainly inundated with heavy traffic throughout its main artery and I know have a mayor and council, community leaders, business leaders quite concerned about the traffic flow and are looking for some solutions and support to address that artery?

Hon. Mr. Reiter: — So in this case, you're speaking to specific the highway then. Is that the case?

Mr. Wotherspoon: — The main route, the main artery cuts of course right through Lloydminster, and they're inundated with traffic challenges. And I understand they've engaged your government and the ministry with some proposals on this front. And I'm just wondering if . . . I didn't see anything in this budget to support that community. I'm just wondering where it's at on the radar of your ministry.

Hon. Mr. Reiter: — I just followed up with the ministry because I wasn't sure when you . . . Or I may have misunderstood you. I thought you said that you knew that the city had contacted this ministry on the issue. But our folks are telling me they're not aware of any contact with that. I'm assuming those sorts of situations typically — and again I'm just assuming — I would think that the contact was probably through the Highways ministry.

Mr. Wotherspoon: — Sure, and fair enough. I just know it's through my outreach with mayors and councils, including in Lloydminster, that they'd touched that as, you know, an item that was important to them on the municipal side. But we can . . . It's not on your radar, and we can, you know, follow up with Highways and Infrastructure to see where it's at for them.

I know housing is a major issue for a lot of the, well a lot of communities across the province. It's reflected as a major priority for many of the cities. I know that there's not necessarily a large direct role by your ministry into addressing the housing pressures, but it's a major issue for one of your, some of your large stakeholders within the sector.

So I guess what sort of actions, plans, advocacy do you provide as municipal affairs minister on the housing file?

Hon. Mr. Reiter: — You know, as you mentioned, it's predominantly not in our file. But it's affecting especially our larger municipalities, so I've had a number of discussions with mayors and councillors from some of our cities on this. As you're well aware, there are some programs our government offers in regards to housing. But generally speaking, not through this ministry.

Mr. Wotherspoon: — Do you lend your voice? Because I know, you know, if we go out and meet with the municipalities, for many it's among their one or two top issues that they want to see resolved. I'm sure you hear the same when you're meeting with them. How do you carry that discussion back to your team in cabinet?

Hon. Mr. Reiter: — There's been a number of discussions. You know, as programs have evolved in the past, I've been in a number of discussions with Minister Draude on this issue. She's intimately involved with it. We've met, her and I have met with a number of stakeholders on this issue. So while it's primarily in a different ministry, as you've mentioned, you're absolutely right; it's a significant concern to a number of our municipalities. So as I try to do with all inter-ministry issues, try to keep the lines of communication open with my colleagues and with municipal leaders around the province.

Mr. Wotherspoon: — As far as the regional planning discussion, we had some of this discussion last week. Some of it was around one of the bills that was brought forward. Just what's your perspective and what role are you taking to support regional planning in, around the growing cities primarily?

Hon. Mr. Reiter: — I'm very cognizant of the time because, you know, you may want to do a follow-up. So there's a number of areas we've been working on because we consider regional planning very, very important to our growth agenda. So first, and I won't elaborate on this again because I'm cognizant of the time, but there was the legislative changes we had made last year to *The Planning and Development Act*, which I could elaborate if you wish, but I'll leave that up to you. And then there's sort of four key areas our ministry folks have been working on. Since the planning for growth target there's been, our folks tell me, there's been eight new planning districts in the province, which we consider very, very good.

There's the rapid growth communities work. Our folks are sort of working on it as a pilot project in the Humboldt area. They're also working on right now a one-day forum. They're targeting the end of May for that, where they'll be inviting all the planning districts from around the province to come. And then on top of that there's just normal, which you would expect, there's our staff providing sort of day-to-day assistance to municipalities and to planning districts. So you know, I could or our staff could, if you wish, elaborate on any or all of those, but I'll leave that up to you.

Mr. Wotherspoon: — Is the minister concerned with any proposed developments around some of the major cities that are currently being considered? I guess one example would be here in Regina just on the southeast side, I think the RM is also planning a community that, as far as I understand, abuts the city quite closely there. As a minister, how are you evaluating that proposal? Do you have any concerns as it relates to that proposal?

Hon. Mr. Reiter: — So your point on subdivisions around the province, you know, we take them all very seriously. We have a growth agenda but again, you know, we take those seriously. The ministry reviews them all with an eye to the statement of provincial interest. They view, you know, they look at concept plans. They look at official plans. They look at zoning bylaws. All of those are reviewed by the ministry.

From time to time there are some more controversial proposals like the one you referred to. In those instances I think it's important that the ministry make sure that there's enough time spent to give local governments an opportunity to work through these things. Municipal councils by and large make very, very good decisions. And in instances like the one you're referring to it's important, that I said, the ministry give municipalities time to work through this and that the ministry has the opportunity to do their due diligence.

Mr. Wotherspoon: — Thank you for your answer. Certainly that's a file that will require your attention, and I think you mentioned that. As far as SIGI, the Saskatchewan infrastructure growth initiative, can you give us an update on that initiative? There's a reduction in dollars, I believe, this year. Maybe just describe why the reduction and how that program's being

utilized this year and what the perspective of the stakeholders are with the reduction.

Hon. Mr. Reiter: — Sure. Very simply the reduction, and I can get into specific numbers if you like but, again cognizant of the time, only do that if you ask. Generally speaking the reduction is because the program's in kind of windup phase. It was a term program when it was announced. I would call the program very successful. I think it was very well received by municipalities. I think it's one of those sorts of programs that, you know, as this one winds down, that potentially we would look at doing a similar type of program in in the future.

The Chair: — Well thank you, Mr. Minister, and Mr. Wotherspoon. This being the agreed-to time, Mr. Wotherspoon, do you want to do some summations?

Mr. Wotherspoon: — Sure. No apologies though tonight. I want to say thank you to the minister for his time here tonight, as well to all the officials for their attention to the committee here tonight. Your time and of course your work every day in the field, certainly your work is important. And you know, we spoke . . . All of your work is important in your respective areas, but I think about those that are dealing with communities in crisis as related to the weather-related crisis that they're facing. It's some really important work, of course, so thanks for all your work.

I don't know if we're done with our questioning or if we have more time. I guess our House leaders will figure that out. But thanks to the minister for . . .

Hon. Mr. Reiter: — If I could, Mr. Chair, I'd like to thank you, Mr. Wotherspoon, for your questions and also your colleagues as well. I'd like to thank the committee members and you, the Chair, and all the staff and also for all the officials for being here both last week and this week. Thank you very much.

The Chair: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. Thank you to all the officials. There is a number of officials with us tonight. And thank you to the committee members as well, Mr. Wotherspoon. This will conclude for this evening. We will adjourn this committee until tomorrow, April the 9th, at 3 p.m. Thank you and good night.

[The committee adjourned at 22:36.]