



STANDING COMMITTEE ON INTERGOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS AND JUSTICE

Hansard Verbatim Report

No. 46 — June 22, 2020



Legislative Assembly of Saskatchewan

Twenty-Eighth Legislature

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON INTERGOVERNMENTAL
AFFAIRS AND JUSTICE**

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Mr. Buckley Belanger, Deputy Chair
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Mr. Dan D'Autremont
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Mr. Ken Francis
Kindersley

Mr. Delbert Kirsch
Batoche

Ms. Laura Ross
Regina Rochdale

Ms. Nicole Sarauer
Regina Douglas Park

[The committee met at 15:00.]

The Chair: — Good afternoon, everyone. I want to welcome the members of the committee. We have Mr. D’Autremont; we have Mr. Francis; we have Mr. Kirsch; we have Ms. Ross; and we have Mr. Meili sitting in.

Today the committee will begin its consideration of the estimates and supplementary estimates for the Ministry of Government Relations. We will now begin with vote 30, Government Relations, central management and services, subvote (GR01). Minister Carr, please, if you have some, introduce your officials. And if you have any, make your opening remarks.

**General Revenue Fund
Government Relations
Vote 30**

Subvote (GR01)

Hon. Ms. Carr: — Thank you, Mr. Chair, and good afternoon. It’s my pleasure to speak to the spending priorities outlined in the Ministry of Government Relations budget for 2020-2021. I’m joined this afternoon by senior officials from the Ministry of Government Relations and the Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency. This includes deputy minister Greg Miller; assistant deputy ministers Laurier Donais, Sheldon Green, and Giselle Marcotte; and the president of the Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency, Marlo Pritchard; vice-president of corporate services Teresa Florizone; and acting vice-president of operations Steve Roberts.

I would like to begin by providing a few general comments on the ministry’s ’20-21 budget. Then my officials and I will be happy to answer questions the committee members may have. The ’20-21 budget reflects the plan to overcome the challenges arising from the COVID-19 pandemic and the many efforts put forward in the past year.

First, our ’20-21 budget response to COVID-19. It includes 150 million for the municipal economic enhancement program and 45 million for emergency support for First Nations and Métis organizations. This funding supports Saskatchewan communities in a time of economic uncertainty.

Second, this budget reflects the expansion of the Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency. Funding incorporates wildfire management and emergency management functions. Its budget is 85.2 million. The Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency is instrumental in keeping people and property safe, supporting local authorities through emergent events, and coordinating large-scale provincial responses like flattening the COVID-19 curve in Saskatchewan’s North.

As with any new structure, the agency’s long-term resiliency depends on building a strong foundation. For the Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency, that means being fully prepared to respond to any disaster or emergency when called upon. Our new agency answered our first major call for disaster assistance in December, a train derailment outside Guernsey. The second came later that same month, not from within Saskatchewan but internationally, as we deployed a total of 11 wildland firefighters to Australia to

help fight wildfires.

The agency played a key role in the provincial non-health response to COVID-19, providing significant support to the northern and Indigenous communities impacted by or at risk of outbreaks. The Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency was the key point of contact with affected communities. The Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency monitored the situation and disseminated intelligence to other ministries, agencies, and Crown corporations. It assisted with provincial business continuity planning, established checkpoints to aid in education and enforcement of health order restrictions, and it used its Sask911 expertise to establish a toll-free information line for Saskatchewan residents in less than 48 hours.

All of this demonstrates the value this agency provides the province of Saskatchewan by supporting and enhancing public safety. The agency’s structure has delivered on its promise of facilitating greater international coordination and co-operation, while providing a more streamlined provincial response when emergencies strike.

Third, the Government Relations budget now includes the Provincial Capital Commission. Its budget is 7.2 million.

Now on to the numbers: Government Relations, 2020-2021 expense budget is 783.8 million, compared to the 2019-2020 restated estimates of 690.9 million. This is an increase of 92.9 million, or 13.4 per cent, over last year.

Highlights in this budget include 314.2 million in transfers for municipal infrastructure. This is an increase of \$85.8 million. 278.1 million for municipal revenue-sharing program. This is an increase of 26.5 million. It represents revenue from three-quarters of one point of PST [provincial sales tax] in 2018-19. 85.2 million for the Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency. This streamlines front-line public safety functions into one agency. And 45 million for emergency pandemic support for First Nations and Métis organizations. This represents grants to organizations that typically receive payments calculated from the forecasted casino revenues.

For this year, the profits distribution formula of the gaming framework agreement and *The Saskatchewan Gaming Corporation Act* will be suspended and replaced with transfer funding to the First Nations Trust, community development corporations, and the Clarence Campeau Development Fund to continue their support to First Nations and Métis communities and individuals.

Now I would like to describe our budget by examining the expense type. Ninety-seven per cent of our budget reflects third party transfer payments. The majority, 82 per cent of the total transfer funding, is provided to municipalities and municipal stakeholders primarily through revenue sharing and infrastructure grants. Eleven per cent is provided to the Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency. Six per cent is provided to First Nations and Métis organizations. And 1 per cent is provided to the Provincial Capital Commission.

This leaves 3 per cent of our ministry’s total budget to deliver ministry programs. This includes community planning and

support; ongoing programs, services, and reconciliation efforts in relation to our First Nations, Métis, and northern portfolios; building standards; and the provincial disaster assistance program.

This concludes my overview of the Ministry of Government Relations 2020-2021 budget, which includes the Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency and the Provincial Capital Commission. It is a budget that responds to today's challenges and delivers on our commitments to the communities and the people of Saskatchewan. Thank you.

The Chair: — I'd like to introduce Mr. Doyle. He has joined us as well. Are there any . . .

A Member: — Vermette.

The Chair: — Mr. Vermette. Yes. And are there any questions?

Mr. Meili: — Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you for getting to Mr. Vermette's last name. And thank you, Minister, for the opening comments and the opportunity to ask some questions today. And thanks to all the officials. Good to see you again, Mr. Miller and the committee members.

This is an interesting set of estimates because we're sort of talking about a ministry within a ministry. We're talking about the First Nations and Métis Relations, and you've talked about the spending there. It's sort of a ministry that doesn't have its own standing, which is a whole other discussion there.

But I raise that because I have a question regarding how the minister envisions her role in advancing First Nations and Métis Relations within Intergovernmental Affairs, and in particular, what steps she's taken to make sure that her officials and staff are representative of the population of the province and in particular the population she is to be serving.

Hon. Ms. Carr: — Okay, great. Thank you very much for the question. So first off, I guess my role is to engage with First Nation, Métis, and northern partners to plan and respond to opportunities and challenges so that we can all be a part of the growth of Saskatchewan. I work with my colleagues to provide leadership and direction so that our responses are integrated and well understood. This includes engaging with the First Nations, FSIN [Federation of Sovereign Indigenous Nations], tribal councils, Métis Nation-Saskatchewan, and their leadership, as well as northern municipal leaders.

[15:15]

It begins with relationships. Recently I worked with my colleagues and Indigenous partners to address the losses of casino profits, resulting in the Government of Saskatchewan providing a \$45 million grant for emergency pandemic support to First Nations and Métis organizations. Further, due to the engagement and relationship built with my colleagues and northern municipal leaders, Government Relations provided \$370,000 in response to pandemic needs around checkpoints.

I continue to bring items, discussions, forward to my colleagues throughout the government to discuss the interests and

perspectives of First Nations, Métis, and northerners, things I have learned through my relationship with them, especially most recently respecting pandemic-related needs.

Through the good work of the ministry, staff continue to work with communities, First Nations, Métis, and northerners, as well as other provincial officials and federal officials. They're building understanding, supporting relationship building, and working with and between ministries and agencies, especially since so many of our opportunities and challenges are not vested solely within my ministry. So for example, the deputy minister of Indigenous affairs committee takes place. The assistant deputy minister working group in northern issues takes place. We have an inter-ministry group on Indigenous priorities. We have consultation networks. And that's just to name a few of the ministry leads that we have in this field.

So we're always taking steps to try and ensure that the people that work for us are representative of the people of the province of Saskatchewan. On the GR [Government Relations] side, we have a percentage of our staff that self-identify directly to the Public Service Commission, so we would be more than happy to get those numbers for you if you like. Directly within our First Nations, Métis, northern affairs branch we have approximately 30 per cent of the staff that self-identify as First Nation or Métis and those people within the branch, whether they are administrative or whether they take on management roles, they go and flow throughout the entire ministry.

And then we have the Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency. Within this agency, we have a very high number of people that self-identify as First Nation and Métis. A good portion of those, approximately 400, are type 1 and type 2 firefighters. These firefighters are primarily from the North. They are First Nation and Métis, and we find that very helpful and very important when they're working up there because they can speak the language of the people that they're dealing with, and they know their backyard the best.

So I really do feel that we reflect the population of Saskatchewan within our ministry.

Mr. Meili: — Thank you very much. You mentioned the work done with First Nations and Métis partners and consultation in particular around COVID-19. Lots of concerns raised about that consultation, or lack thereof, in my conversations with many of those partners. I appreciate the percentage there, the 30 per cent overall. Can you tell me how many, or if any of your senior leadership team within your ministry are First Nations, Métis ancestry, the senior officials that are especially dealing with those files?

Hon. Ms. Carr: — So I've never asked them personally. I will talk with them right now and see where we stand.

And once again, thank you so much for the question. As I said, I wasn't aware of how many specifically, and of course the numbers that I'm going to give you are people that self-identify that I'm aware of. There could be more, but I may not be aware of them.

So those who self-identify: within the Ministry of Government Relations, we have an ADM [assistant deputy minister], we have

an executive director, we have two directors. Within the Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency, we have a director. And I'm told that if we go to the manager level, the numbers get much, much higher within that agency because they're out there, boots on the ground, managing the people.

Mr. Meili: — And you did mention that you would likely have self-identification numbers from the rest of the staff as well and that you might be able to provide those afterwards. I'm just going to request if that is something you can bring back to us after the committee, that would be very helpful. Thank you.

The Premier the other day was asked about systemic racism, and he acknowledged that systemic racism exists within Saskatchewan. Obviously when we talk about systemic racism, we're talking about institutions that propagate discrimination in various ways, and that would naturally include parts of the provincial government. I'm wondering if the minister could tell me her thoughts on systemic racism, what she sees as evidence of that within the Government of Saskatchewan, and what specific actions she and her team have taken or are taking to identify and change the existence of systemic racism within the province.

Hon. Ms. Carr: — Okay, well thank you very much. So I think last week we heard the Premier acknowledge that systemic racism resides within the province of Saskatchewan. And I agree with him that that is in fact true. And we all acknowledge that this is absolutely an ongoing challenge.

So specific to the actions that we're taking, this past year in January of 2020 our government proclaimed the Day of Action Against Hate and Intolerance. We did this to emphasize the importance of equality and make it clear that there is no room for intolerance in our province. We need collaborative, respectful dialogues about the issues facing our communities. We also need to continue working together to ensure that all of our families are safe and to make further progress on reconciliation.

Saskatchewan's commitment to reconciliation implicitly addresses racism. It is not possible to support reconciliation without implicitly acknowledging racism.

Through GR's funding initiative, we have supported applications to support events and projects to advance reconciliation. For example, we provided funding to support the Office of the Treaty Commissioner to facilitate work across the province on truth and reconciliation, and the Battlefords Tribal Council to support a multi-government coalition that supports more inclusive service delivery and safer communities.

And right now I'm just going to call Giselle Marcotte up, who's going to expand a little bit further on some of the actions that we are taking.

Ms. Marcotte: — Thank you. Giselle Marcotte, assistant deputy minister, Government Relations.

Thank you. We continue to work in the area of reconciliation — and as the minister said, reconciliation is about acknowledging the past and moving forward — as we move forward together with First Nations and Métis and other communities in Saskatchewan. Through the work of places like the Office of the

Treaty Commissioner, we've supported them in having the dialogues out there in community directly.

We continue to support the initiatives in the North through Embracing Life, where we bring together 19 agencies, including youth and elders and various communities and government representation, to support the North and asking the North to talk to us about what their needs are. We continue to support this year, through our funding program, missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls calls for justice in a focused support for the initiatives that organizations will be bringing to us.

Mr. Meili: — Thank you very much, Ms. Marcotte. Often when the concept of systemic racism is discussed, it's described through the results that are seen. So in our province, for example: 50-plus per cent of the children living on reserve living in poverty; the overrepresentation of Indigenous people in the justice system. My colleague Mr. Vermette has been talking a great deal about the overrepresentation of Indigenous people in suicide, especially youth suicide: 29 times more likely for girls, six times more likely for boys if they're Indigenous than non-Indigenous to lose their lives.

We've had some debate over a suicide prevention strategy and a disappointing result with the government not supporting that, but you know, there is a draft plan that came out through the Minister of Rural and Remote Health. I haven't seen any actions on trying to reduce incarceration rates. But I guess what I'm getting at, because as you can see, I'm touching on a number of different ministries here, but you have a role in representing through those relationships that are a part of your ministerial role with First Nations and Métis leaders and communities. To what degree have you engaged those leaders and communities in, for example, the suicide prevention plan that was put out by Minister Kaeding? How active is your office in trying to have a whole-of-government approach to addressing systemic racism?

[15:30]

Hon. Ms. Carr: — Great. Once again thank you so much for the question. And I'm really glad that you brought up the Pillars for Life, the suicide prevention plan that the Ministry of Health has been working on. And I want to thank Member Vermette for the work that he has done and the awareness that he brings from his communities and his voice in this House. And I truly do believe that as we move forward with this plan, that that is exactly the input that we listen to as we move forward.

Now we're lucky to have Minister Kaeding, the Minister of Rural and Remote Health, as the lead on this. And as you'll be fully aware, Minister Kaeding is the former Government Relations minister and the former minister for First Nations, Métis and Northern Affairs.

So as GR would have input in this, we have our inter-ministerial working group. So we support other ministries and initiatives that move forward and give input on that type of stuff. And so in their core business we would give input on pieces that would be of importance to them. We inform them on policies that they need to make that may affect different avenues within the First Nation, Métis portfolios.

One of the things that Minister Kaeding has mentioned is some

of the consultation that happened as they were working on this plan. He did have talks with the Métis Nation-Saskatchewan. He also talked with FSIN in their consultations as they were developing this plan. So through all of those avenues, there was input.

Mr. Meili: — Thank you very much. I'm going to bring forward some questions raised with me by Mr. Errol Eashappie. I'm not sure if you've run into him before. He's the president of the Aboriginal Skilled Workers Association. He's reached out to me expressing his concerns with systemic racism in hiring in Saskatchewan.

So I'm just going to sort of stack a couple of questions here so you're able to knock them off all at once. But has the minister heard of the ASWA [Aboriginal Skilled Workers Association]? What does the minister believe the government should do to increase Indigenous participation in the workplace? And one of Mr. Eashappie's concerns is that even with the training available, many businesses pass over qualified Indigenous workers who then end up on social assistance or in worse circumstances. Is there any role for the government to work with an organization like the Aboriginal Skilled Workers Association to help develop a plan for greater Indigenous participation in the workplace?

Hon. Ms. Carr: — Okay. So the Aboriginal Skilled Workers Association, you asked me if I had heard of them before, and I have not heard of them before. So an organization like this, we're more than happy to work with these organizations. Having said that, this is really work that would take place out of TED [Trade and Export Development] or ICT [Immigration and Career Training], so that's Trade Export Development or Immigration, Careers, and Training. So they would be dealing with associations like this to do the work side of things, not necessarily my ministry. So we'd be more than happy to put them in contact with these ministries so that they can move forward if they're not already within those ministries.

I guess one thing I would touch on in this vein is I am aware that the Saskatchewan Chamber of Commerce has rolled out a program with organizations, companies throughout the province of Saskatchewan, and they've actually signed memorandums of agreement with these companies to do some training and to hire a certain percentage. I don't know the details within the plan, but it is to engage First Nation, Métis people for them to be able to work within their organizations, so actively make that a piece of their core business.

And I know that the day I went to that ceremony, SaskPower was at it. So we're working on that within government also through some of our Crown corporations. So I'm really pleased to see that type of work happening as far as First Nations employment goes. Specifically to ASWA, I'm not aware of them, but I'd be more than happy to put them in touch with TED if that is the wish.

Mr. Meili: — Thank you very much. I received a letter today forwarded to me . . . well, I guess some correspondence between the Minister of the Environment and the Métis Nation of Saskatchewan and also Minister Morgan. But I think it's of relevance to your ministry, Minister.

The letter, and I'll just quote from President Glen McCallum here, who writes:

Minister Duncan's letter confirmed that Saskatchewan avoids consulting with the Métis Nation of Saskatchewan and refuses to consider impacts to Métis land rights. It invoked the 2010 consultation policy as somehow justifying Saskatchewan's failure to meet its constitutional obligations to consult and to act honourably when engaging with Indigenous people.

He described Minister Duncan's 2020 letter as a clear and painful reminder of the colonial, institutional, and structural obstacles faced by Métis people. The letter also requested an apology for that letter by the 30th of June.

So the questions related to this. One, was the minister aware of this letter and the rationale behind Minister Duncan's response and whether an apology will be received, how the government will proceed in response to Mr. McCallum's letter?

And then a related question. I do hear frequent concerns from First Nations and Métis leaders that Crown land is often being sold, and they don't believe they're receiving an opportunity to be the first purchaser of that land. So along with the response to that letter, I guess I'd like to hear how this government is ensuring that any Crown land that is sold, the First Nations have the first right of refusal to be able to purchase that land prior to it going on the market.

Hon. Ms. Carr: — I'm just wondering if you could table that letter so I could have a look at it.

Mr. Meili: — Yes, happy to.

Hon. Ms. Carr: — It's pretty tough for me to address something that I haven't even seen.

Mr. Meili: — The question was whether you'd seen it, so I guess the answer is no. So, happy to table these letters. And the rest of the question?

Hon. Ms. Carr: — I guess I would just add that regarding the letter and the answers to the questions regarding the letter, those would really be questions best posed to the Minister of Environment or whoever was supposed to answer those. Since I haven't seen the letter, clearly I don't know that they've been answered, but probably better posed to that ministry that made those comments as opposed to my ministry.

[15:45]

Mr. Meili: — Yes, so I guess as we discussed, there's a really important role for your ministry in managing those relationships. You've got a situation where your government is not following through as they should on responsibilities in any part of the government. It's actually pretty important that your ministry be aware — a little surprising that you're not aware of the letter — and be working to facilitate those relationships.

Again the question, the question of Crown land and both the consultation on its use as well as the offer, first offer of purchase, is one to which I would be happy to have an answer. We know we've got a break prior to phase 2 of committee today. Perhaps you'll have time to review the letter before then.

Hon. Ms. Carr: — Okay, so I guess just first of all, I'm going to speak to the letter that was just handed me that you've tabled. Obviously I will take some time and I will read over the concerns that Mr. McCallum has. I do note that the date on the letter is June 11th, 2020, so most recently sent to us. And I will ensure that, I guess, Minister Morgan, who this is addressed to, not Minister Duncan even though he refers to a letter from Minister Duncan that . . .

Mr. Meili: — That letter's included as well, the letter from Minister Duncan.

Hon. Ms. Carr: — Yes, the letter from 2010 that he's looking for answers on 10 years later. Okay. No, I'll absolutely make sure that they have this letter and that it gets addressed.

Mr. Meili: — May 1st, 2020, Minister.

Hon. Ms. Carr: — Yes.

Mr. Meili: — May 1st, 2020 is the letter from Minister Duncan, just to be clear.

Hon. Ms. Carr: — Okay. Oh, fair enough. Yes. I read 01 and thought 10. My dyslexia coming in. No, fair enough. I think we'll work on this together and see what the answer is, and we'll move forward from that on this letter. More than happy to do that.

Regarding Crown land sales, so the Government of Saskatchewan continues to make Crown land sales available for sale to First Nations under treaty land entitlements and specific claim agreements. First Nations that have entered into treaty land entitlements and specific claim agreements can request to purchase Crown lands at any time. First Nations can also participate in Crown land sales outside of TLE [treaty land entitlement] or specific claim agreements. So specifically with those Crown land sales, the majority of that is done through the Ministry of Agriculture. The Ministry of Agriculture is fully aware of the first right of refusal or the first offer to purchase.

Concerns that have been put forward, our ministry has been in discussion with the Ministry of Agriculture. Right now it's on a willing seller, willing buyer basis that that is done. But once again, this does go through the Ministry of Agriculture so they could maybe expand on that a little bit more than I can.

But as I said, the government continues to make Crown lands available for sale to First Nations under treaty land entitlements and specific claim agreements.

Mr. Meili: — Thank you very much. A question for you that was shared with me from a First Nations leader in the province who really wanted to know. A 10-year-old girl ended her life in Makwa Sahgaiehcan last November. This is one of many suicides we've experienced with young, young people. And we know that the experts have reviewed the Pillars for Life plan and found it inadequate to save lives. It's described as a travesty.

Yes, on Friday the member from Cumberland, Mr. Vermette, introduced a bill for a suicide prevention strategy. I've commented on the choice of the Premier to not support that, but I wonder if the minister, being the minister in charge of First Nations and Métis Relations, obviously having many

relationships with the communities affected, could explain to me why she chose not to support that bill?

The Chair: — While the officials confer, I would announce that the document Mr. Meili has tabled is IAJ 12-28, Correspondence between Métis Nation Saskatchewan and the Minister of Environment, IAJ 12-28.

Hon. Ms. Carr: — Okay. So I guess I'll just start off by giving my condolences to the family of the young girl who took her life, and of course to all families that have lost anybody to suicide.

So my first comment is going to be that we are here to discuss the budget of the province of Saskatchewan, and this is not a budget question. This question is more appropriate for the floor of the legislature, to be asked across the floor, not in a committee like this. Having said that, we do have the Pillars for Life strategy, the suicide prevention strategy that has been put forward.

Not everybody is going to agree on the path that we may use, whether it be in the plan that Mr. Vermette brought forward in his bill or whether it be the Pillars for Life, but I support the plan that is being brought forward by the province of Saskatchewan, and that plan is called Pillars for Life. And we will work through that and we will work with all people of the province of Saskatchewan to try and ensure that suicide does not happen unnecessarily.

One of the things I can tell you about the province of Saskatchewan or the Government of Saskatchewan concerning the high rates of suicide in the North is the Ministry of Government Relations is collaborating with partners across multiple jurisdictions to support and develop a community-based solution and strategy, and this is called Embracing Life initiative. It's a call for action to reduce suicide by sharing the strengths of communities and partners and working together through health promotion and suicide prevention, intervention, and postvention. The Ministry of Government Relations provides secretariat support and strategic coordination to the 19-member Embracing Life initiative.

Mr. Meili: — Thank you, Minister. In a previous question around systemic racism, you talked about the emphasis on reconciliation. Obviously when we talk about systemic racism in Saskatchewan, that's a key element. Can you tell me how many of the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission this government has committed to, how many they're acting on? So which 34 — they've said 34 — which 34 they believe are the ones directed at the provincial government and which are they acting on and which are they not?

Hon. Ms. Carr: — Great, thank you very much for the question again. Of the Calls to Action, you referenced the 34. We are actually actively doing 26 of them. And of those 26, they fall into several different ministries and categories: child welfare, education, education and reconciliation, health, justice, missing children, National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation, sports and reconciliation. And the exact numbers are 1, 2, 3, 5, 12, 18, 22, 23, 26, 30, 31, 33, 34, 36, 38, 40, 57, 62, 63, 64, 75, 76, 77, 87, 88, and 90.

[16:00]

And I'd also like to mention that there are actually 14 other Calls to Action that are directed at different levels of government. And we're working on those 14 with those other levels of government.

Mr. Meili: — So the legislature unanimously passed a resolution on November 24th of 2016 calling on the province to implement all of the Calls to Action that are within the jurisdiction of the provincial government. Now I hear that you have chosen to act on 26 of 34.

Why isn't the government following through on the other ones? What are the obstacles there? Why are you not following through on the direction from that unanimous vote?

Hon. Ms. Carr: — Once again thank you very much for the question. So as you can appreciate, truth and reconciliation will take time, so the 26 of the 34 show the work completed and the commitment that we already have to truth and reconciliation. Of the eight remaining, we continue to try and understand and work towards the commitment that we have to those eight.

Mr. Meili: — Could you list the eight that are remaining just so that I know which those are?

Hon. Ms. Carr: — I think it's fair we can table that. I don't think we have that in front of us. Yes, we'll table that.

Mr. Meili: — Okay. So one of the things that is missing here is any formal reporting structure to make sure that we're able to track this. And this is a series of questions that I think we've had to come back and ask a few years running in committee, where the Premier committed on March 15, 2018 to providing a formal report to the Assembly on the government's progress on the Calls to Action. So why hasn't there been any formal reporting on the progress, and when will we see a plan to report progress on those Calls to Action as the Premier promised?

Hon. Ms. Carr: — Okay, so I guess just in answer to your last question, which eight are we still working towards: 42, 43, 47, 52, 55, 71, 77, and 82.

So regarding the Calls to Action and how we track these items, we do track these items. Last year in estimates it was actually asked for by you, and we tabled it for you. So I'm not sure what happened to that, but we do have an updated version that we would be more than happy to table for you so you can see where we are at on that now.

Mr. Meili: — Sorry, it's a bit of a joke, right? It lists it and then says yes or no. That's not really reporting any progress. We need to see more than just yes or no, action is being taken. We need to know what actions, what the timeline is as of . . . Certainly we need something more than that.

Hon. Ms. Carr: — Well, Mr. Meili, what I have in front of me is not a bit of a joke. There is nothing about this that is funny. We're talking about the Calls to Action for truth and reconciliation, and I take it very seriously. And the document that I see in front of me definitely is not a yes or no document. So I'd be more than happy to table this for you.

Mr. Meili: — Please, because all I have is yeses or nos, which really isn't adequate when it comes to whether any action is being

taken.

From the minister's own experience with this file and the recommendations, what does she think is the recommendation that is most important for the Government of Saskatchewan to be acting on now? And where are we on that one?

Hon. Ms. Carr: — I think all of the recommendations that are put forward are . . . a good portion of them are wholly important. To pick one out more important over the other one would not be fair to the Calls to Action to single one out. So I think as we work through this process and we work through the recommendations that are of provincial importance, to pick one over the other is not fair to those Calls to Action, and I won't be doing that.

Mr. Meili: — So okay. Again we don't have anything that indicates the progress thus far with any detail. Does the government have a timeline for when they plan to implement all the Calls to Action, when the ones that are currently under way will be implemented, when they will start working on the remaining?

Hon. Ms. Carr: — Thank you for the question, Mr. Meili. This is a work-in-progress, and as I mentioned, we had 34 Calls to Action. We are completed and continue work with the 26 and we will be working on the remaining eight considerations as we move forward. And we'll do that in the due course of the work that we work on as we move forward. And a set date hasn't been in mind. We just work on them continually.

Mr. Meili: — Okay, so you don't know when any of these will be completed or begun, the ones that haven't been begun. Do you know when you'll be presenting a report as promised by the Premier on March 15, 2018?

Hon. Ms. Carr: — Right now I think we're tabling a report for you that gives detail on the actions that have been done.

Mr. Meili: — One of the Calls to Action that hasn't been acted on or started any action on and is in the list that you provided of those eight that aren't being moved on, is the recommendation that a public monument to residential schools be built in each provincial capital city.

I was thinking back to — pardon me for pointing him out, but — standing with Mr. D'Autremont outside the war memorial in November and both looking for family members there. And how meaningful it is to have those names.

We have monuments to land surveyors, to Catholic sisters who've worked as schoolteachers. There's a lot of monuments in our parks. This seems like not that heavy of a lift. Why is this one on the list of things that have not been chosen to be acted on, and what's in the way there?

Hon. Ms. Carr: — Okay. Well thank you very much for the question. So as I said, we continue to work on the remaining eight. This is obviously one of those, and something that you're talking about is likely a pretty big undertaking. But we continue to work with the First Nation and Métis members to find the best way to continue to recognize our Indigenous partners.

I would like to add that Saskatchewan recognizes First Nations

and Métis people with other symbols in the provincial legislature. In 2006 the First Nations mace runner and beaver pelt cushion were placed in the Legislative Assembly, something that you look at just about every day. And in 2010 the Métis sash was added, along with the proclamation for 2010 to be the Year of the Métis in Saskatchewan.

[16:15]

Mr. Meili: — Has the minister read the 94 Calls to Action of the TRC [Truth and Reconciliation Commission]?

Hon. Ms. Carr: — Yes.

Mr. Meili: — Okay, great. It's odd to me that there would be one that's such a clear action — you know, it's not particularly complicated in terms of starting a process — that we're now several years into this. And you know November 24th, 2016 was some time ago and there's not even a yes, we've begun the conversation. Why the back burner for this one in particular?

Hon. Ms. Carr: — I think, as I've already mentioned, that as we work through all of these Calls to Action, we're working on them; we're enacting them. We continue to commit to continuing work with ones that we've already completed. This is one of those ones that we are getting to and proper consultation will need to be done. I don't think it's just as easy as just throwing up a monument and not having full consultation on all of that. So there's a lot of work that has been done. There is a lot of work that we will continue to do and this will be one of them.

Mr. Meili: — Thank you, Minister. Now obviously it would have to be done with consultation, but that's a step that you would know how to begin. So I would encourage you to do so. I think that's important. I encourage you in your role to look at all of these.

And I do want to thank — I'm going to pass over to Mr. Vermette for the rest of the questions and Mr. Belanger will be joining as well — I want to thank the officials for answering my questions today and thank you, Minister. And I would just put in that these recommendations are really important and encourage the minister to consider this not as something that needs to be requested and tabled, but an annual report that would allow us to move forward on these recommendations in the light of day. Thank you very much.

The Chair: — Mr. Vermette, I assume you have some questions?

Mr. Vermette: — Yes, I do, Mr. Chair. Thank you. To the minister and officials, it's good to see you here. I hope we will get some answers we're looking for. I know many of our northern community members are looking for some answers, our leaders and stuff.

So I guess I'll start out with staffing. And for me, when it comes to the office, I've always said we have to have a stand-alone office. I think it was important that at some point we've talked over the years about having a ministry that has a dedicated minister with staffing and funds. I think that's important. I know I've pressured our leader on this side, should that ever happen where the good people of this province say, you know, it's time for change, if that ever happens, we're dedicated and I have a

commitment to that. So that's good.

In saying that, staffing — and I look at the obvious — because over time, I know over the years we have lost staff and the dedicated staff to the North for cuts and different reasons. And we'll go back and forth and we might have disagreements that that's happening or doesn't happen. But can you give me just how our staffing is in Northern Affairs? And I'm talking about I guess the office in northern Saskatchewan, and I think that's where you have your main office. So if you can give me some ideas just on staffing, to start there, I would just like to have an update, seeing if there's been any changes. Maybe you hired an extra 100 and I'll be happy.

Hon. Ms. Carr: — Okay. Well thank you very much for the question. So within our First Nation, Métis and Northern Affairs we actually have six staff located in La Ronge and two located in Regina.

And then we also have our Northern municipal relations branch, and within that branch we have a total of 13 employees. There are 11 in La Ronge, one in Buffalo Narrows, and one in Regina. And this is exactly the same staff complement that we had last year.

Mr. Vermette: — Okay, so the new hires that I was hoping you were going to announce didn't happen then.

Anyway, going on to my next question, Mr. Chair. I know over the years we've had programs that our fishermen have utilized, our entrepreneurs in the North have utilized. There's many different programs I guess, funds that were available at one time and have been cut. Has there been any change from last year to this year in programs?

And I guess why I say that, I know sometimes programs come and go, and just sometimes there's time for change. I understand that, and I think sometimes if you consult with our fishermen, our northern leaders, they'll give you good ideas where if you're going to stop or cancel a program, before you do that you consult with them.

And I want to see if you've done any work with our northern leaders, First Nations, Métis, I guess municipal leaders to say to them, you know, we're looking at changes here. I'm just looking if you've made any changes, have you reached out? And if not, I guess I'll let you answer those questions. And I think it's mainly with funding and programs, and see where we go from there.

I'll just give it to you because I know you going to go back there, and I don't want you, you know . . . The doctor, the Leader of the Opposition was willing to give you exercise. I don't want to give you as much. So I'll put a few of those questions together.

Hon. Ms. Carr: — Okay so thank you very much for the question, and I am happy to report that we have had no program or service cuts to the budget.

I would also like to add that we have started the MEEP [municipal economic enhancement program] program. So in the North it will be adding \$2.6 million across the municipalities. And this program is designed for them to be able to apply for projects that they want to do, capital-type projects that they might

normally do. So they can apply for this money and it will go directly to the municipalities for them to be able to do some additional work.

Of course the municipal revenue sharing for this year, depending on the size of the community, some of them may have already got it in one tranche. But for those that didn't, we advanced all of that so they could have it in advance. Given the nature of COVID-19 and the possibility of people being a little bit late with paying their taxes and stuff, this money will help bridge that gap for them as they move forward.

Also I think it's important to note that it's just not the Ministry of Government Relations that actually funds. Additional budget highlights that go to First Nation, Métis, and northern areas is a \$5.4 million increase to third party Indigenous service providers, a \$1.16 million increase for First Nations on-reserve policing and enhanced policing. We have \$134,000 increase for the First Nations University of Canada, Saskatchewan Indian Institute of Technologies and the Gabriel Dumont Institute and the Dumont Technical Institute; \$100,000 increase for the Métis Addictions Council of Saskatchewan; and an \$80,000 increase to the Aboriginal court worker program.

So I guess as we've already talked about here, this ministry kind of goes across all ministries to a certain extent. So I'm happy to let you know that there have been lots of areas where we have continued and increased the funding.

Mr. Vermette: — So I guess your role as a ministry and a minister is to advocate, I think when I look at it, for northern individuals, organizations with ministries, to advocate for programs and, I guess, services that our northern people need and rely on.

And I think that there's many areas where our northern people are feeling like they're not being heard by government. And I've heard some leaders frustrated. I've heard elders concerned. I've heard families who've lost loved ones concerned about northern Saskatchewan.

And I've always said this and will continue to say, we need a minister who understands the northern issues, who understands the people. Whether it's our trappers, our fishermen, the way of life, the culture, you have to have a minister who understands that. You have to have staff who — and I hope, you know — truly understand the challenges that northern people face.

And I've said this before. I've said it many, many times that the minister that's responsible for Northern Affairs, northern people has a very important role. And I know the Leader of the Opposition today in committee earlier asked you some questions about your role as a minister and understanding the challenges that our First Nations, our Métis people, our northern people, are having.

And sometimes I hear the leaders. And I hear, like I said, the elders and the community members, and those feeling the challenge. They're frustrated and wondering, well where's the government in all of this? How come they're not responding? How come they're not coming forward? How come they're not doing certain things?

[16:30]

And I always go back to me, and we talk about it because we always think about New North. And we talk about our First Nations, our Métis leaders and what they see in the vision they want. And you know, I've heard you say you're reaching out to talk to them, to consult with them. Yet I have another picture of that, that I'm hearing another side to that, that there's frustration. There's some hurt.

So I will ask you . . . Your role within the ministries and government, do you have some examples of how you advocate for and know the issues; who you've consulted with to make sure that you're bringing those issues forward; what you've heard from the leaders, the northern people, First Nations, Métis; and how you advocate with all the ministries to make sure the services in the North doesn't feel like they're forgotten?

And our young people feel like there is no hope. So there's many challenges. And you know, I've always said this where I wish, you know, we would have an office that is dedicated, a minister dedicated to understand . . . than somebody that maybe doesn't understand the challenges that are going on.

But I put a lot in there because I feel like it's going to go back and forth. So I'll just leave it at that and maybe let you try to answer, you know, the question as best you can.

Hon. Ms. Carr: — Okay. Well thank you very much for the question. So as I had mentioned earlier, my role is to engage with First Nation, Métis, and northern partners to plan and respond for the opportunities and the challenges so that we can all be part of the growth in Saskatchewan. So I work with my colleagues to provide leadership and direction so that our response is integrated and well understood.

This includes engaging with First Nations, FSIN, and tribal councils, Métis Nation-Saskatchewan, and their leadership, as well as northern municipal leaders. It begins with relationships so I've been forging those relationships, I feel, very effectively over the past few months. I can't speak for what has happened in the past. I can only speak for what has happened since I've had the opportunity to fill this chair.

And over the past few months I've worked very, very closely with northern municipalities and northern leaders. Right within the municipal sector, just over the past three and a half months, we've had 32 meetings. Now granted they're not the meetings that we're used to. We're not talking face to face. And I truly look forward to the opportunity, when that time comes, that I can actually meet some of these leaders because I think they've done a tremendous job, yeomen's work for the communities that they are in. So I cannot wait to meet some of them.

So I've had five calls with Bruce Fidler, the president of New North. You mentioned that association and that's a very important association for the municipalities that span across the NSAD [northern Saskatchewan administration district]. I've had seven meetings with all of the northern mayors. I've had one meeting with the northwest leadership group; two meetings with the Turnor Lake mayor; 11 calls with Robert St.Pierre. And obviously with what has happened in La Loche you can understand why I have had so many, many conversations with

him of late. I've had calls with the mayor of La Ronge, calls with Stony Rapids, Pinehouse. So those are the mayors that I have met with.

I've also had over 37 meetings with Indigenous leaders throughout the north and some further south. I've had meetings with Bobby Cameron and other FSIN chiefs, eight meetings of late; one meeting with Chief Francis Iron; one meeting with Chief Edmund Bellegarde; one meeting with Glen McCallum; six meetings with the Meadow Lake Tribal Council; three with Tribal Chief Richard Ben; seven meetings with the Prince Albert Grand Council; three with Grand Chief Brian Hardlotte; four calls with Chief Teddy Clark; one meeting with Jerry Bernard; and one meeting with Leonard Montgrand.

So I've had several meetings, conversations. And so when you talk about me understanding, I'm starting to get a very, very strong understanding and a message from these leaders and what is important to them in the North.

And you specifically ask, what is it that I'm advocating for in the North? So you're fully aware of the gaming agreement that we have with the FSIN within the province of Saskatchewan. So with the closure of the casinos and as a result of the pandemic, casino net profits were expected to be zero or almost zero on a net basis for the entire year. So the impact of that on funding through the gaming framework agreement and other governing authorities, we decided that would be pretty detrimental to those communities.

And you talk about the supports that we do for those communities. So while I was talking with . . . several of those meetings that I just told you about, they stressed to me the importance of the money that flows through that gaming agreement and how it goes to the 74 First Nations reserves within the province of Saskatchewan, the Clarence Campeau Development Fund, and other initiatives. They talked very strongly about how it was really important.

So had I just left things go . . . And in conjunction with Saskatchewan Liquor and Gaming, obviously because they're the signatory of this agreement, and other ministries and with the work of my colleagues, had we just let this go and if I had not advocated, there would have been zero funds available, very close to zero funds available.

And I went forward and I fought very hard to get funding for these First Nations communities, funding that's important for the social programs that they provide off-reserve to ensure that people get the services that they still need instead of having to go that one year without any funds available to them.

So the funding will allow these organizations to continue the good work at the community levels that they have done in the areas of social and economic development, educational and health programming, as well as senior and youth programs, just to name a few. So I think you can see that I am working very closely with organizations. I'm listening to what they are telling me and I'm advocating on their behalf.

Mr. Vermette: — Thank you for the comments and answering some of the questions. I guess I'll go back home then. Of all the meetings and all the areas that you guys have addressed, we'll

probably have no more problems then because you've been out there doing everything that needs to be done. So I shouldn't be having any more concerns from our chiefs, our mayors, our northern leaders because of the great work you've been doing.

Having said that, you know, I know there's still challenges out there. And you can talk about dollars put into certain programs that have lost funding because of COVID, and that's fine. Like any other time, any of us would say thank you when government does something and it helps a community organization when it comes to funding if they're losing their funding.

But I guess we'll have a difference of opinion on some of the challenges that I hear, some of the concerns that have been expressed to me from the North. So maybe I'll go back home and things will, like I said, won't be as challenging, which I don't think that's going to happen. But anyway, I'll go back and . . . you know.

Having those meetings and those discussions, whether they're, you know, on the phone or in person . . . yes, like you list off a lot of meetings. Out of all those meetings that you had, phone calls, like I mean you list off so many. Like you made it sound like in the short period of three months, you said you really reached out because of COVID and all that. And you know, I have to recognize that. That's very important and that's good. You need to do that. You have to make sure that you're talking with the leaders.

Because when I talk to them on phone calls, the calls that I was on with leaders, there was frustration from government not responding. And I guess, you know, whether it's your own self or your ministry, I don't know. They were just saying government. They weren't getting a response. And I do know later on you did have some phone calls and I heard that was starting. So yes, and I want to give you some credit in some ways that yes, you know, you're trying your best to understand. Whether you will or not, time will tell.

And I'm curious, of all those meetings, and I was sitting there as you were listing them off, in my mind thinking how many of those meetings, leaders, organizations that you met, New North . . . I don't know if you met with any school divisions in those calls, if they were on some of your conference calls. Mayors, First Nation, Métis leaders, our elders, senators, grand councils, FSIN. There's quite a list.

How many of those, and were there any of them that asked you as a minister for First Nations, Métis, for northern community members, how many of them asked you not to support a suicide strategy bill for the province? How many of those leaders? How many? And if they did could you please identify and let us know which ones told you they did not want a suicide . . . I'm just curious to see if you had any conversation about all that, because you were having a dialogue. Because you know the bill was there.

The Chair: — Excuse me, Mr. Vermette. Can you tie this question into your budget and how it pertains to the budget? And bring this back to the budget because I'm having trouble wrapping my mind around how that particular vote has anything to do with budget.

Mr. Vermette: — So I guess with any of the resources that were used to talk with all those leaders — and as I said to you, you said you talked with a lot of them — would the dollars that are being allocated for the North, would any of those dollars help with any types of help for people needing addictions counselling, mental health, suicide . . . Would any of those dollars have been utilized?

[16:45]

And did anybody that you've met with and have met with from the North, have they asked you not to put any of those dollars, have they asked you not to help in any way? A suicide strategy, a support advocate? Is there anyone has asked you not to? I guess with those dollars . . . As the Chair, I respect he said keep it within the flow of dollars coming in, so I'll put it that way to you if that helps.

Hon. Ms. Carr: — Okay. So thank you very much for the question. I guess first of all I just want to start off with your comments where you seem to be twisting my words about the consultations and the conversations I've been having with people in the North. By no stretch of the imagination did I tell you that things were going to be perfect when you go home. As you and I both know, things are not perfect and there's always work that will need to be done. And I'm there to help and I'm there to work with my partners as we move forward.

So you asked specifically about the dollars used around suicide within this funding that has been coming forward. I guess I would point you, first of all, to the Pillars for Life plan that's within Rural and Remote Health and the funding that happens within that program and how that's going to be funded moving forward with the actions that take place. And that plan is not just for people in one area of the province; it's for people within the entire province. And that is why I support the Pillars for Life plan, the suicide prevention plan for the province of Saskatchewan, for all people of the province of Saskatchewan.

As I worked with some of the community leaders, First Nations leaders, we're building that relationship to be able to have those conversations. And they're letting me know what's important and what types of things we can take forward and advocate for. And that's my relationship that I'm building with them currently. So right now through the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Rural and Remote Health, and the Pillars for Life, I'm not sure what funding is over there for that plan but that is where that will fall.

Mr. Vermette: — Okay, thank you for that. I guess with your ministry and your role when it comes to First Nations, Métis and Northern Affairs, you talk about a government's program with pillars, you talk about. Have you consulted with any experts? I'll say a name, Jack Hicks. Have you consulted as being the Minister Responsible for First Nations and Métis? And have you reached out knowing that, you know, we have such a crisis going on when it comes to suicides within the Indigenous communities, the North, and I know the rest of the province, as I've said?

Have any of the dollars from your ministry . . . Have you reached out and will you be reaching out to any experts when it comes to dealing with First Nations and Métis citizens when it comes to suicide, some of the experts that are out there? Are you utilizing

any of . . . How will you be advocating for, I guess, a suicide plan, a suicide bill? Just a crisis going on when we look at it. So with all your contacts that you have and you're making, I'm assuming you're talking, and hopefully you guys are talking, about some of the challenges that are facing our youth, our Indigenous youth.

So I guess I'm curious to see how you've heard the issues, the challenges, and if you've had any dialogue with some of the leaders about the suicide and how you advocated that, and what dollars have been used. Again I go back to that. Have you helped with the plan? Being that your role, especially being that First Nation, Métis relations as a minister you're responsible for, with the challenges we see in Indigenous and the rate of suicide amongst our children, our youth. So I'm just curious to see your role and what part you've advocated, or didn't — I guess we'll see — didn't advocate. I guess I'll wait to hear you answer.

Hon. Ms. Carr: — Thank you very much for the question. And first of all, I'd like to point you once again to the gaming agreement and advocating for the money to continue to flow through the FSIN and disseminated to the different reserves and other programming that is available. I also know that off the top they give money to the mental health and addictions rehabilitation program, but that amount is actually determined by the FSIN, so they will determine how much will go into that program. And, of course, with mental health and addictions, that'll help address suicides to some extent. So that money will flow through there through the gaming agreement.

We also have, as I had mentioned earlier, the Embracing Life. The collaboration among 19 provincial and federal agencies has coordinated a social media platform and awareness campaign. The initiative, supported by Government Relations, is using Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter to collate tips and information to support suicide prevention and mental health. And I'm told by my officials that this Embracing Life collaboration has a great number of youth that are getting involved within this, and I think that's really an important factor to make out. So through Government Relations, we are using that Embracing Life program to engage youth and get them while they're young.

[17:00]

And specifically regarding the Pillars for Life and developing the plan and who I worked with, the plan was developed by the Ministry of Health and so it was through the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Rural and Remote Health, that that plan was developed. And so that would be a question that's probably more appropriate to be asked of that minister. He would be able to give you an answer to that.

And then one other thing I just want to note is the Mental Health Commission of Canada just recently is quoted as saying:

We are pleased that the Pillars for Life is structured around the same five pillars of MHCC's Roots of Hope, a community suicide prevention project which is built upon community expertise, as well as national and international best practices. The five-pillar plan provides an adaptable starting point for the province to address identified needs and aligns with the work already being done by community leaders in the three Roots of Hope Saskatchewan

communities in La Ronge, Meadow Lake, and Buffalo Narrows.

So that is from the Mental Health Commission of Canada endorsing the Pillars for Life plan, the suicide prevention plan that we have put forward, that the Minister of Rural and Remote Health has put forward.

The Chair: — Being the hour is now 5 o'clock and you have fully answered your question, Minister, we will take a recess until 6 p.m.

[The committee recessed from 17:01 until 17:58.]

The Chair: — Good evening. Welcome back everybody. To start off, the Ministry of Government Relations has a document to table. It's IAJ 13-28, Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action directed at the province of Saskatchewan, actions taken.

Mr. Vermette, I believe you have more questions.

[18:00]

Mr. Vermette: — Yes, sure. I guess after a break going over . . . I had talked about and you had finished up, trying to back and forth about individuals your ministry and yourself had tried to reach out to, consult with. We both have our opinions of that process. And you know, I'll leave it at that for now.

What I would like to say is if you want to really do some consulting work for the North and for municipalities and our First Nations, our Métis people, I'm going to ask you to do that on their behalf. And I'm thinking about some of the challenges. Maybe you have some dollars in there where you could work with certain ministries to assist them with making sure we have access to cell service. Maybe there's ways to lobby with SaskTel.

And I'll give you a couple of examples. There's probably letters going to be going on and already have been sent. But we have a small community of Hall Lake. It's a reserve with La Ronge Indian Band. They would sure like some support. I'll give you a heads-up. The chief and council are trying to support Hall Lake with getting cell service. Unfortunately it's a small community. Sometimes, you know, I just like advocating myself when it's mentioned to me that the community needs that. I've been in the community many times and you don't have cell service. It's starting to get a good population. And I think we've seen upgrades, SaskTel's upgraded Sucker River. So there's been work there. So if you could advocate with your ministry with SaskTel to try to get Hall Lake cell service, I think they would honestly appreciate that. So consult with SaskTel on the First Nations' behalf, and I think that would be a good gesture saying, here's some good work.

Also, just while I'm on SaskTel, we have a road 106 from Smeaton to Creighton. Along that highway there is no cell service. And we've had many challenges now that STC's [Saskatchewan Transportation Company] gone, and unfortunately communities rely, people rely on trying to get services there. And I know some are trying to backfill for medical appointments and everything else. There have been challenges with that.

But having said that, should you break down, should you have a . . . And we had this; somebody contacted me. A young family with a young mother, single mother with children broke down. And there's no way to — and it is about safety — there's no way to . . . And I'm not saying and I think they're not asking that you put towers up all the way. But you could almost roll out a process to say, well this year we might put one or two towers, you know, and move on to three, whatever they can afford and say is feasible to do. So people know that if in a crisis, an emergency, they can get to that tower, at least they would have cell service to make a phone call for emergencies.

And that road has, you know, a lot of traffic on there for tourists, for medical appointments, industry. There's different business entrepreneurs going up and down. Just an idea. So if you could maybe, when you're advocating for Northern Affairs stuff, that would be something with the ministries I would like to suggest you could maybe advocate for. So that's a positive side. It doesn't always have to be the negative side of it. But if you could do that, that would be much appreciated.

Now with all the challenges that we have in northern Saskatchewan, I say that I want to thank the leaders: our mayors, our municipal leaders, our First Nations, our Métis leaders. You know, they do a great job. I think about COVID-19, and I think about the great job many of them did. Unfortunately they didn't have a lot of supports, but they took it upon themselves to take care and try to keep their communities safe, the residents safe as best they could with limited resources, you know, that were coming in. And I know we'll have more to say about this later on.

But I just want to thank the leaders, the local leaders, and the community members. Those are the heroes that face . . . And I know there's been calls back and forth. And I think we were on one call with you; the member from Athabasca and myself were trying to relay some of the frustrations that we were hearing so that you would, you know, hopefully hear and respond. And we'll leave it at that. I mean, we sometimes agree on things. Sometimes we're going to disagree, and I'm okay with that. That's the process.

But I do know when it comes to safety and it comes to making sure of a clear message, communication to our mayors, our First Nation leaders, it's crucial and it has to be. And I think your ministry could play an important role and should play an important role to make sure communications is happening.

And I don't mind giving credit where credit is due. I don't ever have a problem with doing that. So those areas where we've heard that people had good communications, that's great.

But there were many challenges and frustrations when I was on telephone conferences with the leaders, the mayors, First Nations leaders. So I think there's work to be done. And you say there's always more work to be done. I want to reassure you, you have some work to do out there with the communications part of it.

And we know that we're not done with COVID. Everyone's nervous and they're waiting to see, you know, what the next phase will be. I don't know what dollars you'll put . . . And I know you made an announcement after a push, and we had called for about \$10 million, as opposition and northern leaders asking

for \$10 million for COVID to deal with the crisis and the challenges. Whether it's food security, there's many challenges that our municipalities were faced with.

And you know, for those families that lost loved ones I want to, you know, put them in our thoughts and prayers and let them know that we do see and can try to understand the troubles and the loss they're going through. Some of us have been faced with loss.

But having said that there, you gave 370 instead of 10 million from your ministry. You announced, I believe 20,000 of that 370 went to one community, La Loche, to initially start. Can you tell me who decided where the other 350 . . . I know, I believe it was New North was going to have some capacity to look at people applying. So do you know where you're at? Are any of those dollars left? And are they coming out of this year's budget or will the dollars . . . Where do they come from? So if you can give me a little background information, I'd appreciate that.

Hon. Ms. Carr: — Okay, well thank you very much for the question. So, you're correct. It was the \$370,000 that you referenced, and \$20,000 was shaved off the top of that and went directly to the community of La Loche. Given the outbreak that they had there and the demands on their resources immediately and the money that they expended right out of the gate before we got up and moving with our remaining funding, we decided that \$20,000 could go to the community of La Loche to help out with the expenditures that they had already spent in their community.

So the \$350,000 that is left is money that actually went to New North, and New North has that money already. We gave the \$350,000 to them and it was specifically for checkstops. Those checkstops were designed for education and enforcement. So we already knew, in discussions that I had with some of the leaders in the North already, they had let me know that they had received some funding from the Métis Nation. The Métis Nation was helping out with checkstops, and they were putting some money into it, so they asked if we could put some funding into it.

So we came up with the \$350,000 amount and the money is application based. So any community that decides they want to put up a checkstop or is going to have expenditures regarding a checkstop, they can apply for that money, submit the bills, and we will cover 50 per cent of those costs. And the idea behind the 50 per cent was the fact that the communities were putting in funds for the checkstops they already had, the Métis Nation was putting in funds, and so we thought that as a good partner that that was something that we should take part in. So we thought we would start with the \$350,000 and see where it went from there.

To date, applications have been made and cheques have been sent out to communities in the amount of 135,437. So roughly left in that fund will be about \$215,000.

So there is still money left available for checkstops if they were necessary in the future. Or maybe there are still applications coming in that people just haven't applied for reimbursement. That money is still available if they need to be doing that. So that is exactly how that went. And yes, it is included in our budget this year.

Mr. Vermette: — And not the 10 million? Having said that, I

know that there was a lot of partners and federal, provincial. As you say, you came later with some dollars. I know the municipalities were doing what they needed to do and some of them were struggling to keep up with it, food security. And we've talked about this. There was many challenges that they were being faced with as municipalities and extra costs were, you know, came to the municipalities.

At the end of the day, I don't know. Once they look at their budgets, and as you said I think earlier, if I remember correctly, you said some of the dollars that the municipalities, their grants and stuff that they were . . . They've already received those and some of them might have used them up, and some of them may have not. I don't know if I got that right. Maybe you can clarify that after just to make sure that I'm right.

So are you hearing that, and have you heard yet, are there challenges for the municipalities? If they utilize those dollars for helping them get through this, you know, COVID as best they could for the first wave of it and if the second one. What kind of plan do you have with the municipalities? Because they're going to need more than ever. And I hope we don't have to have us having a press conference with the leader of the opposition putting out and, you know, begging for dollars for municipalities to help the people that they're trying to protect.

They are the local heroes. I talk about our mayors and our councils. I talk about our chiefs and councils, your Métis leaders. Everyone, you know, come out and they did their part for their communities. And some of the struggles we heard that they felt . . . Like municipalities, the mayors felt like they were going to the table. Everyone else seem to have money from the federal government to help out but they were the ones . . . They were frustrated that they had no resources. And some of the smaller communities had next to nothing for resources and were saying, we need this.

I know we're going to get into this more later on, but I'm just hoping that within this budget hopefully you've allocated for that, that you're looking at this, should and when we are hit with a second wave that those municipalities will have.

[18:15]

And to limit the 370, I guess 350 of what was left to save strictly for roadblocks, does that kind of tie the hands of New North? Did you think about that at all? Or was it just that you seen that that was the need at the time that was asked for and that's where you allocated the dollars, rather than allowing the municipalities to apply for it and you know, utilize the dollars to strictly work with COVID-19 and not use it any other way? Was that not something that you guys could have said, well let's work with the municipalities to make sure they utilize these dollars, but you know, tie them to COVID-19 and trying to save?

I'll see what you have to say with that, and then we'll go onto the next questions.

The Chair: — Minister, the floor is yours.

Hon. Ms. Carr: — Thank you. I was just waiting for them to finish their conversation.

A Member: — Patiently.

Hon. Ms. Carr: — Patiently. So thank you very much for the question, and I'm glad that you asked. You know, all of the resources that we spent throughout the province with the pandemic and COVID-19 has been fairly extensive. And even though we only put \$350,000 into New North that went specifically for people to apply for, for checkpoints, we extended millions of dollars in resources to the North for trying to bend the curve and ensure that the spread did not go any further than it did.

So I'm going to be calling Marlo up to actually address this specifically as to all of the resources that were spent and how they were spent, but just because we don't write a cheque doesn't mean we're not contributing. We contributed with supplies. We contributed with resources in human services, whether that be at checkpoints or at EOCs [emergency operations centre], but I'm just going to pass it over to the president of the Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency, Marlo Pritchard, so that he can address that fully for you.

Mr. Pritchard: — Good evening, sir. Marlo Pritchard, president of the Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency. Again, thank you very much for the question. As you are aware, it was a lot of work that our agency did specifically to the North or with the North in regards to addressing the COVID breakouts and increasing public safety. So I'm just going to go down the list, and if you have follow-up questions, by all means.

We initially responded to, of course, the increased risk to communities in the North with the breakout of the COVID-19. We embedded our staff, our SPSA [Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency] staff with the northwest incident command. We had individuals working with Rick Laliberte and his leadership, and I do, like you, I want to comment on the true heroes of the North. They impressed me continuously throughout the process and throughout the response.

We had ESOs, which are our emergency services officers, go up to La Loche and work with that community and help train and build capacity within the community and on their EOC. And when I went up there, I have to again commend the work that the local staff are doing for their community — amazing amount of work.

We also leased a number of RVs [recreational vehicle], 16 to be exact. They were utilized for self-isolation trailers for northern communities and were designed to move around from community to community. We currently have 11 still in La Loche. I'm sorry, I can't tell you how many are being used today, but they have been utilized throughout the last number of months for individuals that needed to be self-isolated.

We have again utilized SPSA staff with our type 1 and type 2 firefighters at the checkpoints, which are basically community members, individuals that speak the local language, were able to address some of the local concerns.

We also increased our communication, both with local leaderships and with the community checkpoints, making sure that the messaging was consistent, the interpretations were consistent. So if somebody was travelling through the North, our goal was that it didn't matter if you went to a community

checkstop or through one of our government checkstops, you were getting treated the same way with the same messaging. It took us a while to get there, but we did get there eventually.

We supplied a lot of PPE [personal protective equipment] to the northern communities. Again, ISC [Indigenous Services Canada] assisted, but also through SPSA purchases and donated items we got a lot of PPE up to the North. We also delivered cleaning supplies and cots, both to Buffalo Narrows, La Loche for increased cleaning of houses and that. Our staff worked in those communities to assist with that.

And to date, we invested approximately \$4.3 million through SPSA into the northern communities to help local community leadership combat COVID-19 and again, increase public safety for all.

Hon. Ms. Carr: — So I guess as you can see, the resources were extensive. And if you can imagine that what we're talking about right here are just the resources in the North that were spent by the Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency. It doesn't include all of the staff and the people that were up there from Health and the extensive work they did with the communities to help with the contact tracing and the actual testing and working with the health facilities.

So, as I said, even though it wasn't a cheque that was wrote, the money was spent on resources.

Mr. Vermette: — Okay. And I understand that there's some that I know did a great job on both sides wherever people . . . and I'm not going to take away from that.

But the communications, I have to be honest, at the roadblocks . . . Learn from this, and hopefully we do learn from this, that people have the same message. And people understand what a public health order is and what it isn't. And people who are at the checkstops will have different interpretations, and sometimes that caused a lot of problems, miscommunication. And that shouldn't happen. That shouldn't be the way it is.

People should be allowed, you know, to go through if it's within the public health order and making it very clear. I mean if I'm having my own interpretation of an order, then obviously we have a communications problem, I would say. I'll leave it at that because I know my colleague has quite a bit of questions he may want to ask in that area later on. We'll see what happens.

I guess I've got two areas that I want to suggest to you. And as I asked you to advocate for some of the northern issues, and I think about with SaskTel. The internet in La Ronge, the tri-community, La Ronge Indian Band, Air Ronge . . . We have probably one of the 14th populated regions in the province, so we're about 14 on the list with our population together as a tri-community. And our internet services, to be honest with you, is lacking.

We own SaskTel. The people own it. They want to keep it. And they would like to have a good service for internet, high-speed internet. And I can be honest with you. Whether you're working from home, kids trying to get an education, it's very challenging with what they're being put through.

It already was, you know, having challenges and the upgrades

need to happen. I mean, we've got a petition in from leaders. People are doing all they can. I've served the position in the House to government, hoping to understand.

But maybe you could talk to the minister of SaskTel and advocate, saying this is important. We're talking about technology today, jobs, everything else, would give opportunities. So I think people would be, you know, ask you as the minister and your officials if you could work with SaskTel and advocate for high-speed internet, better service in our tri-community. It is a large population, so I'll leave it at that area for now.

And well maybe you'll make some comments on it. Actually why don't I allow you that? I'm curious to see what you're going to be able to do for us.

Hon. Ms. Carr: — Well as you know, the Minister of SaskTel is a very difficult man.

Mr. Vermette: — We think alike sometimes.

Hon. Ms. Carr: — I know. No, all joking aside, those are the types of things that we want to hear, the stuff that truly affects you and the things that are high on the priority list.

So I will go speak to the Minister of SaskTel and see what the plans are. Are you in the plans? And where do you fit, and how can we get you there? So I will have that discussion with him.

Mr. Vermette: — Okay, I appreciate that. The last one that I'll suggest to you. And within your budget and maybe you can . . . you'll probably find this in your budget. Because I know you guys are finding money, so maybe you can find this money.

The tri-communities have issued a petition as well but almost an ask, and they're trying to do what they can for safety. We have a highway that goes . . . Highway No. 2. Once you get to La Ronge, it goes north — it's 102 — through the tri-communities. It goes through the band, Air Ronge, then it goes to the band, and it goes into La Ronge.

So from we'll say Far Reserve Road where, you know, it starts when you get into the community from the South, you have a highway where we have quite a bit of traffic, big trucks hauling in to the mines. You know, the speed of it. Some are very concerned about it, safety. We've had quite a few accidents, people killed walking along because traffic is busy.

They're trying to find ways, and maybe you could talk with some of, you know, the ministries to advocate for the group. And they have a group going. They've done a petition; they've sent letters to the municipalities saying . . . And I think they're sending out letters to whoever will listen and try to advocate with them. It's about safety.

And what they would like to see is have a paved, well-lit . . . some benches along there, when you go from Far Reserve Road right to the Co-op Marketplace. So you'd have quite a, you know, area that goes through our tri-communities with a highway that's putting people and kids . . . We've had meetings and parents don't even want their kids riding their bikes along the highway to school because they're scared they're going to get hit.

So if we could get a paved walkway, working together. Not only would it do for health and give people a chance to bike and community members to have a place that's safe along the side of the highway and not on the shoulder of the highway. That would be something for the kids could go to school back and forth riding their bikes. You could have people exercising, you know, for their health. There's many . . .

The other thing some of them have said, you know what, Doyle, we talk about, you know, lowering the carbon emissions that we have. And that's another way they said. So they talk about all these areas and very positive. And the youth have come in a group. And I've been to some of the meetings just to hear them out. And it amazes me, the ideas they have.

[18:30]

So I would ask that you maybe advocate. And I can connect you with some of them that maybe you could advocate to certain ministries to see if there's some way. Even SGI [Saskatchewan Government Insurance], whoever, Highways, whoever, to say is there . . . Parks, you know. Is there ways to work with them to get this walkway that would be safe for kids? And I'll be honest. We've had quite a few, you know, distracted driving, impaired driving, and people killed along this stretch of highway. So if there's anything you could do, that would be appreciated, to advocate for northern people.

I could sit here and complain and tell you all the things that I think you're not doing, but I'm one that tries to work in a positive way and give credit where credit is due but also to be able to say when, you know, you're doing wrong and it isn't helping the people. And sometimes, some of the challenges, I wish I could say to you, please talk to your leader. Talk to your colleagues and do something when it comes to northern children. As I said earlier with the petition, the suicide prevention strategy would be so important.

But with that, I know my colleague has more words he will say and he articulates very well. I'm not as gifted. So with that I'll just say, Mr. Chair, I'll wait for the response and maybe you'll respond how you're going to get some of these things I've asked you to advocate as the northern minister. So we'll see what you come up with. Thank you.

Hon. Ms. Carr: — Well thank you very much for your question. And as I mentioned in my previous answer, thank you for bringing those concerns forward. I have had the opportunity to drive up there and see that exact stretch of road between those communities that you talk about, and it can be very challenging. So I would be interested to see what has already been presented, probably to Highways, with regards to that because I know that the conversations were starting to take place when I was in Highways just less than a year ago. So I'll follow up and just see where we're at.

Mr. Vermette: — Okay, and if you'd cc me your letters, that would be nice.

The Chair: — I see that Mr. Belanger has joined us and I'm guessing he has some questions for the minister.

Mr. Belanger: — Yes, that's a very safe guess that I do have a

number of questions for the minister. And I'll start off with the question, is it fair to assume that as the minister responsible for, well, a wide variety of portfolios but in particular municipalities, that you were more or less appointed the lead minister as it pertains to the COVID-19 challenge in northern Saskatchewan? Because I think you were on a number of calls and that you basically were the minister that handled most of the media and discussions with the northern leadership. Is it fair to assume that you were appointed lead minister for this file?

Hon. Ms. Carr: — Okay, so thank you very much for the question, and I think I'd like to emphasize that this truly was a team effort. This is a group of individuals and leaders on both municipal sides and government side that actually made this all work, so definitely a team effort.

I think maybe given the nature of my portfolio and the duties that I'm assigned within my portfolio . . . Because I'm with Government Relations, so cities, towns, villages, RMs [rural municipality] all fall under my responsibility. First Nation, Métis, Northern Affairs, so all of those communities fall under my responsibility.

I guess regarding the communication with them, I was that central person that they knew that they could call because of the ongoing dialogue I had, and having those initial conversations and reaching out to each and every one of the municipal leaders, whether they be in the North or whether they be in the South. I did have that contact with all of them and all of the associations, whether that be SUMA [Saskatchewan Urban Municipalities Association], SARM [Saskatchewan Association of Rural Municipalities], or New North. And so they knew that they could . . . that I was, I guess, the point person as far as that kind of stuff goes.

But truly as soon as the health order was put in place and restrictions happened, once again because of the nature of our agency, the Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency, they played a huge role in working with the EOCs, the emergency operation centres within the communities. They played a very large role in helping with the checkstops on education and enforcement.

So just by the nature of that portfolio, a lot of those questions, concerns, suggestions would come through myself. But truly, Dr. Shahab, Minister Reiter, Minister Kaeding, Minister Harrison's shop. We had the opportunity to set up a 1-855 number, and a combination of people from our shop and Trade and Export Development in helping, I guess, triage all of those calls was really important and could not have been done without a team effort.

And I definitely have to mention the leadership of our Premier, Premier Moe, throughout this entire COVID-19, which is not over yet, which is continuing on, the leadership that he has brought forward. So Premier Moe has a team of ministers that work in their individual portfolios and a lot of times those portfolios overlap and we work together, and so it was a team effort.

Mr. Belanger: — Well, Madam Minister, I'm hardly convinced that this team effort that you spoke about was there at all. I'm not convinced in the least bit that there was a team effort.

I'm here to tell the story of how COVID-19 impacted our communities. Now notwithstanding the help of the public safety effort — and we'll make some comments about some of the positive work that was done in that regard — we're talking about the pre-intervention of the public safety effort to contain the virus within our area. And I can point out that from my perspective of being locked down 10 weeks in my own community, in my region that was hardest hit by COVID-19, that the voices of the people of that area need to be heard.

There was no leadership, Madam Minister, from your government. And the only minister that was available to the North and to people in conference calls — sparingly I might add — was you. And so the whole notion of commending your Premier and a number of ministers that you alluded to, they were not to be found anywhere when this pandemic arrived in our community, the first few cases.

Now we were privy to a number of conference calls and telephone calls from worried people. Now as the MLA [Member of the Legislative Assembly] . . . People often will call the chief or the mayor or a councillor or the MLA, and sometimes they'll call the MP [Member of Parliament] to try and find some answers to questions that are distressing them, their communities, and their family. So you do 10 weeks of that and you can see where the frustration of some of my questions and comments will really come to the floor today in the short time frame that I have.

I've mentioned on the media on numerous occasions, on numerous occasions, that had it not been for the local leadership in these communities we would have had an incredible crisis when it came to COVID-19, because the province was nowhere to be found. Now after the fact, the public health safety commission came in, and we had some good comments about their activity. There were some challenges — we'll identify them as well — but by and large there was a lot of co-operation afforded to our regional incident command centre.

So let me do the scenario that I saw and we envisioned. We obviously, in the middle of March, we shut down the Assembly for the issues around, safety around COVID-19. You're aware of that; you were in the Assembly that day. And as legislators, we said, well, this COVID-19 is a major health issue; we need to shut down this Assembly. And there was a lot of panic and worry throughout the ranks of both parties, worrying a sense of how extensive has the COVID-19 impacted our towns. How much infiltration of our families has this COVID-19 . . . really has been entrenched in terms of future challenges. And there's genuine worry in this Assembly. We sensed it as a caucus, and we saw it within the government ranks.

Now the question that we had at the time, or I had at the time, was in the midst of that, we wouldn't be foolish enough to not admit that the government had planned a snap election. We know that there was debates within cabinet as to whether we should proceed with a snap election or not. There were those that wanted a snap election within your ranks, and I would maybe suggest a third of them. The other two-thirds were really worried about the pandemic issue. And basically those that had the wish to have a snap election were getting their way, but to have a snap election in the middle of a pandemic was absolute nonsense. And you and I know that was the plan over there.

So the question I have, prior to ourselves walking away from the Assembly on March 15, middle of March, give or take a few days, how long ago were you aware or members of your cabinet were aware of the incredible threat of COVID-19? Would you say in late, latter part of January, or the earlier part of February was when cabinet became aware of the real threat of COVID-19, that it wasn't a perceived threat anymore? Could you give me a timeline as to when you first heard of the COVID-19 threat to our population, even if you were to give me a very ballpark estimate of what time frame? Was it late February, early March? Any time frame would be very helpful.

[18:45]

The Chair: — Before the minister answers, I just want to make a point that although we allow a broad discussion when it comes to our budget, we are here for budget deliberations. I would like to see you somehow tie this to our budget discussion tonight.

Hon. Ms. Carr: — Okay, so just on the question that you asked, obviously we as government were watching this evolve, as were everybody, but specifically to when the risk increased, that question truly is for the Ministry of Health and when they feel that that day was. I don't know that answer.

Mr. Belanger: — Well as the lead minister, which I assume you are, and as per the notion around the budget, we understood as legislators that March 15th, that the crisis had hit us full, in full-blown manner. There was — and I want to confirm this with the Minister of Health — but this issue around COVID-19 supposedly had been raised with the national ministers of Health a number of weeks before we convened the Legislative Assembly or interrupted the Legislative Assembly process. And I think that knowledge of the coronavirus, or COVID-19, was probably available to the cabinet a lot further than anyone else, including the opposition. And as a member of cabinet, I would assume that you'd be privy to that information and that particular issue.

And I have said to the media on numerous occasions, as a representative from the northern part of the province, that nobody's blaming the Saskatchewan Party government for COVID-19. We've never said that. Nor I think it as foolish enough . . . that'd be foolish of us to say that. But where we judge the Sask Party's performance is around how you handle COVID-19. That's where the rubber hits the road, so to speak. And time after time, Madam Minister, the performance of this particular government has been an utter failure. The 300-and-some thousand-dollar budget item that you spoke about was just a drop in a bucket of what is required to really deal with the issue around COVID-19.

Now as COVID entered our communities, prior to that, Madam Minister — and we have news releases and articles that substantiate what I'm saying — when the COVID-19 issue surfaced as a real and legitimate threat to the safety of all the people of Saskatchewan including the North, northern people and the northern leaders reacted instantaneously, where local mayors and local chiefs put a local emergency measures operation in place; each of the communities. And they did it as best they can given the resources they have and the knowledge that they understood they had to be able to do the local emergency measures declaration.

Mayors and chiefs and many times chairpersons of the smaller settlements of the North, they were on their own. They had to figure this out. And this happened before March 15th. They knew there was a significant threat coming down the pipe. And how they knew the significant threat was happening was just through media coverage. That's how they basically found out.

And when the Assembly dispersed, the members of this Assembly dispersed to go back home, I was one of them, of course, dispersed to go back home to find out what's going on. And we find that the mayors and the chiefs of each of these communities moved very quickly. They established emergency measures declaration. They advised the public through their radio and TV stations. They told people exactly what the medical health professionals were telling people to respond to the COVID-19. And there was not one cabinet minister from the Saskatchewan Party government that was front and centre to try and help this problem along. Not one. And as a result of that, they had to figure this out on their own. But when the smoke cleared for the local preparedness in terms of trying to protect their people, they quickly realized, as any organization in any region would, that we have to have a regional effort as well.

And that's when we also got involved as a MLA, and we contacted Rick Laliberte — who's a well-known guy in our area, former MP, had great communication skills, was a good writer, and had good connections with many people in that area — to see if he'd come and help us out, create a North West Incident Command Centre, of which Mr. Laliberte agreed. He left his employment to come and work for the region.

The mayors donated the northwest communities office staff which included two people. They said they would volunteer their two people to work in this northwest communities — which is really a forestry operation and a resource development operation — to act as their regional incident command centre. So the mayors established their own local organizations and prepared locally. Then they moved, with our help, to create a regional incident command centre because it makes sense.

And then they wanted to lock down these towns. They wanted to lock out COVID. They wanted to lock out COVID. And we could not. The mayors and the chiefs wanted to shut down the liquor stores in the regions because they wanted to make sure that liquor sales, liquor intoxication wasn't an issue when it came to public safety, that people were really making good decisions around the purchase and consumption of alcohol. They were told no by the province, absolutely not. And then we asked for more PPE, personal protective equipment, at which the province was a no-show again.

And in order to secure our communities, we wanted to lock down our communities. We were told we have no authority to do so — can't shut down highways to these municipalities. And yet First Nations were doing that. So many of the municipal leaders said, well we want to do that too. Well we were told no, you're going to have a big fine each day if you block highways. Then both the First Nations and Métis communities wanted to shut down liquor stores, and they were told no. We needed more PPE for our communities to protect those that are our front-line defence corps — if you want to use that phrase — and again, no help from the province.

So then we turn around and as two northern MLAs, we had a telephone conversation with you, conference call. And we said, Madam Minister, we need money to secure our communities because it costs money to man these checkpoints. As insignificant as you may think checkpoints are, it allowed our local people to check who was coming in and who was going out. And we did this before Dr. Shahab made his declaration from a public health perspective. Many communities moved a lot faster and further than that, and that cost a lot of money.

And when we explained, or I tried to explain to you on that conference call the whole issue around how pressing this matter was, you can recall our conversation. The response you gave me was one word — you said, noted. That was your response. And that's where, you know, that's where the frustration through this whole exercise came from.

And I reiterate, Madam Minister, that it was the local leadership, the volunteer base, and those people that rose to the occasion right now. They understood the incredible challenge around COVID-19. They done this alone. And many of these northern communities use a lot of their own resources. They're tapped out after a month of paying for the perimeter security, the information getting to the public, helping people with food security — like the list went on and on and on. And after a few weeks, the communities were tapped out. That's when we came and asked you for help, to help these northern communities, and you offered the \$300,000 budget. There's your budget matter, Mr. Chair. That budget matter of 310,000, I would dare say one First Nations community spent that probably within a month of pandemic shutdown.

So why were these northern communities and leaders doing all that, Madam Minister? What was their objective? Their objective was very clear: to stop COVID from coming into our communities. They did not want COVID into their communities. And did we have the authority to shut down these roads to our communities? No. Municipalities didn't have that authority. Did we have, did the First Nations have authority? I think they had better authority, but I'm not certain that they had the authority to shut down a provincial road. But access to their First Nations bands, I'm assuming they have that authority because they are more federally regulated than provincially.

But the whole objective of the whole area was to shut down access to our communities so COVID doesn't come into our towns. And then as we collaborate and talk, and sometimes those conference calls were six or seven hours, people had so much to say about how to do this best. And they're all trying to contribute. They're all moving in the right direction.

[19:00]

And there's a number of suggestions as to where COVID eventually came in to our communities. The two primary sources are northern Alberta oil camps where people from La Loche worked. That was one of the suggested sources of the infection, as these workers went to work. And I won't get specifically into what work camp, they returned to La Loche unchecked, and there's no checkstops and the disease arrived through that route. Other people say it was through the health care professionals coming to work in our community, which would be unfair, because a lot of them we needed them badly. But those, you

know, to be absolutely clear, those were some of the considerations as to where we got some of the exposure from. Now I'm of the view that the source came from the northern Alberta oil camp, oil-site work camp.

So after we went through this exercise of trying to get these things figured out with no help, towns are being tapped out, different rules for First Nations and different rules for the Métis or the municipal governments, no leadership from the province, we finally have to lean on senior organizations like the Prince Albert Grand Council under the guidance of Vice-Chief Tsannie. We had to see the Meadow Lake Tribal Council for their help to try and figure out what they could do. And where they finally got some resources, both the Métis Nation and the First Nations, was through the federal government.

They finally afforded, the federal government finally afforded some help to these organizations, whom I referred to during those conference calls as big brothers or big sisters. But they're there with their strength and organization and lobbying effort to help the smaller northern communities and the Indian bands. And this was all before Shahab put in the public health order to shut us down. So we tried our darndest, Madam Minister, to stop COVID from coming in. And with no resources and no help, we lost that battle.

We got the first hit in Southend. Southend quickly dealt with that. We got our second hit in Stony Rapids. Stony Rapids quickly dealt with that. And then we got another hit in La Loche, and another hit in Beauval, and another hit in Patuanak, and it just flourished from there.

Now the desperation behind these northern leaders, Madam Minister, both the First Nations and Métis, they understood three principles as to why they acted so fast. And I explained all that. I talked quite thoroughly in all our conversations. And when we sat there with them, the leadership said three things.

Number one is we live in a remote part of the province. We live a long ways away from most of the population. So that has its unique challenges as well.

The second aspect we were dealing with was the fact that we didn't enjoy services as, say a Saskatoon and a Regina close by. We're quite a distance away. And in fact we've done a measurement of what the difference is between La Loche and your home community of Weyburn. And for the record it's over 11 . . .

Hon. Ms. Carr: — It's Estevan.

Mr. Belanger: — Oh Estevan, sorry. It's over 1100 kilometre difference. Over 1100 kilometre difference. That's a significant gap. And I want to get into that a bit later.

So, we're remote, we don't enjoy the services, but the third most compelling argument and the reason why the leadership was so desperate at the time was we live in close quarters of each other. There's overcrowding going on in these homes. Many young children are in these homes. And we all know that social distancing for young kids, it's impossible to have them understand that. But the leadership understood this.

So the reason I'm doing all of this tonight, Madam Minister, is I'm trying to ensure that you understand being from such a distance away, from Estevan to where La Loche is, that there are significant differences in lifestyle. And we tried to explain that in that conference call with you that those were the three issues that leadership was really pushing. And we still didn't get you to understand that. You still would not accept the fact that there's different ways of doing business in the different parts of our province. It's a huge, vast province.

So my point being is, when we asked you for resources of \$10 million, you say we'll give you 300,000. One band council, Madam Minister, for one reserve may have spent that 300,000 for one issue of food in one month. \$300,000 is not going to get us anywhere. So the question I would have for you is, of that \$300,000 contribution that you made, how many communities applied for it? Which ones got any money? And how much did they receive?

Hon. Ms. Carr: — Okay well, I'd just like to take the opportunity to thank the member for the lengthy question and commentary. I guess first of all I'll just touch on the phone call I had with both of yourselves that day where you had asked for the \$10 million. And I believe by the end of the phone call, I don't recall which one, but one of you had negotiated it down to \$5 million will do, if I recall correctly. I have the minutes of it, so I believe that's what was said.

And on that note, I would like to say that there's \$350,000 that we put forward for the New North to administer checkstop money for the communities in the NSAD. And I will have Brad Henry speak to those specifically. You asked for the communities, how much they got. He's going to address that. But I would note that our president, Marlo Pritchard, already spoke to the money that was spent in the North, and it was just over \$4 million.

And of that \$4 million, it went towards PPE. It went towards helping out the EOC, training. It went towards trailers that were supplied for the North for people to self-isolate. We supplied cleaning kits. We supplied cots. There were housing units up there that were used for staffing and self-isolation, and we furnished those so that people could actually use those units. So that was just over 4 million.

And that does not include the MEEP money that the NSAD is going to be able to have available to them to help kick-start their economies after the fact and get projects on the go, in the amount of \$2.6 million, which is specifically for the NSAD. So that fulfills your ask of \$5 million right there.

And so now I'm going to first turn it over to Brad Henry to talk about the \$350,000 and how it was allocated. And when he's done, I'm going to ask the president of the Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency to come up. You had an opportunity to talk about the North West Incident Command in your comments and he would just like to make some comments regarding that. So I will have Brad Henry come up.

Mr. Henry: — Hi. Brad Henry, executive director of northern municipal services. There was 11 grants issued to 11 communities, totalling \$135,437. And those amounts and those communities are: Beauval received 15,000; Patuanak received

\$5,828; Buffalo Narrows received 15,000; Pinehouse received 15,000; Ile-a-la-Crosse received 15,000; Stony Rapids received 7,400; Michel Village received 15,000; Cole Bay received 15,000; La Loche received 6,579; and Jans Bay received 10,630. An application has been approved for 15,000 for Pelican Narrows and the cheque is in the mail.

Mr. Pritchard: — Thank you. I'm Marlo Pritchard, president of the Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency. As I indicated earlier, we were embedded in the North West Incident Command right off the start. Mr. Rick Laliberte did reach out to us and we embedded Phane Ray right off the start, and we had other individuals from our agency embedded and working with those communities, working with issues that were raised around checkpoints, communities needing to move.

[19:15]

You know, we worked closely with the North West Incident Command, local community leadership in getting individuals out of the NSAD for funerals, compassionate reasons. We worked with First Nations communities around essential goods, arranging so that they could get clearly and easily through checkpoints. But again that communication and building that relationship within that Incident Command was crucial so that we had concerns raised back and forth.

And I can tell you a lot of those stories were — again through Rick Laliberte's crew, even phone calls to myself — where we worked with local communities to address issues that were raised, whether it was around essential goods, lack of transportation. I can tell you, you know, of a CO [conservation officer] that heard of a shortage in a community of a family that couldn't get their dietary food. He took it upon himself to go to Meadow Lake, purchased it on his own credit card, and delivered it up there.

We arranged with, again through the North West Incident Command and our SPSA staff, to arrange delivery between families. Families would go to checkpoints, the other family would come and meet it there, and we helped coordinate and work with that, with those families and those communities. So we did all we could to alleviate a very difficult situation through the North West Incident Command and our embedded staff that was in there. So thank you, sir.

Mr. Belanger: — Yes, I would point out that, just for the record, it's important to note from my perspective, I think, Mr. Pritchard and his role in terms of public safety, basically came there to clean up the mess left behind by the inaction of the provincial government. That's my view. When he got there, he was behind the eight ball and I want to point out that there was a lot of extra work that was required, a lot of reaching out because it is a huge undertaking.

But the fact of the matter, had we resolved these issues prior to Mr. Pritchard coming and cleaning up the mess that was left behind because of the outbreak and because of Dr. Shahab's public health order, there would have been a lot less problems had we taken the advice of the leadership at the outset.

Now that being said, there was a lot of heartwarming stories of people that reached above and beyond what was required in all

communities, and of course the public safety commission as well.

But that being said, this 135,000 that was allocated of the original 300-and-some thousand that you committed, did that money come from the northern revenue-sharing trust account or the northern municipalities account of any sort? Did it come from their own northern municipal sources? Or did it come from the provincial General Revenue Fund?

Hon. Ms. Carr: — Okay, so in answer to your question, the answer is yes, it came out of the NMTA [Northern Municipal Trust Account]. And so a good portion of the funds that are in this pool of money do come from the provincial government in one way, shape, or form. So we felt that it was an appropriate use of funds for this purpose, specifically for the North.

Mr. Belanger: — So in essence there's two points I want to make. So you committed \$300,000. And my colleague and I want to know where you come up with this \$5 million conversation . . . reduction that you alluded to earlier.

But before we get to that, from my perspective, Madam Minister, the \$300,000 you committed in this budget came from the northern revenue-sharing trust account as you've just explained. And for the public out there, the northern revenue-sharing trust account — and correct me if I'm wrong, Madam Minister — it is a collection of revenues from all sources of land leases in the North.

Like for example if there's a mine site that takes a certain amount of land for their actual mine site, they pay property taxes or a lease fee, and that lease fee goes into the northern revenue-sharing trust account, which in turn is the basis for the North to access for capital needs, such as water and sewer or heavy equipment to manage their communities. So that money's dedicated to that particular purpose and it's derived from those sources of revenues — as I mentioned, land leases for mining companies or private leases in the North. So everybody pays into this northern revenue-sharing account that has leases in the North, and that's how the account is built.

So you took that northern money to put it into this COVID response of \$300,000 and you had 135,000 uptake in that. So the North basically paid for their own COVID response, of which you made \$300,000 commitment on behalf of the government of Saskatchewan.

So you would expect . . . That I'm taking what you've said to us earlier, that one of us in our conversation dropped this \$10 million suggestion to 5 million. I don't know how you do your math, Madam Minister, but your \$300,000 contribution that you alluded to actually came from the North. It didn't come from the provincial coffers. This is a northern revenue-sharing trust account that companies that lease land pay into for the benefit of the North. So you took it from that fund to give back to the northerners.

And not only that, Madam Minister, but La Loche was the hardest-hit town. The chief and the mayor of those communities had all the pressure on them, plus the health professionals, plus the volunteers that were out there helping the community through this pandemic. They got hit hard. And what did they get allocated from their own money? Six thousand dollars. Six thousand bucks

was what I understood the member saying.

So I guess I would question, Madam Minister, how in the heck do you get from \$10 million from our original request down to 5 million, and then saying, oh we put 300,000 there? But you didn't put that in. That came from the northern revenue-sharing trust account. So that's why, you see why the frustration and anger from northern residents are very clear. Because not only have you . . . You did not rise to the occasion of leadership. When we needed you guys the most, you were not around. You were not around. And when we asked, okay, if you don't want to be around, then at least give us the resources to deal with this matter. You didn't give us the resources. In fact you gave us a paltry amount from our own sources. That's what you did.

And if you'd look at the challenges around COVID-19, which were clearly identified by the northern leaders, it didn't faze you at all. You didn't seem to get the urgency behind the northern leaders' points. And then when we tried to stop COVID from coming in, Madam Minister, when we tried to stop COVID coming in, you did not adhere nor listen to some of the plights of many of the northern leaders and the requests from northern leaders. You simply ignored them. And that is a real shame. That, in my opinion, is a vacuum of leadership.

Now when the crisis hits, that's where you tell the true nature and true test of leadership. And I can tell you, sitting there as a northern MLA and watching how these leaders tried their darndest to keep COVID from coming in . . . And after COVID came in, after our communities became inundated with COVID-19 — and I think there's six deaths attributed to the northern part of Saskatchewan — that's when Shahab issued that public health order to lock down the whole North. And after it hit our communities, the government put these roadblocks in place. And as I mentioned, Mr. Pritchard and company had to clean up the mess.

Now we come along here and we asked the Premier, who did you consult to shut down the North? And he said, northern leaders. We said, which one? Who? We never got a response from him. The media asked, who did you talk to? There was no response. Because the fact of the matter is, we're a throwaway region for your government. And I say that because after COVID ravaged our community . . . And I can do the correlation if people want to understand how badly the impact of COVID-19 was.

If you look at Saskatoon . . . La Loche had 160 positive hits — just the community because the First Nations had hits as well — but as a general community, 160 hits. That translates into about 15,000 to 17,000 hits in Saskatoon if one were to do the per capita comparison. So if Saskatoon had 15 to 17,000 positive COVID hits, you would see this government respond accordingly. Well that's the extent of impact that the northern community of La Loche and the Clearwater River Dene Nation had on their local shoulders. The health professionals, the mayor-in-council, the chief-in-council, the volunteer organizations, the Métis Nation local leadership, the area director of the Métis Nation, they had that weight on their shoulders. So imagine as a minister you had to deal with 15 to 17,000 cases of COVID-19 in Saskatoon. Again, that's the extent of the impact of those positive hits in La Loche.

So after we get these hits in our northern communities despite

our best efforts to stop it from coming north, despite our best efforts to stop it from coming north with no help from the province when the — can't use that word in this Assembly — but when the blank hits the fan, Madam Minister, we knew we were in deep trouble, that it was going to be problematic and we needed help.

And what did we have to do, my colleague and I from Cumberland, along with our leader? We had to initiate a press conference where we asked the government, send in the team. Not the same team you sent in when we lost all those jobs in the mining companies. You called them the rapid response team at the time. But that's what we needed. We needed a rapid response team to deal with the crisis in La Loche and Clearwater.

[19:30]

And it took a concerted effort by the northern leaders, the media, and us having a press release telling you to send people in to help stop this disease. And it was only after that that your government finally got the message. But then the problem occurred when you locked in the North, when the Premier said, we're locking down northern Saskatchewan. So we're saying, all this time we're trying to stop it from coming in and no help. All this time we're asking for resources to deal with it if it hits, because as Mayor St.Pierre said on numerous conference calls, it's not an issue of if you're going to get COVID-19 in a community, it's a question of when. And his message resonated with a lot of communities and that's why they acted so quickly. So when we got hit with COVID-19, we had to force your government to help us out, just through the media cycle. Like I don't know why you didn't get it that there was a significant problem.

And that's why I do the correlation on a per capita basis to Saskatoon. If Saskatoon had 15 to 17,000 hits of COVID within a two- or three-week time period, you would see your government react and respond. Well the same thing happened in La Loche — 160 people got positive tests in that community. And there was no response; instead the Premier comes along and says, we're locking down the North. We're locking down the North. Well after it came to our community you're going to lock it in? With no resources? What was the message behind that? And who did he speak to?

So you can see why northerners have kind of had enough of believing that this government is going to deal with some of these issues. And the reason why I'm explaining all this to you, Madam Minister, is you need to know from our perspective how paltry and how insulting the lack of effort was at the initial phases of trying to protect their communities against COVID-19. And to top it all off, the lousy \$300,000 you put in front came from our own sources, of which only half was uptaken, and the biggest town that got hit by COVID-19, La Loche, got 6,000 bucks. And that is where the frustration came from, through the media and through the leaders.

Now as I said, there's no way that these small northern communities could meet this challenge together. I give full marks to PAGC [Prince Albert Grand Council]. They came along and they helped the far North. Had it not been for Vice-Chief Tsannie and the Prince Albert Grand Council's effort to protect the Athabasca Basin, they would have been standing alone. The Athabasca Basin would have been standing alone.

Meadow Lake Tribal Council co-operated with the Métis Nation of Saskatchewan. They secured a \$2.8 million or \$2.6 million allocation from the federal government, and that allocation practically came overnight. And that helped them deal with food security issues in these northern communities, because as soon as you put the health order of lockdown — essential travel only, medical appointments only — and as Mr. Pritchard pointed as well, he wanted to make sure that there wasn't travel in and out of our communities unnecessarily.

And that makes sense. We're not arguing with that. But when it comes to food security, another issue we face, Madam Minister, was the rule that says that if you can't find food security in your local community, you can go to the next town. And if you can't find the food you need, you can go to the following town.

Well if you're in La Loche, I'll give you an example of a few people that explained this predicament to me. They said, well we didn't have enough food in La Loche. We couldn't get what we needed for our family because we need food for our families. It's the biggest town in our region. So they travel to Buffalo. Well they get to Buffalo. Buffalo Narrows is locked down because Buffalo Narrows doesn't want any COVID cases in their town. So the next town is Ile-a-la-Crosse. Well, Ile-a-la-Crosse is locked down because they don't want COVID-19 in their town. So they go to the next town which is Beauval, where there's a big general store. Well that was the source of an outbreak as well, so they couldn't stop there. So onward to Meadow Lake to get to the Green Lake checkstop, and they get turned around, saying sorry, you can't go shopping.

Now there are some inconsistencies between what was being said for essential services and medical issues. But there was some good and timely intervention by the public safety commission personnel that ensured that this wasn't going to be a common occurrence, that there was some misunderstanding and that got resolved. So I give them credit for that.

But if you're from La Loche and you travel all through that process, look for essential goods like food, and you get to all those towns that are locked down, then you get to the Green Lake checkstop and they're saying sorry, we're not letting you through because Meadow Lake doesn't want COVID-19. So where do they go to get gas to get back home because every other place they have is shut down.

So you can see why people get so angry and why people get so frustrated is because there was no leadership attached to what we were trying to do, from the provincial government — none whatsoever.

And I say today that I'm thankful that Mr. Laliberte joined the cause because he has a genuine amount of respect from both First Nations and Métis communities. He left his employment to come and be part of the incident command centre. He has grander visions and ideas of how things could have been handled but, as I said before, with no resources in place, it's difficult to get things done.

And through it all, Madam Minister, we had a lot of angst in our community. People in Saskatchewan need to know that the northern Saskatchewan communities, northwestern communities, La Loche included, they wanted to keep COVID

out. They never got no help. They never got no help in keeping COVID out from your government, none whatsoever.

And while this was going on, your government was contemplating a snap provincial spring election. You and I know it. You and I know it. And when you say, that wasn't the case, that is absolutely false. You were planning a snap provincial election in the middle of a pandemic.

The Chair: — Mr. Belanger, I'm going to step in here. Is there a question, and is it related to the budget?

Mr. Belanger: — On the \$300,000 allocation, Madam Minister, did you have any consultation with the northern mayors prior to your \$300,000 contribution?

Hon. Ms. Carr: — Okay. So, I'm just going to touch on a few things that you spoke about there. And you talk about the lockdowns and stuff and when did I speak, who did I speak to. I spoke to Robert St.Pierre on more than one occasion regarding checkstops. We actually had a request from the northwest incident team for that money also. And I spoke to a good portion of the northern mayors before that lockdown was brought in on individual telephone conversations that I personally had with those mayors. So those were the questions you had around that.

The \$10 million that was requested from yourselves in the conversation that I had with both of you on the phone that day with my chief of staff, Jared Dunlop, there with me; at the end of the conversation, Mr. Vermette said if you can't give me 10, will you give me 5 and I'll pick up the cheque. So that was Mr. Vermette negotiating that down from 10 to 5.

And lastly on the . . . I guess I wasn't clear. Oh, I have a little note over here. The doctor's name is Dr. Shahab.

\$370,000 is the total money that was taken out of that fund. Twenty thousand of it went directly to La Loche, and the other \$350,000 of it was for application-based, for security. So La Loche also made an application and got another 6,000. So it was a total of \$26,000 that actually went to La Loche for around that bucket of funding.

And I'm just going to have Sheldon Green come up. You spoke about this fund and how the money was put into it. So he's just going to expand a little bit on where that money comes from that goes into that fund.

Mr. Green: — Hi, Sheldon Green, assistant deputy minister, municipal relations division. The Northern Municipal Trust Account is a special fund managed by the ministry and it's got about a \$50 million budget this year. The sources of dollars for that, the lion's share is from the General Revenue Fund, both for northern municipal revenue sharing, various infrastructure programming. Federal government transfers to infrastructure also go in there, and then there's also lease fees from across the North and property taxes.

And for example, in 2018, 65 per cent of the budget of the Northern Municipal Trust Account was from the GRF [General Revenue Fund].

[19:45]

The Chair: — Okay, I recognize Mr. Vermette.

Mr. Vermette: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. You talk about negotiations. That all of a sudden this MLA in opposition has the power to negotiate dollars. So now that you've done that, I have a lot of things that I want to negotiate now. Because if you're saying that I have the power to negotiate with you, I've asked for some things from you as a minister. So I'm going to again negotiate with you. I'm going to ask my mayors, I'm going to ask the chiefs, what do you want? Because apparently I, Doyle Vermette, the MLA for Cumberland, can now negotiate and get you what you want, apparently, is what the minister is saying. So if that's how it is, that's good to know that's how. Okay. So I negotiate.

Wow, that's amazing. So I'll tell you something I'd like to negotiate with you. We've got residents back home in Creighton who need a long-term care facility. They need that. So in this budget could you provide that please? I'll negotiate with you. You do that. We need a number of other things I'm going to tell you. And I'm going to get a list together, and I'm going to send you a letter. And if you're saying that I have that much power to negotiate with you, then I'm going to be asking some things people have been asking for years from your government and have not gotten it, have begged you for it and have not gotten it.

So I guess I'll put the letter together and negotiate for the good people that I represent in the North, in the communities in the rest of the province. Because they seem to think for some reason I have special powers to negotiate. So anyway, with that, you'll be getting lots of correspondence. We're going to negotiate. And I'm hoping everything gets delivered, because you said that's how it works. And hopefully my colleague here has some things that he'd like to negotiate, because I'm sure his communities could use some stuff.

So with that, I'll let him finish up. But thank you very much for those comments you made.

The Chair: — I recognize Mr. Belanger.

Mr. Belanger: — All right, and thanks so much for the member from Cumberland's timely intervention because obviously, you know, I've told him as we talk about issues, when you negotiate from 10 million, you're lucky to get a cup of coffee off this particular government. And that's kind of where I think a lot of people in the North view this particular government as it comes to the matter around proper allocation for budget needs.

Madam Minister, you misread this file tremendously. You misread it horribly from the perspective of understanding what was required. And I cannot blame you for that, given the fact that you live 1100 kilometres from La Loche, you know, and the fact of the matter that I'm not sure how close you have any First Nations community near your riding or in your riding.

But if you had that perspective, you could understand how things operate in many of the Indigenous, and in this case northern, Saskatchewan communities. And if you haven't got those perspectives, then you do two things. You chat with your staff that may have those perspectives, or you reach out to your colleagues or people that are in the know and get them to assist in this regard. But what we've seen from the whole process as it

pertains to COVID-19 is I'm the MLA whose area was the epicentre of COVID-19, and the battles we had to keep people focused and the efforts that was undertaken by many groups and organizations to keep the work progressing was tremendous.

After all that work, Madam Minister, after all that work, what was the end result? The end result was our region was stigmatized. We had people that were turned away from hotels, people whose medical appointments were not honoured in the province of Saskatchewan because the question they asked: are you from the Northwest, or in particular are you from La Loche? So many of those members were stigmatized and they could not go to a medical appointment or were turned away from some of the hotels. And those stories are factual, and they've been shared by many people throughout the North.

And why is the North being stigmatized today? Because their first and foremost action was to protect their community from COVID-19. That was their first priority and the people of Saskatchewan ought to know that. They wanted to keep COVID-19 out, Madam Minister. They did not want COVID-19 in their towns. Why? Because they know they're remote. They know that they don't have the services. And above all else they know that there's overcrowding in all of our northern communities, First Nations and municipal communities, and a big section of our population are young children who do not understand social distancing and who were afraid of this COVID-19.

So you look at all those factors and you get 175 hits in La Loche. The leaders warned that this would happen. And at the end of the day, for all that effort, we got nothing but grief.

And I assure this to the people of Saskatchewan. We tried our darndest to fight back and to help stop the influx of COVID-19. And to the people of Saskatchewan, the Saskatchewan Party government did not help. In fact they hindered that progress. Now I share again, what would happen if 15 to 17,000 cases of COVID-19 happened in Saskatoon? What would happen then? Well that's the extent of the exposure that the community of La Loche had in per capita exposure rates. And they had nobody on their side.

And I've said it in the media. I've said it to people as we have these conference calls — food security, big challenge; treatment, big challenge; perimeter security, big challenge; communication, needed resources, regional coordination. The one critique I'll have about the public safety commission is that I thought they should have collaborated with the northern Incident Command Centre at a grander basis, on a greater level. There were some gaps there as well. So it's not all roses from the perspective of how the public safety commission can take lessons from this.

And the reason why we're sharing this with you, Madam Minister, is we want you (a) to understand what occurred. But more importantly, I want the people of Saskatchewan to hear our story, what happened to us during COVID-19 and how the government failed us. But the third thing we want to do is make sure that we learn lessons from the COVID-19 so it doesn't do the same thing if there's a second or a third wave. That's the purpose of us speaking up tonight.

And when the North was shut down, people were calling us and

saying, "What do we do here, Buck?" Which is my transgression of the rules here. But what do we do here, Mr. MLA? Well the first thing we don't want to do folks is to have widespread travel. If we're getting hit with COVID-19, we cannot be hypocrites and say, everybody leave and go south and spread the virus. We don't want to do that. Absolutely not. That'd make us hypocritical. So we said, we're on our own to try and figure things out. We're going to pressure the government to try and give us resources to contain and trace the spread and hopefully get as least damage and deaths as possible. That was what we were dealing with. And there's no drama here. These are factual events that occurred.

So the leadership wanted to keep COVID-19 out with no help, and they could not do it on their own. And when COVID hit, the first thing the Premier did was lock us in. And the stigma attached to that is still being felt today. Now you cannot tell me that's leadership, Madam Minister. You cannot tell me that's leadership.

And to this day I say that the federal government with their 2.3 or 2.6 million, I don't have the exact figure in front of me, they came with their money a lot quicker than most people were hopeful for. And the Métis Nation and the Meadow Lake Tribal Council along with the P.A. Grand Council [Prince Albert Grand Council] got resources on their own. They did good work in the North. They are the champions of resolving, alongside the health professionals that came to our northern communities at great risk to themselves and their family, those are the champions of tackling COVID-19.

Now the lessons need to be learned. These communities are preparing for a second and third wave. But I'll tell you, Madam Minister, mayors and chiefs are tired. They've had a great amount of responsibility placed upon their shoulders. The people are inundated with stigmatizing attitudes as we try and come out of COVID-19, as we try and recover. But we were alone, Madam Minister. We were alone. And I want to make that point to the people of Saskatchewan very clear.

My last point before I wrap up my comments . . . because two hours is not enough time to do justice to what happened to our region. There's so many mayors and chiefs can tell you hundreds of stories. But one of the gaps in northern municipal affairs that I saw was some of the small communities . . . In the midst of the pandemic you lost a municipal advisor out of the community of Buffalo Narrows. He retired. So to small communities like Descherm Lake, Garson Lake, Bear Creek, those small settlements . . . And I think the legislation points out that you're the mayor of those small communities.

Well your communities were left alone. They had no municipal advisor. They had to go to La Ronge to I think the gentleman's name is Hasan. And thank goodness Hasan was there to answer questions for some of these smaller settlements. Because had he not been there, there would have been issues.

Now we're learning that they're shutting down the Buffalo Narrows office and moving that position to La Ronge, further isolating these small communities. And I don't know why you would do those things, Madam Minister. It just doesn't make any sense why you would reduce services to your municipal partners in an area hard hit by COVID.

And like La Loche, the small communities of Descherm Lake, they wanted to shut down access to their small town. You know why? Because one of the councillors said, my daughter has some severe asthma problems; I don't want people coming in here with COVID-19 because if she gets it, she's done with, so I want to set up perimeter security in our community.

So, Madam Minister, I implore you not to close that Buffalo Narrows office down, because as the mayor of these small communities . . . You're the mayor of Garson Lake. You're the mayor of Bear Creek. You're the mayor of Descherm Lake. You're the mayor of these small settlements, and they want their municipal advisor to stay in Buffalo Narrows, not be moved to La Ronge, further away, thereby further isolating them and abandoning them. That's something that should not happen, Madam Minister.

And there's a lot of rumours around why that job is moving to La Ronge, but I'm not going to get into rumours because they don't serve any purpose. But if that position is moved, it'll qualify one consistent theme amongst many of those smaller communities that this was being predetermined and preordained that that position would be moved to La Ronge and that office in Buffalo Narrows would be abolished, thereby abandoning these communities even further. People know what's going on, Madam Minister. They pay very close attention.

So my closing comments as it pertains to the North in general on COVID-19, and if I were to grade your government's performance on the response to the issues that the northern people have raised and the leadership has continually conferred to you and your Premier, it would be a big fat F-minus. That would be my grade. It would be F-minus-minus had we not had the good work of the public safety commission come along and save some grace on behalf of this government.

So I think we have a lot to learn from the COVID-19. And as difficult as this evening may be for trying to get you to understand the challenges of the North, if you want to be a minister of the Crown, you're the minister for all of Saskatchewan, not just an area that you would like to be minister for. You're it for all of Saskatchewan.

[20:00]

The Chair: — Seeing that we've reached our agreed-upon time for the consideration of these estimates tonight, we will adjourn our considerations of the estimates for the Ministry of Government Relations.

Minister, do you have any closing comments?

Hon. Ms. Carr: — I do, Mr. Chair. I guess first of all I just want to clarify regarding the position in Buffalo Narrows that's vacant right now. There's absolutely no intention of closing down that office, so what you are hearing truly are rumours. We are not closing down that office. So I just wanted you to be clear on that.

This truly has been an unprecedented time that we've been through over the past few months. I'd like to take some time, first of all, to thank quite a few people that I got to talk to and meet over the telephone: Tribal Chief Richard Ben, Mayor St.Pierre, Chief Teddy Clark, Grand Chief Hardlotte, Mayor Bruce Fidler

— there are so many, I just can't list them all — the PAGC, MLTC [Meadow Lake Tribal Council], FSIN, Chief Bobby Cameron, the Métis Nation. We truly did listen to them and took what they had to say into consideration. You know, having said that, I'm very proud of how we and they responded to a very unprecedented situation.

There are lots of lessons that we have learned out of this, something that we never thought we would ever be doing, but the lessons learned are being taken back and we're re-evaluating anything that will happen moving forward.

I would like to thank the member for Cumberland and Athabasca for serving in their communities during this pandemic. Obviously it couldn't have been a very easy job.

I'd like to take the time to thank my officials for being here tonight and helping me out with some of the answers that we had to go through this evening. I'd like to thank the committee members that sat in on both sides of the House. And of course all of the staff that make these evenings happen — Hansard, Clerks — to ensure that we have a good evening. So thank you very much and we'll see you tomorrow night.

The Chair: — Mr. Belanger, do you have any closing remarks?

Mr. Belanger: — Again I thank the minister and her officials for being here this evening and to address the issues that are first and foremost in many of the northern leaderships' minds. As I've indicated, there's some valuable lessons being learned. I am pleased to hear the minister committing to not moving the Buffalo Narrows office out to the La Ronge location. We'll be certainly following that up with a telephone call to the mayor of Buffalo Narrows, as she certainly had a concern as well. So Mayor Aubichon will be advised accordingly.

And again I point out that while it hasn't been all roses with the public safety commission, I think despite the obstacles that they faced, they worked very well with the region. And I know they've learned a lot of good lessons. And I will thank the officials from the public safety commission as well.

And with that, we'll be looking at this particular file and overseeing what progress and what lessons are being applied and implemented and learned from, so when the second wave does hit, that we're better prepared, better coordinated, and ready to take COVID on as the northern mayors and chiefs have shown us how to do. Thank you.

The Chair: — I'd like to also thank the officials and the minister for being here and the committee members. I ask a member to move a motion of adjournment.

Ms. Ross: — I so move.

The Chair: — Ms. Ross has so moved. Is that agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

The Chair: — Carried. The committee stands adjourned until tomorrow, Tuesday, June 23rd at 3 p.m.

[The committee adjourned at 20:04.]