



STANDING COMMITTEE ON INTERGOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS AND JUSTICE

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STANDING COMMITTEE ON INTERGOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS AND JUSTICE

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[The committee met at 15:31.]

Chair B. McLeod: — And good evening and welcome to the Standing Committee on Intergovernmental Affairs and Justice. My name is Blaine McLeod, the MLA [Member of the Legislative Assembly] for Lumsden-Morse, and we have our members here with us tonight. We have a few substitutions, so we'll get that looked after. First of all we have MLA Patterson, MLA Martens, and MLA Brad Crassweller. I should say first names as well: Megan Patterson, Jamie Martens.

And on the other side of the room, chitting in tonight for MLA Betty Nippi-Albright is MLA Brent Blakley. And we have MLA Jacqueline Roy. And sitting in tonight for MLA Leroy Laliberte is MLA Don McBean. And I got it right tonight; thank you, Don. Awesome.

So I'd like to advise the committee that pursuant to rule 148(1), the 2026-27 estimates and the 2025-26 supplementary estimates no. 2 were committed to the Standing Committee on Intergovernmental Affairs and Justice on March 26, 2026 and March 18, 2026 respectively. The 2026-27 estimates are as follows: vote 73, Community Safety; vote 92, Firearms Secretariat; vote 30, Government Relations; vote 3, Justice and Attorney General; vote 27, Parks, Culture and Sport; vote 88, Tourism Saskatchewan.

And the 2025-26 supplementary estimates no. 2 are vote 73, Community Safety; vote 3, Justice and Attorney General; and vote 27, Parks, Culture and Sport.

So today to begin with, we will be considering the estimates and supplementary estimates no. 2 for Parks, Culture and Sport until the hour of 5:30 p.m. Then we're going to recess from 5:30 to 6:30, and afterwards we will consider the estimates for Tourism Saskatchewan.

**General Revenue Fund
Parks, Culture and Sport
Vote 27**

Subvote (PC01)

Chair B. McLeod: — So we're going to begin with vote no. 27, Parks, Culture and Sport, central management and services, subvote (PC01).

Minister Ross is here with her officials, and I'd ask first of all that officials please introduce themselves before they speak for the very first time. And again, just don't touch the microphones, which I did just beforehand to make sure that it was straight to me. The *Hansard* operator will turn them on for you when you speak.

So, Minister Ross, please introduce your officials, and we'll be pleased to hear your opening comments.

Hon. Alana Ross: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. Today as we gather in Regina, we also stand on Treaty 4 territory and homeland of the Métis people. Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the 2026-27 budget estimates for the Ministry of Parks, Culture and Sport. I look forward to the discussion ahead and to answering

the committee's questions together with my officials.

Here with me today are Greg Gettle, deputy minister; Paul Johnson, assistant deputy minister for parks division; Dan French, assistant deputy minister for the stewardship division; Naomi Shanks, executive director of sport, culture and recreation; Jessica Jackson, director of corporate services; Bernadette Hamill, executive director for the Status of Women office; Charles-Henri Warren, executive director for the francophone affairs branch; Elias Nelson, my chief of staff; and Tyson Willock, ministerial assistant for communications.

The Ministry of Parks, Culture and Sport plays an important role in supporting the quality of life that people, families, and communities enjoy in our province. It plays an important role in delivering our government's mission to ensure that Saskatchewan remains the best place to live, work, and raise a family. This is made possible by the hard work and dedication of the team I have introduced to you today as well as countless others who comprise our broader team within the ministry. It is an honour to bring forward a second budget as the minister and to serve alongside such an excellent group of professionals.

The Ministry of Parks, Culture and Sport has a broader mandate than some might expect. In addition to offering exciting and meaningful experiences, we support and safeguard natural, cultural, and heritage resources — important aspects of Saskatchewan's unique identity.

The Royal Saskatchewan Museum and Western Development Museum preserve our history and provide opportunities for successive generations to learn about our history. The Saskatchewan Heritage Foundation provides grants to support important heritage preservation initiatives and is an important partner in the heritage property designation process. Through unique arrangements, revenues collected from lotteries and casino operations flow through to the trusted partner organizations such as Sask Sport, SaskCulture, and the Community Initiatives Fund to support participation in sport, cultural activities, and other activities that enhance the quality of life for people, families, and communities across Saskatchewan.

Our provincial parks system has a dual mandate of providing recreational opportunities and environmental stewardship. We balance human use and development with the need to protect natural beauty for generations to come. Over 1.4 million hectares of lands are conserved across 36 provincial parks and 104 recreation areas. This includes a wide variety of ecosystems, species, and environments. There are lakes, rivers, valleys, hills, pastures, bogs, grassland, boreal forest, lodgepole pine, and all manner of flora and fauna.

Delivering on this mandate is largely supported by park revenues, primarily camping fees and entry fees. Lessees also pay fees, whether it is private business that we partner with to provide additional services within the parks or cottagers who hold land leases. These revenues are 100 per cent reinvested back into our parks to help maintain campsites, roads, facilities, and other infrastructure so that we can continue to deliver high-quality experiences for visitors and for future generations to come.

It is no secret that governments across Canada are facing

increasing financial pressure. Despite these pressures, Saskatchewan has been able to bring forward what I would describe as the best budget in Canada. With the broader provincial budget, the Ministry of Parks, Culture and Sport is no exception. We are strengthening our provincial parks system with \$15 million in new capital investments so that we can continue to deliver high-quality services to visitors across Saskatchewan.

We are providing stable operating funding for the ministry and the third-party organizations that the ministry supports. We are securing the Royal Saskatchewan Museum's ability to store, safeguard, and study artifacts, fossils, and Saskatchewan's national history. And we continue to deliver on the important affordability initiatives that our government committed to in the 2024 provincial election.

Fifteen million dollars in capital funding will support capital renewal and replacement in provincial parks across the province, including new visitor centres in Candle Lake, Cypress Hills, Duck Mountain, and Greenwater Lake provincial parks; road improvements at Cypress Hills, Danielson, and Good Spirit Lake provincial parks; upgrades to water treatment plants at Makwa Lake, Good Spirit Lake, and Buffalo Pound provincial parks; upgrades to wastewater management at Cypress Hills and Pike Lake provincial parks; numerous other campground and infrastructure upgrades at provincial parks across the province. Included in the \$15 million is \$2.5 million to replace and restore infrastructure that was lost to wildfires last year in the Narrow Hills and Lac La Ronge provincial parks.

We also continued funding for the new seasonal site construction grant program that we introduced last year. Administered in partnership with the Saskatchewan Regional Parks Association, this program will continue to provide more camping opportunities for people, families, and communities across the province.

\$16.5 million in capital funding will support the development of a new location for the Royal Saskatchewan Museum's research collections and exhibit centre, known as the annex. As the RSM [Royal Saskatchewan Museum] collections have continued to grow and as the RSM has continued to attract world-class researchers from around the world, the time has come to develop a more modernized facility to support this important work.

Budget 2026-27 also continues to deliver on our government's commitments from the 2024 provincial election. An additional \$4 million has been added to the active families benefit for a total of \$8 million in funding to support the doubling of this very important initiative. The benefit amount has been doubled from \$150 to \$300 per child, and for children with disabilities it has doubled from \$200 to \$400 per child. We have also doubled the threshold from \$60,000 in adjusted family income to \$120,000. Eligible families can now claim the active families benefit on their 2025 income tax filings.

We have continued funding for other important commitments, including the new school playground equipment grant and the doubling of the community rink affordability grant, as well as the veteran service club support program.

The Status of Women office continues to play a leading role

across government when it comes to addressing women's issues and celebrating the success of Saskatchewan women. This budget continues the important work we are doing to address the issue of interpersonal violence in our society with an additional \$125,000 for the Status of Women office. One-time federal funding under the national action plan to end gender-based violence has been used to hire an additional staff member to accelerate the work that we are already doing.

We will continue to build on Saskatchewan's interpersonal violence strategy with programs and services in alignment with our three focus areas of prevention: through educating our youth, promoting healthy relationships into adulthood, and increasing awareness within our broader society. Intervention to help individuals who are at risk access the supports that they need and help victims escape their circumstances. And accountability for perpetrators and users of abuse so that they are held accountable for their actions or are rehabilitated and so that victims can see justice fulfilled.

The francophone affairs branch continues to play a leading role across government when it comes to implementing the Government of Saskatchewan's French-language services policy. This policy reflects our commitment to delivering French-language services to support the vitality of the francophone community in Saskatchewan.

[15:45]

Four key activities of the francophone affairs branch include managing the French-language Service Centre, translation services for various areas of government, engaging with the francophone community, and managing the Canada-Saskatchewan Agreement on French-Language Services. As with the Status of Women office, the francophone affairs office plays a collaborative role within government while most public services are delivered by other areas of government.

In conclusion the Ministry of Parks, Culture and Sport's 2026-27 budget strengthens our provincial parks with accountable funding, provides stable operating funding, and continues to deliver on the important affordability initiatives that we've committed to. We are doing our part within our government's overall budget to protect Saskatchewan as the best place to live, work, and raise a family. The various programs and services that fall under the ministry support the quality of life that people, families, and communities enjoy in our province.

With that, my officials and I would be pleased to take your questions.

Chair B. McLeod: — Thank you so much, Minister. I will now open the floor to questions and I recognize MLA Roy.

Jacqueline Roy: — Thanks so much. I will begin with some questions around the Status of Women office line of Parks, Culture and Sport.

So I guess first I'm looking at the new money that was added based on that one-time 125 K grant. What is the current full-time equivalent budget for the Status of Women office, and what was it prior to that 125 K being added?

Bernadet Hamill: — Hi, my name is Bernadet Hamill and I'm the executive director of the Status of Women's office. Thank you for the question. So last year . . . pardon me, I had to get some numbers written down. I don't have my reading glasses with me, so I had to have them blown up for me in real time.

So in 2025-26 the Status of Women's office had four FTEs [full-time equivalent], full-time staff in our office, and our budget was 697,000. This year we will have five FTEs with this year's budget and our budget being 816,000.

Jacqueline Roy: — Thank you for that answer. Moving on to the next question. Has there been a funding change for organizations since third parties have been unable to present to schools? And I guess that being said, has that funding increased, decreased, or stayed the same?

Hon. Alana Ross: — Thank you for your question, Madame. I really can't speak to other ministries' budgets. If you could be more specific as to what date and ranges and organizations that you would like to have information on, we may be able to address that for you. Bernadet, do you have anything more specific that you would like to add?

Bernadet Hamill: — Yeah, I think we could just get some clarity on the question first.

Jacqueline Roy: — That might take a while just because there are quite a number of organizations that are funded. So what I will do is I'll commit to tabling that, those organizations here so that I can get an answer at a later date from you.

Bernadet Hamill: — I can speak to organizations that the Status of Women office provides funding to. We just can't speak to other ministries. I wouldn't be able to provide you with that. We'd have to defer to those specific ministries.

Jacqueline Roy: — Yes, that's my understanding from what you said.

Bernadet Hamill: — I'd be happy to share who we provided funding . . .

Jacqueline Roy: — Thank you, I will table and move on with my other questions.

Bernadet Hamill: — But no, I'm prepared to answer the question. I have the information in front of me.

Chair B. McLeod: — Answer the question then, please. That will be good. Provide what you can.

Bernadet Hamill: — What particular year would you like? I can start with this 2025-26 or '24-25.

Jacqueline Roy: — Those would not answer the question because my question would be regarding when the funding change occurred. So '24-25 and '25-26 years would not provide a broad enough range to answer that question.

Bernadet Hamill: — I can say that the Status of Women's office funding has not changed from 2024-2025 to 2025-26. We had the same level of funding that we provided, and I can share the

organizations that we provided funding to. I'll start with '24-25 . . .

Jacqueline Roy: — But that isn't the question I'm asking, is the problem. If I may, the question I'm asking is, has there been a funding change since third parties have been unable to present? So that would be way before 2024, and it doesn't appear that that data is here today.

Chair B. McLeod: — So point of order in regards to the questions that are being asked. We're dealing with estimates from '25-26 and '26-27. So we can provide the numbers that are related to the estimates that are in front of us there. And if that is helpful, then that can be done.

Jacqueline Roy: — I guess what I'm saying is that although I appreciate that answer, it wouldn't be in direct relation to the question, so it wouldn't be helpful. I'll move on with my questions then.

Chair B. McLeod: — Sorry, I will . . . Minister Ross, your interpretation there?

Hon. Alana Ross: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. Madame, you would have to go directly to the ministries involved — Education — that we . . . Our ministry is not a part of that. The community-based organizations were working directly with the school system. So that would be a question that you would be taking to the Minister of Education.

Jacqueline Roy: — Okay. Thank you for that. And does that include . . . With that detail, would that then include funding for sexual assault centres that deliver those programs? That would be under the Education budget?

Bernadet Hamill: — So, Madame, what I can tell you is . . . I'm sorry. I'm not French, so I just am trying to answer the question as best I can. I can tell you that we provided funding through the Status of Women's office to the Prince Albert Mobile Crisis Unit and Sexual Assault Centre.

Jacqueline Roy: — So funding is provided to the P.A. [Prince Albert] mobile crisis unit and the sexual assault centre?

Bernadet Hamill: — The name of their organization is the Prince Albert Mobile Crisis Unit and Sexual Assault Centre.

Jacqueline Roy: — Thank you for that. And in the budget is there any other funding provided to any other sexual assault centres?

Bernadet Hamill: — We didn't have any applications from any others this past year.

Jacqueline Roy: — Thank you for that. And in the previous budget year, would you have had applications from other sexual assault centres?

Chair B. McLeod: — Again I'll intervene. We're speaking of '25-26 and 2026-27 estimates, so the focus of questions needs to remain within that scope.

Jacqueline Roy: — Thank you for that. I will reword my

question. Has there been a change in the number of applicants?

[16:00]

Bernadet Hamill: — Thank you for the question. And I'd just like to clarify that I'm speaking about only the Status of Women's office. We can't speak to other ministries that may receive applications. What I can tell you is that the Prince Albert Mobile Crisis Unit and Sexual Assault Centre is the application that we received this past year.

Jacqueline Roy: — And so then would I be correct to assume that for other sexual assault centres that might be funding provided under Justice? Would that be the correct assumption?

Bernadet Hamill: — Yeah, I would defer to . . . It could be the Ministry of Justice. Could be the Ministry of Health as well.

Jacqueline Roy: — Okay, thank you for that. And do you in any way direct or advocate for the allocation of funding for justice or health, since I presume you would have more insight into the needs of those areas of programming?

Bernadet Hamill: — Thank you for the question. The Status of Women's office works across all government as you heard the minister speak earlier in her opening remarks. And so we collaborate with a lot of different ministries or departments within several ministries. But a big focus of our work over the last couple years has been in a collaborative relationship with the Ministry of Justice.

And so we have worked together on numerous different initiatives that have come forward that have been talked about and shared, such as things under the national action plan to end gender-based violence and Saskatchewan's strategy to ensure that the work, across the work that people are doing, is following the alignment that is guided by Saskatchewan's three pillars of prevention, intervention, and accountability. And supporting Saskatchewan's implementation of the national action plan is part of Saskatchewan's ongoing work to do that.

Jacqueline Roy: — Thanks for that. And what dollar amount are you contributing to the national action plan to end gender-based violence? And would that be based on Saskatchewan's population, or do we contribute more since our gender-based violence rates are twice the national average?

Hon. Alana Ross: — Thank you for the question. So across government, the province spends over \$70 million annually on the Status of Women files, specifically in gender-based violence, and that's across various ministries. We are also part of the national action plan, and the requirement is a one-to-one. We match what the federal government does, but that's also included in the excess of \$70 million. Bernadet can give you a greater detail on that, but we far exceed the requirements of the national action plan for the matching dollars.

Bernadet Hamill: — Thank you, Minister. Yeah, and I'm happy to share that with you. So Saskatchewan entered into an agreement in 2023 with Women and Gender Equality Canada to receive \$20.3 million over the four-year period, and so that is broken down . . . with expectations that Saskatchewan's also contributing. As the minister said, Saskatchewan far exceeds

what we receive in federal funding. So each fiscal year since 2023 . . . And I'll just go kind of backdating and what we're to get this fiscal year that leads to the 20.3 million.

So in 2023-2024, Saskatchewan received the first instalment of the federal funding of \$3.333 million. In 2024-2025 we saw an increase within that federal agreement of \$5.658 million. In 2025-2026 Saskatchewan received another \$5.658 million. And the last year of the agreement, which is the current fiscal year that we are now in, Saskatchewan is to receive the last instalment of \$5,658,000 for a total of \$20,307,000. And to answer your question on how the federal government determined that funding, Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat set the funding for all the provinces and territories.

And I appreciate your question that, you know, was that based on population or was that based on statistics. Because we asked the same question, how they came to that number. And what they shared with us was that that was population based, and that they also then did a bit of a sliding scale, if you will, with the territorial provinces because their populations were lower and had higher rates of interpersonal violence, domestic violence, based on their smaller populations.

Jacqueline Roy: — Thank you for that answer. So because that money definitely goes through a lot of different ministries, as mentioned, ultimately which ministry is responsible for the money that goes specifically towards the national action plan? Would that be Justice, or would that be Status of Women, or which specific ministries would it include?

Bernadet Hamill: — Thank you for the question. So how Saskatchewan's agreement and how we're implementing our national action plan, or Saskatchewan's implementation plan of the national action plan, is we work with all the ministries who are participating in the plan. And that includes the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Government Relations, the Ministry of Community Safety — sorry, I was going to say the wrong ministry name — as well as in partnership with the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Social Services, the Status of Women's office with a larger, I would say, role with the Ministry of Justice due to the nature of the programs that they provide.

So how the funding works is that through the provincial budget process, our own treasury board sets the budgets for each ministry. And each ministry must go through the budget process, just as Status of Women do, to participate in the funding and receive the funding to support the programs and services that they are delivering that align with Saskatchewan's strategy and that are enhanced with projects to implement this national action plan. And it's a 10-year plan with four years of funding.

Jacqueline Roy: — Excellent. Thank you for that. So where would I find the balance sheet for the amount that each ministry is being allocated?

Bernadet Hamill: — Particular budget questions have to be deferred to the particular ministry.

Jacqueline Roy: — So would that be my understanding then, if it is to be deferred to the particular ministry, that there is no combined balance sheet for the national action plan, that I would

need to ask Education, Health, Government Relations, Community Safety, Justice, Social Services, and Status of Women individually?

Bernadet Hamill: — That would be correct. Each ministry is responsible for speaking to their budgets.

Jacqueline Roy: — So when it comes to the budget and what is handed out by the federal government to the province, what are the reporting mechanisms that the government requires as to which ministry gets allocated what?

Bernadet Hamill: — So, yeah. So to answer your question, the Status of Women, what our role is is we coordinate with the ministries. As I mentioned, they work within their budgets. It's set by Saskatchewan Ministry of Finance.

When it comes to reporting the outcomes of the work being done, the Status of Women's office reports that to Women and Gender Equality Canada, and they roll it up into a national reporting that they share on their website.

Jacqueline Roy: — Thank you for that information. So does that mean that the Ministry of Finance would have the numbers that go to each ministry? Or is there no central area where all the funding is listed?

Bernadet Hamill: — I think that I have to refer back to how I answered the question before.

[16:15]

When it comes to the provincial budget process, the Ministry of Finance sets each ministry with their budget amounts for the year for all their programs and services. And so each ministry works with the Ministry of Finance for that. So I can't speak to other ministries or what the Ministry of Finance can tell you. I would just have to defer you to ask them.

Jacqueline Roy: — Okay, thank you for that. So the Status of Women's office does not work with the Ministry of Finance to allocate those resources?

Bernadet Hamill: — So the Status of Women's office coordinates and collaborates with all the ministries participating in the funding. And we support the ministries in their processes to move through the provincial budget process, and that includes supporting them to submit their information to the Ministry of Finance. And that's the role that we have.

But each ministry has to speak to their own individual budgets. And so I'm not able to say any more than that because I can't speak on behalf of any other ministries.

Jacqueline Roy: — Okay, thank you for that information. When it comes to the domestic violence death review recommendations, are there specific dollar amounts tied to each domestic violence death review recommendation?

Bernadet Hamill: — Thank you for the question. So the Ministry of Justice, the domestic violence death review was their process, and it is up to them to respond to this particular question.

Jacqueline Roy: — Okay, thank you for that. I'll now move on to some francophone affairs estimates. Thank you for your help with the Status of Women.

So when we look to francophone affairs, we see that there has been a decrease in the variance of budget between '26-27 and '25-26 despite population increase of francophones. Could that be explained?

Greg Gettle: — Good afternoon. Greg Gettle, deputy minister for Parks, Culture and Sport. And so that budget change from next year's budget, 2026-27, to the current fiscal year of '25-26 is only \$8,000. And that's based on the overall ministry's reduction in salary dollars based on government's efficiency target.

Jacqueline Roy: — So are you telling me that the entirety . . . Am I to understand the entirety of the decrease was due to lowered wages at the francophone affairs office?

Greg Gettle: — No. Let me clarify. So what we have, what we've done is we have an overall efficiency target for each ministry. And our ministry happens to be 3 per cent. And so what we've done at this stage is we've gone across all of our different branches and we've set a slightly lower amount for people wages based on that efficiency target.

We don't yet know where we're going to actually gain those efficiency targets because it's based on natural attrition. So we have to wait to see what our retirements are and our voluntary resignations in order for us to be able to realize where those true efficiency dollars will be derived from. But it's not related to reducing people's salaries. No one's salary has gone down as a result of this.

Jacqueline Roy: — Thank you for that. I guess where I was going with that question was, therefore that would be due to attrition, retirement, or possibly letting staff go?

Greg Gettle: — So I'll just clarify. There's no letting staff go. It's only through retirements or voluntary resignations.

Jacqueline Roy: — Could you clarify for me the difference between a voluntary resignation and letting someone go?

Greg Gettle: — Sure. That's basically someone decides that they're leaving their position for whatever reason. Maybe they're taking another position with government, maybe they're taking another position outside of government, or they're choosing to retire. So it's their decision that they are leaving. And that's, as a result, it being voluntary.

Jacqueline Roy: — Thank you for that. And what percentage of the budget went to compensation packages this year for employees that left either voluntarily or were let go?

Greg Gettle: — Sorry, I'd just like to ask a point of clarification because sometimes we get mixed up with years. So when you say this year, do you mean '25-26 or '26-27?

Jacqueline Roy: — I would mean for the period in which you can actually do reporting for estimates.

Greg Gettle: — I think we're reporting on both years, right. We can talk about '26-27, which is . . .

Jacqueline Roy: — One of my former questions was ruled out of order because I asked about '25-26. Am I allowed to ask those questions?

Chair B. McLeod: — If the question relates to where we're going in '25-2026, yes, I will allow that. Yes.

Jacqueline Roy: — Thank you then. So that would be for both years that we're looking at.

Greg Gettle: — Sorry, my apologies. I was trying to remember the question, if you used the term "severance." Is that what you were looking for?

Jacqueline Roy: — I believe I heard a few words that you discussed back there. But basically any amount of money that would have been given to somebody who voluntarily left or who was, in your own words . . . I'm trying to remember what they are now. But yes, any type of compensation package.

Greg Gettle: — Okay, so to answer the question, there are no compensation packages being provided to employees. We are looking at saving salary dollars. When people choose to leave voluntarily either through resignations or through retirements, we will then as a ministry decide whether or not to fill those positions as they are or to look for additional savings. But we're not actually offering employees any type of package or severance as they leave the organization.

Jacqueline Roy: — So there have been zero payouts in '25-26 or '26-27 due to a salary bonus, a severance pay, as you said, a retirement bonus, or any other applicable word above and beyond a base salary level?

Greg Gettle: — So I can say that there are no retirement bonuses or severance bonuses that have been offered to anyone in either of those fiscal years that you mentioned.

Jacqueline Roy: — So I can therefore assume that zero dollars were spent outside of the base salary. That is correct?

Greg Gettle: — There are other forms of compensation. That might be vehicle allowances. There's flex benefits. But I'm not sure exactly how those are accounted for. But there are no other kinds of bonuses that employees receive.

Jacqueline Roy: — When it comes to flex benefits, could you please elaborate?

[16:30]

Greg Gettle: — So the out-of-scope employee flexible benefit program is for out-of-scope employees to use on an annual basis for things that are kind of health related in nature. It could be gym memberships, running shoes, those types of things. And that is provided to employees on an annual basis.

Jacqueline Roy: — Thank you. I just want to make sure I get everything clearly on record. Thank you.

Moving on to the *Official Languages Act* as per 2023. With the modernization of the *Official Languages Act* in that year, could you clarify how the updates have led to changes in francophone policy and accessibility in health care, as it relates to health?

Charles-Henri Warren: — Charles-Henri Warren, executive director of francophone affairs branch. The *Official Languages Act* is a federal piece of legislation that's not binding on the province. If you have more specific questions related to Health, I guess I'd invite you raise that question with that ministry.

Jacqueline Roy: — Thank you for that. So when I look at one of the four major mandates of the office, one is the Canada-Sask Agreement on French-Language Services, which the *Official Languages Act* in 2023 came to reinforce. So I guess what I'm looking for here is, how does your office deal with the portion of that duty that concerns health care?

Charles-Henri Warren: — So the Canada-Saskatchewan Agreement on French-Language Services was renewed in 2023, so at the same time as the changes to the *Official Languages Act*. But those are sort of two separate initiatives.

Now in terms of the agreement and initiatives to support health, there's a couple of programs that the Ministry of Parks, Culture and Sport fund through this agreement in the field of health. One is the TAO Tel-Aide which is a French mental health support line that's available to Saskatchewan citizens.

The second is the patient accompaniment service by the Réseau Santé en français, which basically it's a service where if you have someone who is going to a medical appointment, wants to be accompanied by a trained volunteer that can translate in French and provide some general sort of navigation in terms of the health service, that's what that service provides.

Jacqueline Roy: — Thank you. And could you clarify what you mean when you say the *Official Languages Act* in 2023 is not binding on the province? Do I assume by that, that the province is not intending on seeking out the possible federal funding that other provinces have received because of that?

Charles-Henri Warren: — So basically the Canada-Saskatchewan Agreement on French-Language Services is part of the federal . . . like other similar agreements the federal government has with the provinces and territories, is part of the federal action plan for the official languages.

But again that's separate from the *Official Languages Act*. The funding we receive from the federal government, there's essentially an approach to it. Basically every province gets a base amount, and then there's an amount based on the francophone population in each province. So we're not leaving money on the table. We are taking full advantage of the full amount that's been offered by the federal government in that agreement.

Jacqueline Roy: — Thank you. I guess what I'm looking for here is, could you explain the difference between the Saskatchewan approach and the approach that Alberta took to get more funding from the *Official Languages Act*, for example.

Charles-Henri Warren: — So in terms of the approach, I think basically prior to the new federal action plan for official

languages in 2023, all provinces were united in asking for more federal money. The envelope for these agreements had essentially been stagnant for the previous 15 years.

So basically in terms of . . . Alberta didn't really do anything different than we did. What happened basically is prior to 2023, there was not really any formula for the feds to distribute the money. It was kind of based on historical amounts.

Now there is a formula that, you know, there is a base amount and takes into account the francophone population in each province. Obviously the francophone population in Alberta being greater than it is here, they receive more funds by virtue of that. But basically, yeah, there's no difference in approach. Like they adopted a policy on French-language services 15 years after we did, so the same, a similar approach.

Jacqueline Roy: — Thank you for that information. So I am to understand that the tactics used by Alberta then, if any, would equal those used by Saskatchewan.

Charles-Henri Warren: — Yes.

Jacqueline Roy: — Thank you. When it comes to the *Official Languages Act* in 2023, you stipulated some things that have been done around health, either through that or the Can-Sask agreement. What has been done in education and advanced education, justice and community safety, and immigration?

Charles-Henri Warren: — So when it comes to French-language services, there are two big agreements that come into play. There's the Canada-Saskatchewan Agreement on French-Language Services that is managed by Parks, Culture and Sport. There's also the Canada-Saskatchewan agreement for French-language education that's managed by Education and Advanced Education. So I can't speak to that second agreement.

However in terms of some of the initiatives covered in the action plan under the Canada-Saskatchewan agreement, in education that's covered in that agreement, there's basically some money for child care and support for family literacy programs. For justice it's money to support the translation of statutes and bilingual personnel in courts. And for immigration there's money to support the settlement services in French and also money to promote francophone immigration to Saskatchewan employers.

Jacqueline Roy: — Thank you for that. And when it comes to Ed and Advanced Education, what communication takes place between francophone affairs and the Education and Advanced Education ministries when it comes to budgetary considerations?

Charles-Henri Warren: — So in terms of the way Education and Advanced Education manage their agreement for French-language education, that's really . . . you'd have to speak to them about that because they manage that agreement. We don't.

Jacqueline Roy: — Thank you for that. In talking with stakeholders, one of the wishes that they have wanted to see is the bureau of francophone affairs working more closely with specifically the department of Advanced Education and Education so that there is a budgetary, strategic alignment when it comes to that money. Is that something that francophone affairs is looking into? And if so, is that consideration being well

received?

[16:45]

Charles-Henri Warren: — So one of the functions of the francophone affairs branch is to be a liaison with the francophone community. And so part of that role is when we receive information or feedback from various community organizations, we will share that with the respective ministries that are involved. But then it would be obviously up to these ministries to use that information in their budget requests and submissions.

Jacqueline Roy: — Thank you for that information. So I guess I just need clarity between that question and the previous question. When it concerns Education and Advanced Education, the decision is made by them as to how to use their budgets, but it is made with input from francophone affairs?

Charles-Henri Warren: — So basically yeah, going back to my previous answer, when we have information to share with ministries, whether it's Education or Advanced Education or others, we will do so. But in the case of their agreement, I mean, ultimately, they'd be the decision maker in that one.

Jacqueline Roy: — Thank you for that information. And what community groups has francophone affairs heard from that has informed that education, post-secondary education consultation? Is that something where somebody would have to come to you, or is there meetings all the time to go over those issues?

Charles-Henri Warren: — In response to your question, I'd say it's a little bit of both, i.e. if community groups have specific concerns they want to bring to our attention, they're always welcome to do so. But we will, we also seek out views on a regular basis.

Jacqueline Roy: — Thank you for that. And would a regular basis be about once a month, once every year? What would that look like, just on average?

Charles-Henri Warren: — That will depend on the organizations. Obviously with, you know, with the l'Assemblée communautaire fransaskoise which is essentially the community spokesperson organization, it will be every month for sure. With some of the smaller groups, it might be once a year or every second year. But we, you know, our door is always open.

Jacqueline Roy: — Thanks for that. And so when it comes to the CÉF [Conseil des écoles fransaskoises] and their budget, how often does the francophone affairs bureau advocate on behalf of the needs of the CÉF community?

Charles-Henri Warren: — So you're referring to the Conseil des écoles fransaskoises in your question, yeah?

Jacqueline Roy: — Correct.

Charles-Henri Warren: — So basically in terms of the . . . that would be, you know, with Education that determines that. As with other ministries, you know, if we have information that we feel would be relevant to our colleagues at Education, we'll share that with them.

Jacqueline Roy: — Okay, so therefore it doesn't happen on a frequent basis though, whereas in . . . Okay, thank you.

Regarding the budgetary considerations for the CÉF and the litigation now taking place with the province, is that bucket of funding coming from Justice? From francophone affairs? From Education? Where is the money for the legal challenge and the legal action coming from?

Hon. Alana Ross: — Thank you for the question, but this is a situation that's in the courts. So we will be not commenting or taking any questions on this particular situation.

Jacqueline Roy: — Thank you for that. I thought that might be the answer. However patient-client privilege does not apply to funding-bucket commentary or to giving answers to the fiscal record. So I would like an answer to that question.

Greg Gettle: — So all I can speak on is on behalf of the ministry at Parks, Culture and Sport. There is no money within our budget allocated to that.

Jacqueline Roy: — Thank you for that. And with that I will be handing over questions to my colleague from Regina University.

Brent Blakley: — Regina Wascana Plains, actually.

Jacqueline Roy: — Oh, pardon me.

Brent Blakley: — That's okay. Thank you very much . . .

Chair B. McLeod: — Just before you start, I just do need to recognize you. MLA Blakley, please go ahead with your questions.

Brent Blakley: — Thank you very much. And I want to thank the previous two on their Q & A [question and answer] for speaking in English for us and not carrying out in French. So thank you very much for that. Would have went right there.

Minister, I'm just going to get started right away with a few just kind of general questions on Parks, Culture and Sport.

Minister, as you went through the budget development this year, the budget development process, what were some of the objectives and the priorities of this year's budget specifically, and how is that different from previous years?

Hon. Alana Ross: — Thank you for the question. As you know from my opening statements, we did kind of lay broadly out what we were intending to do.

So the purpose of this budget is to strengthen our provincial parks. And with that, we are investing \$15 million in capital funding. And that goes into projects such as new service centres at Candle Lake, Cypress Hills, Duck Mountain, Greenwater Lake provincial parks; road improvements in Cypress, Danielson, and Good Spirit provincial parks; water upgrades, or upgrades to the water treatment plants at Makwa Lake, Good Spirit Lake, and Buffalo Pound provincial parks; upgrades to wastewater management at Cypress Hills and Pike Lake; and various campgrounds upgrades at other provincial parks.

We're also providing stable operating funding for the parks — was one of the things that was important for us to do — and we are also continuing to deliver on the important affordabilities that we committed to in the elections such as . . . When we look at that, we look at our active family benefit. We look at our school playground equipment grant, making certain that that's going ahead; the community rink affordability grant; veteran service club support grant.

And also with our Royal museum, we are also securing the Royal Saskatchewan Museum's ability to store, safeguard, and study artifacts, fossils, and Saskatchewan's national history, and looking at replacing the research, exhibits, and collections centre.

So what we looked at in our budget was how do we strengthen our province and have a positive impact on the quality of life for the people of Saskatchewan through the programmings that we offer.

Brent Blakley: — Okay, thank you. And what were some of your priorities with regards to the arts movement and the arts community in Saskatchewan?

Hon. Alana Ross: — Thank you for the question. So within the arts programs, we looked at the same thing like stabilization and strengthening. In the previous budget, the arts got 1.5 per cent increase in their funding, and that was carried over in this year's budget.

Brent Blakley: — Okay, thank you very much. I'm wondering if you could tell me what was the rate of inflation that was being factored into the budget as it was being developed?

[17:00]

Hon. Alana Ross: — So thank you for the question. So as you know, this is a very difficult budget year across the country. So what we were looking at in this particular year's budget was creating that stability and to be able to protect the services that we were already providing.

Brent Blakley: — I'm sorry, and what was the rate of inflation that you were factoring in on this budget?

Hon. Alana Ross: — As I said, we were looking at . . . Because it's a difficult situation nationally in the country in terms of creating budgets, what we looked at specifically was stabilizing and maintaining in this year's budget.

Brent Blakley: — So sorry, just to be clear, you did not factor in the rate of inflation when preparing the budget?

Hon. Alana Ross: — So it wasn't about inflation. It was about protecting and stabilizing what we have existing already within the park system.

Brent Blakley: — Okay, thank you very much. Kind of a two-part question: wondering if you're able to tell me what percentage increase is this budget over the previous budget. And will this increase cover inflationary costs going forward?

Greg Gettle: — So the overall ministry budget for '25-26 . . . Sorry, '26-27 — got my years mixed up — is an increase of

16.1 per cent.

Brent Blakley: — And do you believe that this funding increase will cover inflationary costs going forward?

Greg Gettle: — Yeah, I think I would just build on what the minister has said. It was really about, you know, looking at how we protect the services that are provided to the people of Saskatchewan and, where possible, where we might be able to enhance particular services.

Brent Blakley: — Okay, thanks. Thank you very much. You said 16.1 per cent. How does this per cent increase, for example, compare . . . You may have compared with recent BC [British Columbia], Alberta, or Manitoba, other Western provinces' budgets, if you're able to answer that.

Greg Gettle: — Yeah, I think . . . I appreciate the question. I think it's a really difficult question to answer for us, and the reason why is our makeup of our ministry is very diverse. When you include things like parks, stewardship, francophone affairs, Status of Women's branch, we have quite a diverse portfolio and there's really no true apples-to-apples comparison of what our overall ministry budget would be with any of those other provinces that you've mentioned.

Brent Blakley: — Okay. For example, they may have a different makeup of the ministry than we do in Saskatchewan? Okay, thank you very much.

Just another question about percentage budget. How much of this budget supports, goes towards third parties? For example, companies that you may contract work out to. For example, previously Aspira was doing your booking, was your booking company. So how much of that, percentage-wise of the budget, goes to third parties, third-party contractors?

Greg Gettle: — Thanks for the question. I'm going to just have to ask for a bit of clarification because you used two terms there, and sometimes they might get mixed together. So you said third parties, which would obviously mean anyone not us or government agencies. And then you also used contractors, I think. So I'm just trying to clarify, do you mean third parties, contractors, or third-party contractors?

Brent Blakley: — Third party. Sorry, I may have been using the term contractors differently. Contracts to third parties is specifically what I'm questioning about.

Greg Gettle: — Okay, I'm going to have to take my glasses on and off to read some of the fine print. But within our 2026-27 estimates, we would have a number of different lines that would be considered kind of third party that we fund. So things like our parks capital program for \$15 million, that's all third parties that we would use for that. We have 2.23 million that we provide to regional parks, 513,000 provided to urban parks.

And then within community engagement we have a number of lines. So there would be the community sport, culture, and recreation programs; that's 8.45 million. Heritage institutions and the Saskatchewan Science Centre, and that amount is 5.551 million. Saskatchewan Arts Board, 6.879 million; Community Initiatives Fund, 8.848 million; Creative

Saskatchewan for 12.125 million; and the Saskatchewan Heritage Foundation for 308,000.

In addition to that, we would also contract within parks for things like gravel, firewood, those types of things. And those are all funded out of our Commercial Revolving Fund, which is not mentioned in any of the numbers that I've just highlighted.

Brent Blakley: — Thank you very much. I'm going to get a little bit to some more kind of pointed questions I guess. You had mentioned — I think, Minister, it was in your budget highlights this year — the Royal Saskatchewan Museum, it says, will receive \$16.5 million to modernize the research, exhibits, and collections centre in Regina. So that's 16.5, for a total budget for Royal Saskatchewan Museum of 19.7 million. So if you take away that 16.5 million that you are paying out just this year, \$3.2 million remain. And that seems to be a little bit of a decrease of about 2.6 million from the funding support that they received last year of 5.8 million. Can that be explained?

Greg Gettle: — So I think you mentioned a decrease or the . . . Sorry, the difference was about 2.6 million. The large majority of that is related to that research, exhibits, collections centre. So we did have a budget in the current fiscal year, '25-26, of \$2.5 million to finish the design work and to begin construction on that facility. That's linked to the 16.5 million that we have in next year's budget to continue with that construction.

There's about 75-ish-thousand, maybe a little bit less or more, and that's related to some other things that are directly in the RSM. But they're very small amounts related to some improvement work, and then again some small salary reductions related to that other workforce adjustment program that I had spoken to earlier.

Brent Blakley: — Okay. So aside from those — the renovations, improvements, and such for both years — the funding support was about roughly 2.5, 2.6 million?

Greg Gettle: — Thank you for the question. So the operating funding for the Royal Saskatchewan Museum is essentially the same. It was 3.2 million in '25-26; it's about the same. A small reduction again related to that salary decrease for our workforce adjustment plan.

Brent Blakley: — Okay, that fits with the math that I have. Thank you very much.

[17:15]

Just a couple more, just a few more kind of pointed questions. With regards to the Globe Theatre in Regina, can the minister confirm what the current level of annual operating support provided to the Globe Theatre the ministry is giving?

Hon. Alana Ross: — Thank you for the question. The ministry doesn't fund the Globe Theatre directly. They do get annual operating funding from the Arts Board.

Brent Blakley: — So the Arts Board being under your portfolio as well, are you able to give us those numbers? Just how much . . .

Hon. Alana Ross: — They currently get \$245,000 annually.

Brent Blakley: — Okay, thank you very much. And has this amount changed in any significant way over the past number of years, particularly considering inflation? Or has it remained fairly much the same cost?

Dan French: — Dan French, assistant deputy minister, stewardship division. It's been pretty constant funds. Remained the same from SK Arts generally.

Brent Blakley: — Thank you. Next question. Has the ministry reviewed how and taken into account, I guess, how rising costs — labour, production, utilities — are affecting organizations like The Globe in the province's art community and other communities? Is that factored into your budgetary estimates at all?

Hon. Alana Ross: — Thank you for the question. When we were looking at developing the budgets again, we used the same philosophy. We were looking at how to protect the people of Saskatchewan. So what we were looking at is the maintenance of the stable funding that was in place in the sector. So we were still able to protect the services and to be able to provide the opportunities for people to enjoy what we have within this portfolio.

Brent Blakley: — Okay, thank you. Considering this constant funding, as you say, would the minister agree that maintaining this flat funding in the current economic environment can maybe put some pressures on programming and operations of these organizations?

Hon. Alana Ross: — Yes, so we recognize there are pressures everywhere, all provinces. The entire nation is facing pressures. And again what we were looking at was to be able to maintain the stable funding that was in place across our government to be able to protect the people of Saskatchewan.

Brent Blakley: — Okay, thank you very much. And just, Minister, are there any plans to revisit, for example, how The Globe Theatre is supported in light of the potential role that it has in downtown and vitality and growth? Any thoughts on that?

Dan French: — I thank you for the question. So we have ongoing dialogue with our third parties and our sectors, and we have ongoing discussions through the budget development process every year. So we certainly can't predict what next year is, but we can say for sure that we have pretty good relationships within the communities and we have those ongoing dialogues around budget developments.

Brent Blakley: — Okay, thank you very much. And just your opinion here: considering the positive economic impact that The Globe Theatre and organizations like it have on this province, doesn't it seem to make sense to look at the financial support of these organizations as a good investment rather than a risk?

Dan French: — Thank you again for the question. We do recognize the value of arts and culture in this province, and we do recognize the economic benefits of heritage, arts, and culture in the province as well. So we will continue to have those dialogues with our partners during budget developments in future

years.

Brent Blakley: — Thank you very much. I'm going to switch gears a little bit to parks since we have, I see, about five minutes left. Just a couple parks questions. I'm just curious about the wildfire season we had last summer. I'm just wondering if you could indicate how many provincial parks were impacted by the wildfires that we had last year, last summer?

Hon. Alana Ross: — Thank you for the question. There were a number of parks that were impacted by the smoke. It made camping difficult, I think, across the province this year. But in terms of closures, we had one park that was closed for the season, and we had another park that was partially closed.

Brent Blakley: — Okay. Then how about damages? How much has been spent so far repairing damages? And how much is perhaps projected to complete repairs for damages?

Paul Johnson: — Hello. Paul Johnson, assistant deputy minister of parks division. And thank you for the question. The reality is we are still assessing damages from the 2025 wildfire season. We know that we lost substantial capital infrastructure in a number of locations, Narrow Hills Provincial Park being the worst, but also in Lac La Ronge Provincial Park. And it will take us some time to fully assess that equipment because it sometimes can include underground infrastructure, waterlines, those types of things. And we're not open yet for the season. So we're still assessing that.

We have estimated the capital losses in all our parks from the fires to be two and a half million dollars, but there's also operational-cost expensed items, things like small tools, equipment, and other things as well. So we are still assessing the total value of the losses. Estimated capital is the best I can give you at two and a half million.

Brent Blakley: — Okay, thank you very much. And did you by chance track the impact that the wildfires had on attendance in the parks by cancellation of booked sites, etc.? Just how it affected that.

Paul Johnson: — Yes, thanks for the question. Overall across the parks system our attendance, our visitation we call it, was flat in 2025-26, which is a good-news story considering we closed the provincial park for almost the entire season. So actually if you take out the fire-impacted parks of Narrow Hills, Lac La Ronge, and to a degree Candle Lake Provincial Park, our overall camping numbers are up about 2 per cent year over year, which is a great-news story for us.

Brent Blakley: — Okay, thank you very much. Again switching gears a little bit. I note from previous budgets' estimates, we had from 2020 to 2025 Aspira was the online booking agent, I believe, for the campsites. And I believe that contract ended as of September 2025. I was wondering if you could tell me who is now doing that online booking and how long the contract is for?

Paul Johnson: — Thank you for the question. Yeah, the current service provider is Aspira Canada limited. So the original contract was 2020 to 2025, but in that original contract we had built in two additional one-year extensions. We evoked one of those one-year extensions. So the current contract with Aspira

Canada ends in September 2026.

[17:30]

And as you may be aware there's an RFP [request for proposal] open right now for a new contract provider, and that RFP I believe closes on June 1st. So we are seeking, actively seeking a new provider of the integrated campground management services, and that will determine who's the provider going forward after September 2026.

Brent Blakley: — Thank you very much. And you referred to it as Aspira Canada? It was my understanding that Aspira is a US [United States]-based company.

Paul Johnson: — Aspira Canada is the company we have the contract with currently. The one-year extension was signed with Aspira Canada. So they have a Canadian office. The company Aspira is owned by a US parent company called RA Outdoors. This is exactly the same structure as the other major Canadian supplier of an integrated campground management system — a Canadian company owned by a US parent company.

Chair B. McLeod: — Having reached our agreed-upon time for consideration of these estimates, I do have to entertain that we will now adjourn consideration of the estimates and supplementary estimates no. 2 for the Ministry of Parks, Culture and Sports. I want to really thank everyone for your participation and the good questions, good answers, and some really, really great interaction back and forth.

Minister, I'll leave the door open for you to have any closing comments.

Hon. Alana Ross: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. And thank you. I want to say thank you to the committee for attending here this evening, for the questions that you respectfully brought forward. I would like to thank my officials for being here and for all the support that they give us from our ministry during the year. I would like to also thank *Hansard* for taking the time; I know when we get into estimates they can be long evenings for you. And I think I've covered everyone, but just thank you very much. Thank you.

Chair B. McLeod: — Thank you so much. Any closing comments from the committee members at all? Please go ahead, MLA Blakley.

Brent Blakley: — Yeah, I would just like to reiterate what the minister said and just thank everybody, and her staff for being here and answering, kind of going through things with a fine-tooth comb trying to get us the answers. And just thank, again, everybody else for being here. And it's a little late, so again thank you very much for taking the time. Appreciate that.

Chair B. McLeod: — And thank you, everyone. We stand recessed now until 6:30 p.m. Thank you.

[The committee recessed from 17:32 until 18:30.]

**General Revenue Fund
Tourism Saskatchewan
Vote 88**

Subvote (TR01)

Chair B. McLeod: — Welcome back, committee members. We're now going to move on to consideration of the estimates for vote 88, Tourism Saskatchewan, subvote (TR01). Minister Ross is back with officials from Tourism Saskatchewan. And I would ask that officials please introduce themselves before they speak for the first time. And please don't touch the microphones. The *Hansard* operator will do that for you when you speak.

Before I get the minister to introduce her officials, I was remiss in saying we have a member sitting in for MLA Jacqueline Roy: MLA Tajinder Grewal from Saskatoon University-Sutherland. Wow, pulled that out of somewhere. Excellent. So, Minister, please introduce your officials and make your opening comments for us, please.

Hon. Alana Ross: — Thank you, Mr. Chair, and good evening, everyone. It's my pleasure to speak to the work of Tourism Saskatchewan and the actions being taken to strengthen the visitor economy and enhance the tourism experiences and destinations in the province.

So to begin, I will introduce CEO [chief executive officer] Jonathan Potts. Jonathan is joined by his colleagues Amy McInnis, vice-president of marketing and communications; Tracy Breher, vice-president of destination and workforce development; Rae Gallivan, vice-president of corporate services and chief financial officer. I also want to introduce my chief of staff, Elias Nelson, and my MA [ministerial assistant], Tyson Willock. Is that everyone?

The total operating budget of \$19.469 million supports Tourism Saskatchewan's 2026-27 business plan. The General Revenue Fund budget for Tourism Saskatchewan includes a \$384,000 increase to meet the collective bargaining agreement and out-of-scope compensation commitments. The GRF [General Revenue Fund] allocation also includes a \$193,000 decrease and a reduction of 2.0 FTEs due to an organizational restructuring resulting in efficiency improvements. Overall this represents a 1 per cent increase in funding from '25-26.

Saskatchewan's Growth Plan sets an ambitious goal of a 50 per cent increase of tourist expenditures by 2030, a jump from \$2.4 billion to \$3.6 billion annually. Tourism Saskatchewan has solid strategic priorities in place to achieve this goal, and a robust industry that plays an increasingly larger role in Saskatchewan's economy. These strategic priorities include growing visitation to Saskatchewan from national and international markets, strengthening the tourism workforce, growing tourism business across the province, and collaborating to advance tourism priorities.

Travel spending in Saskatchewan reached \$3 billion in 2024, which is the highest level ever recorded. While the full year of tourism data from Statistics Canada for 2025 will not be released until May of this year, preliminary tourism data points to an increase in visitor spending in the first nine months of this year.

Despite economic and geopolitical pressures, tourism activity in Saskatchewan remains stable, driven by strong domestic travel and continued US interest. Tourism represents 10 per cent of total employment in the province, with over 61,000 residents

employed in the sector during peak season. Hotel occupancy rates and average daily rates set new historic highs in 2025, with occupancy averaging 62 per cent and revenue per available room reaching over \$95 a year. The most likely reason for this increase are that more Canadians travelled within the country in 2025 instead of going to the US.

While American visitation has declined in many parts of Canada, Saskatchewan has continued to see steady US visitation since January of 2025 and experienced robust growth in July and August last year.

Tourism Saskatchewan is actively engaged in aviation partners to increase and sustain air connectivity and grow Saskatchewan's visitor economy. US air arrivals to Saskatchewan went up by 21.6 per cent in 2025, while total international passenger volumes have matched or surpassed 2019 levels. Daily non-stop service from Regina to Denver, launched in May of 2025, provides convenient connections for Saskatchewan travellers and US visitors, particularly hunters and anglers.

The Regina airport recorded over 1.1 million passengers in 2025, a 3.1 per cent increase over 2024, with transborder travel from the US up a remarkable 29.5 per cent year over year despite the ongoing market volatility. The Saskatoon airport recorded just over 1.5 million passengers in 2025, a 3 per cent increase over 2024, driven by a 6 per cent rise in domestic travel. Cross-border vehicle traffic from the US also had an increase of 2 per cent in 2025 over 2024.

Uncertainty around tariffs impacts traveller sentiment and booking intentions. However Saskatchewan's tourism markets are diversified, with strong resident travel and steady visitation from both domestic and international visitors. The Saskatchewan resident market is our strongest, accounting for approximately 60 per cent of visitor spending, while Canadians from outside the province comprise of another 26 per cent. Those coming from the United States make up just over 9 per cent, while overseas visitors account for nearly 5 per cent of our province's total visitor spending.

Efforts to concentrate on niche, high-spending traveller segments, such as hunters and anglers. These travellers are less influenced by political tensions and more motivated by their passion for the activities Saskatchewan offers.

Record wildfires in 2025 caused significant impacts on the tourism industry, including park and highway closures and reduced visitor safety perceptions, which led to cancellations and resulted in lost revenue for tourism businesses. Several initiatives were undertaken by Tourism Saskatchewan to support the industry and public during and after the wildfires. Targeted marketing campaigns to help offset the impacts of wildfires and to support local businesses included a summer to fall campaign for Waskesiu and Prince Albert National Park as well as a partnered social media campaign with Travel Manitoba, promoting winter experiences in the Denare Beach, Creighton, and Flin Flon area.

An additional investment has been made to support the promotion of visitation to the Waskesiu area for the summer of 2026. These efforts are intended to restore visitor confidence, stimulate spending, and highlight the resilience of the affected

communities.

Tourism Saskatchewan continues to actively engage with stakeholders to minimize the impact of natural disasters for both travellers and businesses, and to keep the visitor economy strong.

Tourism Saskatchewan's marketing strategy focuses on growing visitation and tourism, spending from long-haul, high-value market. Resident and short-haul markets are strong, but opportunities for significant growth are limited. Future growth will come from attracting higher spending travellers from domestic and international long-haul markets along with niche-interest travellers.

Marketing efforts are centred on strengthening Saskatchewan's reputation and competitive advantage through compelling storytelling. This includes delivering consumer-focused content that inspires travel while using research and evaluation tools to continuously refine tactics and better target potential visitors.

In 2025-26, Tourism Saskatchewan partnered with the Matador Network, the world's largest independent traveller publisher, to highlight Saskatchewan's niche, astrotourism experiences. In October, Tourism Saskatchewan hosted a Matador Network film crew to capture content featuring astrotourism experiences across the province. Filming highlighted the Cypress Hills Interprovincial Park and its dark-sky preserves, as well as the Great Sandhills. The final piece was exceptionally well produced and Tourism Saskatchewan invested in a campaign through Matador's audience channels to ensure the content reached the dark-sky enthusiasts around the world.

The month-long campaign earned over 12 million impressions, 5 million video views, and 45,000 page reviews. In June last year, Tourism Saskatchewan launched a redevelopment, consumer-facing website focused on bringing the tourism brand to life through storytelling and content. The site promotes niche experiences and highlights regional travel zones supported by visually engaging design, strong accessibility practices, and personalized user experiences. The website was built using research, stakeholder feedback, and best practices for search engine optimization.

Since launch, the online landscape has continued to evolve rapidly with the growth of AI [artificial intelligence]-driven research. Tourism Saskatchewan has undertaken a comprehensive AI visibility audit in its websites. Strategies from the audit will be implemented to ensure content surfaces effectively in AI search results, helping maintain visibility and competitiveness with other destinations. Maintaining relevance and remaining a trusted source of travel inspiration and information continues to be the priority for the marketing team.

Several in-house strategies were introduced to grow social audiences and increase engagement with content. These included phased approaches designed to guide audiences along the path to booking. As a result Tourism Saskatchewan gained an additional 31,000 followers across its social channels and achieved a 1.9 million engagements with its content.

Tourism Saskatchewan and Discover Saskatoon co-hosted the annual Travel Media Association of Canada Conference and Media Marketplace in Saskatoon in June of 2025. A significant

amount of media coverage has resulted, with 141 pieces being written and appearing in 175 unique digital and print publications. As of March 11th, 2026, the media advertising value for the printed pieces is over \$1.4 million, while impressions for online pieces are over 43 million.

A new multi-year travel trade and travel media strategy is being implemented to strengthen Saskatchewan's presence in international markets. This strategic approach is designed to grow niche demand and effectively leverage travel trade and media sales channels, enhancing global awareness and visitation. Focusing on key niches, including agri-tourism, fishing, birding, and astrotourism, the strategy will position the province as a preferred destination for specialized international markets, driving long-term growth in visitation and economic impact.

Tourism Saskatchewan is exploring opportunities in the meetings and incentives sectors tied to agriculture, where early signs point to promising potential.

In partnership with Destination Canada, a UK [United Kingdom]-based campaign ran from September through October. Strong overall visibility and traffic performance across paid media channels achieved more than 36 million impressions and over 500,000 clicks. That campaign significantly increased reach and awareness for Saskatchewan within key UK markets, successfully placing our province in front of highly qualified audiences.

[18:45]

A digital media marketing campaign ran across Germany, Austria, and Switzerland from mid-September through January of 2026, building a brand awareness, emotional engagement, and qualified traffic to key travel trade partners while motivating high-intent audiences for 2026.

US anglers and hunters represent a lucrative market for Saskatchewan's outfitting industry, generating over \$150 million annually in operational impact which includes revenue and operator capital spending. Tourism Saskatchewan actively targets the US market to generate awareness and demand for outfitted hunting and angling experiences. Hunters and anglers stay for a longer time in the province than average US visitors and are the province's highest spending travellers. Growing new markets for the outfitting sector for the future is a priority.

In 2025-26 Tourism Saskatchewan invested just over \$1 million to promote Saskatchewan's angling and hunting experiences in the US through agency-led and in-house advertising. Tourism Saskatchewan's annual fishing and hunting campaign ran from December of 2025 through March of 2026 and was delivered in three stages: building awareness amongst US hunters and anglers, highlighting easy access to Saskatchewan through direct flights from Denver and Minneapolis, and converting interest into bookings with urgent "book now" messaging. Leveraging the influence and reach of popular outdoor media personalities and programs is fundamental to influence anglers and hunters to choose Saskatchewan for their next adventure.

In 2025-26 Tourism Saskatchewan invested \$237,000 to support 25 media projects featuring outfitted experiences. Attracting new events to the province is a key strategic action to support

increasing visitor spending to \$3.6 billion by 2030. Events boost the local economy through visitor spending while enhancing the province's global reputation as an attractive and innovative destination.

Tourism Saskatchewan's events strategy prioritizes events that drive overnight visitation, increase tourism revenues, and maximize the economic impact of investments. This strategy supports the development and expansion of events, conventions, and trade shows, particularly business events and incentive travel and alignment with Saskatchewan's sectors of strength, including advanced manufacturing, agriculture, life sciences, technology, and natural resources. Two major event wins for the province were announced in the fall of 2025, this year. 2027 will be significant for Saskatchewan as we host the 100th Montana's Brier in Saskatoon as well as the 114th Grey Cup Festival in Regina.

Tourism Saskatchewan supports significant business events that attract visitors from across the world, including Canadian Western Agribition and Ag in Motion. Both were nominated for the Tourism Industry Association of Canada Business Event of the Year Award, which was won by Ag in Motion. Tourism Saskatchewan supported two major business events coming to the province in 2026: the ISSA [International Social Security Association] Mining Safety Conference, and MS [multiple sclerosis] Canada conference. Both will be held in Saskatoon as a direct result of the events strategy.

The marketing and event partnership program is Tourism Saskatchewan's largest funding program, providing investment to outfitters, resort-based accommodations, attractions, and destination marketing organizations to build digital capacity and to market to audiences within and outside the province. In 2025-26, 67 successful applicants received just over \$900,000 in funding. Tourism Saskatchewan is continually evaluating the criteria and application process to ensure the program is accessible, contributes to developing market readiness, and strategically supports the development of new markets.

The destination development team supports tourism businesses to expand into new markets, strengthen infrastructure, and develop new experiences that drive sales and grow the visitor economy. The team made 262 in-person industry visits over the past year to 220 unique businesses in 117 communities throughout our province.

The tourism development program supports established tourism businesses to expand and diversify their operations by supporting the development of new experiences, expanding seasonal operations, and increasing core business capacity. Funding support of up to \$40,000 per business is provided through an application-based, adjudicated process. Since its inception in 2017, Tourism Saskatchewan has provided over \$5 million in financial support to 161 successful applicants through this program. In 2025-26 a total of 33 applications were received with 26 tourism businesses funded for a total investment of just under \$900,000.

Some examples of projects funded through this program include a new lodge constructed for the provision of all-inclusive fish-and-hunt packages at an established camp. \$400,000 of funding was provided along with \$340,000 in private investment in the

construction of the new facility, resulting in over \$87,000 in sales in the initial year. A working grain farm was provided with \$40,000 to enhance their infrastructure to enable regular, on-site farm tours. The business was successful in providing almost 300 farm tours in the initial year to both domestic and international visitors.

Tourism Saskatchewan provides training to businesses to develop new tourism experiences, with specific focus on niche markets. In 2025-26, 55 participants received special training and mentoring based on business needs.

Tourism Saskatchewan recognizes the importance of Indigenous tourism and its role in advancing reconciliation through economic autonomy and cultural revitalization. Indigenous tourism businesses are supported by Tourism Saskatchewan through marketing, training, export readiness initiatives, content creation, and funding for experience development and co-operative marketing projects.

Saskatchewan was well represented on the national stage at the 2026 Indigenous Tourism Awards, held on February 19th in Edmonton, with four finalists and one winner taking home top honours. This year marks the highest number of finalists for the province since 2018. The finalists included Dakota Dunes Resort, Pêmiska Tourism, Wanuskewin Heritage Park, who was nominated in two categories. Dakota Dunes Resort took home the award for a business that launched a new experience.

In December of 2025, Tourism Saskatchewan entered into an MOU [memorandum of understanding] with Wanuskewin Heritage Park to support its UNESCO [United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization] World Heritage status bid and strengthen the development and promotion of Indigenous cultural tourism experience.

Tourism Saskatchewan provides training and education in tourism throughout the province for businesses and for individuals. In 2025-26 more than 15,000 people were trained in online and in-person courses that enhanced capacity and skills. These programs include Service Best customer service training and the Serve It Right Saskatchewan responsible service of alcohol program.

In response to the identified skill gaps, Tourism Saskatchewan continues to develop targeted training solutions. This includes new leadership and team dynamics training to support emerging supervisors, and new courses in guide training and food and beverage service, two areas facing heightened labour demand.

Labour shortages within the tourism sector continue to challenge business growth, especially in rural and remote areas. To help industry address these shortages, Tourism Saskatchewan delivers programming to increase awareness of tourism careers, particularly among high school students.

The Teacher Explorer's Club was created by Tourism Saskatchewan to foster a province-wide network of educator ambassadors who dedicate classroom time to exploring tourism careers. Members receive ready-to-use lesson plans, activities, and supplemental resources to support career pathway exploration.

The tourism Work Ready program, funded by the Ministry of Immigration and Career Training, works with organizations and employment agencies to identify underemployed or unemployed participants, offer online access to the courses, and provide networking opportunity with industry. In 2025-26 the program exceeded its goal of training more than 100 participants. Through this partnership, Tourism Saskatchewan aims to train and provide wraparound support to 75 participants in November.

Tourism Saskatchewan is partnering with Tourism HR Canada in a pan-Canadian training initiative to increase awareness and access for people with disabilities to enter into the tourism workforce. Training sessions are being delivered to reach 40 businesses within Saskatchewan.

A series of webinars and workshops were hosted to address a range of important topics, including digital marketing, recruitment and retention strategies, accessibilities, trends in social media, building teams, handling difficult conversations, and the use of AI in business. Over 750 participants have completed online seminars and workshops as of March of this year. These resources help businesses market and sell their products, meet customer expectations, and recruit and retain staff.

Industry training on emerging technologies and consumer demands is a priority to help tourism businesses remain competitive. Over the past few months, several in-person industry workshops have been hosted by Tourism Saskatchewan to educate participants about Saskatchewan's tourism brand and AI.

In addition to webinars and workshops on ways to use AI, Tourism Saskatchewan is working on a pilot project with a small group of operators to identify ways AI may create efficiencies in routine work. This sort of modernization is critical given the current labour challenges, and the results will be used to determine future ways Tourism Saskatchewan may be able to help support business adoption of AI.

A skilled and competitive workforce enhances visitor experience and improves destination competitiveness. Combined with training initiatives and tourism career promotion, these efforts support a vibrant tourism industry in our province.

So in conclusion, thank you. I appreciate the time that has been afforded to discussing Tourism Saskatchewan's leadership and workforce. Thank you for your attention, and my officials and I will be happy to take any questions you may have.

Chair B. McLeod: — So thank you, Minister. I will now open the floor to questions, and I will recognize . . . Who first?

Don McBean: — That would be me.

Chair B. McLeod: — That'll be MLA McBean. Please go ahead.

[19:00]

Don McBean: — A part of me wants to say, sounds great, let's go home. Wow, I have pages and pages and 18 tabs open with all sorts of possible ideas, and I feel like you checked off lots of them

in the discussion. But still I have a big number one beside the question, was this a good year? Just a very simple . . . Yeah, I mean every year we say, oh, this is great; we're doing all these wonderful things. Can I call you Jonathan?

Jonathan Potts: — Sure.

Don McBean: — Yeah. Jonathan, you've done this for a few years or more?

Jonathan Potts: — Yes.

Don McBean: — And how does this year stand up?

Jonathan Potts: — Sure, and the short answer is, it was a good year. So for the industry, again the industry's over 3,000 attractions, businesses, and events across the province. You know, we're tracking . . . We were at being a \$3 billion industry in 2024. In 2025, as the minister mentioned, we won't have numbers for a couple months, but we expect that to grow. We're tracking ahead of 2024 in 2025.

You know, in a province as big as Saskatchewan, there's always stronger aspects of the industry and maybe things that go wrong in a particular year. But this year, this past year was very, very good overall.

Don McBean: — I sort of expected that. And I know when we get down to the budget numbers, yeah, we're up 191,000 I think this year. But still, from two years ago, we're down. Maybe just remind us why there was such a drop from '24-5 to '25-6 and what it is that we can do or what impact that might be having.

Jonathan Potts: — Thank you for the question, Mr. McBean. My memory doesn't go back that far, so I had to talk to the smart people behind me. A few things. So as a treasury board Crown, we do receive funding or can receive funding from partners. Federal partners, for example, like PrairiesCan [Prairies Economic Development Canada].

So we did have one-time funding for a marketing program to help bolster the assets content that our business and meeting events programs had, and the two major cities had to promote themselves in those markets. We did have one-time Grey Cup funding in that year as well, so of course that went away.

With Destination Canada, we used to receive funding in the order of about \$250,000 per year, along with Travel Manitoba, who received the same amount. So the two provinces promoted our, you know, what we consider to be the best freshwater fishing in North America, and how we promoted it in the US. So that program went away with some federal cuts. And just generally event-based . . . you know, when you see fluctuations like that, it's often event-based, so that in any given year it can go up or it can go down.

Don McBean: — Thank you. And certainly we understand that there are those fluctuations. And I think if I understood correctly, if I'd have gone back to '23-24, maybe I would have seen a big bump in '24-5. And I understand how that goes. There's the question of, you know, the ongoing funding and what comes in from other sources and who you're partnering with. Do you project that there's stable funding coming from federal and

other? Or is that something that we can predict at all?

Jonathan Potts: — With federal funding, you know, in the current state, as everyone knows, there's been some significant cuts at the federal level. That certainly trickles down to an organization like Tourism Saskatchewan. So I think you probably have access to our business plan. You can see that the bulk of our federal funding has currently dried up. That doesn't mean it's gone forever, but just in the current climate it's maybe not as much of a priority for the federal government.

In recent years, especially in and just after the pandemic, there were some federal programs through PrairiesCan that we were able to access, and you would have seen increased investment from the federal government. Right now tourism isn't a priority.

There is one project that we'll . . . I won't name it because it's not anywhere near signed, but one project we're looking at with PrairiesCan. But that would likely be more of a flow-through than anything.

Don McBean: — Thank you very much for that. I'm going to jump to hunting and fishing. I think, you know, I made the mistake of reading last year's *Hansard* and thought, oh my God, I've already said all these things before. But you know, I was a fishing guide for five summers in the '80s, right. So hunting and fishing, especially the fishing part. And I guess I can't go through this without asking about the hike or the realignment of the hunting and fishing licensing. It's not exactly . . . It probably wasn't a tourism idea, but it happened.

And I'm wondering if there's some sense of what the rise in or raising of hunting and fishing licence might be, if that's looked at, or even maybe where it came from. Yeah.

Chair B. McLeod: — I'll just interject here. That largely is a question that's more connected with the Environment side of the file. So I think there's some broad strokes that you maybe can touch on there, but I'm not looking for a complete answer, knowing that it is an environmental file that'll be there. So thank you.

Don McBean: — Perfect.

Chair B. McLeod: — Yes.

Don McBean: — Interesting, because it aligns with the follow-up.

Chair B. McLeod: — Yes.

Jonathan Potts: — So if I may. Thank you, Mr. Chair. That is definitely the context. So it's primarily an Environment initiative.

In terms of demand for licences, I don't think it'll have a significant impact, especially when we're talking about the US visitor. Our US visitor is a high-spending visitor, so you know, the cost of a licence isn't going to impact their decision to travel here or not.

Don McBean: — Because as well as the raising of the cost, there was a fairly significant — but again, it came from Environment

— the restriction of the season pass for hunting from out of province and out of country. Again, that's not your call. I wasn't so aware that there was such a virulent illegal outfitting program going on, but apparently there was.

And it seems to be well received, but I'm curious when that kind of decision gets made by Environment — maybe for good environmental reasons — how Tourism feels about that. Five-day hunting is not uncommon. Like, people like to come and hunt for a week, say. Do we have some sense that that might impact?

Hon. Alana Ross: — So thank you for the question. Interestingly enough, we met with the outfitters' group this morning, and they actually are supportive of the changes that have been made in Environment to try and get a bit more control over some of the illegal outfitting that's going on in the province.

And as Jonathan alluded to, the people who are coming up and are taking part in this, like, the travellers that are coming, they spend a lot. So marginal increases in the licences isn't going to impact them or prevent them from coming up to Saskatchewan. They come here for the experience, and they're quite prepared to pay for it.

Don McBean: — No doubt. Some of this will just be you helping me understand. In the '26-7 business plan, there's a line, partnership revenue at \$9,000 — page 13 in the business plan — and that seems to be a significant decrease. And I'm not going to tell you where to find it, but I have \$70,000 in front of me and now it's down to nine, which either I'm misunderstanding something or something has changed. Yes, in the partnership revenue idea.

Jonathan Potts: — Just as I start to answer that question, I'm going to take a moment to give a plug for our CFO [chief financial officer] who's going to be retiring at the end of June. So Rae Gallivan's put in 28 years with the Government of Saskatchewan and is, in a few months, going to be enjoying more time with her partner, their dog Teal, and her two young grandchildren, as well as obviously her kids. So just want to say thanks as I look back here for some of these answers.

So in short, there's one significant change there. In past years we have partnered with the Ministry of Parks, Culture and Sport on the Saskatchewaner program. We've taken the program over completely, so they are no longer a partner in the program. Doesn't mean we're not promoting parks. But that's the revenue difference.

Don McBean: — Well that does explain it. And that also kind of leads into a question that's queued up.

You know, the whole idea . . . I sat here for two hours with Parks — Sports, Parks and Culture; Culture, Parks and Sports. And you know, the shadow ministers on this side, we joke like, where does your job or where does your portfolio end and mine start? Looking at across Canada, you know, sort of the tourism per capita, and the numbers are just like crazy because some of them are tourism, arts, culture, sport. Some of them are just tourism. Tourism and parks. Community. You know, it goes all over the place.

And I guess if there's a question in that, it's just sort of a bit of

an understanding of how unique or how siloed tourism is, perhaps. And probably in my limited understanding of financial operations — I'm sorry — the money's coming from tourism, goes just to . . . It's recorded under tourism, but there's obviously there has to be a lot of crossover with all of this in the training, in the labour, in all of that.

Can you give me a better sense of how that's working in Saskatchewan so that the comparative of tourism per capita doesn't look so awkward?

[19:15]

Jonathan Potts: — Sure. I don't have per capita numbers that you're looking at. And you're right, the mandates of the different provincial marketing organizations — so the acronym for an organization like Tourism Saskatchewan in the country is a PMO [provincial marketing organization] — the mandates are very different across the country when you look at them.

So you know, we have the broadest mandate in the sense of we do have marketing, obviously. Visitor services, destination, workforce development, policy, research, and so on are all in our own shop. In some provinces it's just the marketing piece. In some provinces they also have, as you alluded to, the responsibility for things like provincial parks. So you're looking at very different pieces across the country. You can't really compare apples to apples.

Don McBean: — Okay, which goes together with, I think there's a reduction in marketing from something like 51 per cent to 44 per cent of the budget this year. Is that a function of reduced revenues or just a reprioritization of how this goes? And maybe you already answered that. Go ahead.

Jonathan Potts: — Again, so thank you for the question. Yeah, it's actually a pretty simple answer for this one. We just moved budget from one area to another. So the minister had spoken about our MEPP [marketing and event partnership program] program, marketing events and partnership program. We had moved dollars in our budget from marketing over to destination development. So it's 700-odd thousand dollars plus one position's salary went over there as well. So really you're just looking at sort of an internal shifting of the dollars.

Don McBean: — I know I have a bit of a reputation; I always have to tell a story. But as a principal, I drove my admin assistant crazy because all I ever wanted to see was the last number on the bottom right-hand corner, or the number on the bottom right-hand corner of the last page. And she wanted me to understand that . . . So what I think your answer is, is that it's about the same. There's still the same emphasis on marketing and effort being made. It's just being called a couple of different things now?

Jonathan Potts: — That's correct.

Don McBean: — Yeah. Okay, we're chugging through this. Because in the priorities for this year, AI is a big deal. It's one of the two in the highlighted initiatives in this year. I get it, you know, it's 2026. Started in 2024, everything's AI. I guess if there's a single question to start with, we know that AI is important. We know that AI is taking over lots of aspects of what it is. Maybe you could give a bit of a general sense of it, and then

how much of it could be considered in terms of staff reductions and salary reduction. Yeah, we'll start with that one.

Jonathan Potts: — Again thank you for the question. Happy to talk about this one at length actually, depending on how long an answer you want.

Don McBean: — Well the clock isn't advancing so very quickly. Go ahead.

Jonathan Potts: — I'll maybe start by saying we're very, very proud of our organizational culture at Tourism Saskatchewan. So you know, first of all it's a place that people like to work. Our employee engagement surveys, you know, that are done across government in every ministry, Crown, etc., we do very, very well in those. You know, that's a function of the people that I work with. So our employees developed a culture statement. So we have words like innovation, creativity, empowerment, collaboration, and respect in there, so we are constantly looking to evolve.

We are a part of government obviously, but we are also in an industry — marketing generally and tourism specifically — where AI adoption is huge. So we have to keep up with the times if you will, and you know, not be left behind.

And frankly we try to position ourselves — and you might appreciate this joke because I know that you're from southwest Saskatchewan — I say, not at the vanguard; my board Chair says, yes we try to be Ponteix. So you know, we want to be close to the vanguard, but not leading the way.

So we are always thinking about ways to incorporate AI in our work. We completed a digital transformation strategy in the last couple of years. So that's helped guide some of the steps that we're taking. We actually have six or seven AI projects under way right now. But I'll stop and answer the first part of your question and maybe follow up after if you're interested.

So in terms of staff reduction, that's not part of what we're looking at. What we're looking at is better utilizing people's time. So if I can give you an example of, just a simple example. On our IT [information technology] support team, one of the staff is developing an AI tool that when people submit a ticket for a problem, you know, that that team usually needs to solve, they're developing a tool that can solve the simple problems and solve the problem without having to waste the time of our IT professionals who can better utilize their time doing something else.

But we're looking at all sorts of different ways. So we had a new employee start in December or January — I forget which — a younger person. She took the opportunity with our onboarding materials to feed them into our internal AI processes. Developed a better onboarding tool in her first couple of weeks of work. And obviously for somebody that's going through the onboarding process, you know, she's the actual user of the product, right. So those are the kind of things that, some of the easy-to-understand things that we're doing right off the bat. Happy to talk more about that, too. So no staffing reductions, no salary reductions tied to AI.

Don McBean: — Far be it for me to fearmonger on AI; I'm

actually an all-in, both feet, with the idea. But it still needs to be articulated and addressed. I've learned from hanging out with tourism people this last year a bit that a lot of people are doing their own AI, like they're planning their own trips, they're planning . . . And I hear you, it's sort of part of the marketing, it's part of the . . . maybe the AI part of it as well.

The packages that we're creating, the promotion, the marketing that you're doing, do you feel that it's having the effect, or are people quite . . . Maybe this is just anecdotal, but people plan their own trips by feeding in, "Saskatoon, three days, two kids, what do I do?" And the free AI is all right there for us.

Do we recognize that? How do we feel? Is the marketing that Tourism Saskatchewan is developing in competition or in parallel or how do we situate that, I wonder?

Jonathan Potts: — You nailed it there, Mr. McBean, in terms of how people are using AI for searches. And that's why again, like I say, we want to be Ponteix. I do this myself. If I'm going to Ontario, I don't go to Ontario's website to look at things to do. I'll say, I'm going to Ottawa for three or four days, these are the types of things I want to do, maybe the types of restaurants I want to experience, and so on and so forth, right?

So we know that and that's why we're always research driven and consumer driven. So for years it's been called search engine optimization on standard websites, as you would know. Now it's called generative engine optimization, or GEO. So what we have to do with our content is make sure that AI tools generate answers that include, cite, or mention tourism and tourism experiences in Saskatchewan, perhaps Tourism Saskatchewan.

People are used to Google, for example, where you would get the list, you get 10 items on a page and then 10 on the next page and so on. That's not where things are going anymore. Now it's about getting that, like you said, that personalized response based on the query that you put in.

So we've just done content audits on all four of our web properties to see how well they appear in GEO searches and where they show up in things like Copilot, ChatGPT, Gemini, Claude, and so on. So one of our goals in the upcoming year is to work on our GEO rankings. I think that's probably the main thing I want to say about that right now. But yeah, it's a major focus of our work that we want to improve our GEO rankings continuously because AI continues to evolve and we'll continue to evolve.

Don McBean: — You mention, you know, you're data driven of course. I spent a little bit of time sort of looking at all the metrics. And you and Minister Ross, you threw out a lot of numbers of this initiative bringing in this many million hits and views and all of that. And the question behind that observation is, yes, we're data driven. But I'm curious how you see the data actually influencing the decision. Or is it more confirmation? Oh we did this and we got 62 or 62,000 hits? Which way do you see it? Do you see data driving it, or just sort of as a confirmation that what you're doing is working now?

And I'm probably going back into my educational background and saying, yeah, is the data making a difference, or is it just recording? And I'm curious what your sense of that might be.

[19:30]

Jonathan Potts: — All right, I'll start with maybe talking a little bit about our strategies, which you've probably seen in the business plan as well. So generally speaking with our marketing strategy, again it's very much data driven. I think I might have said this last year, so please bear with me.

Don McBean: — I might not remember it.

Jonathan Potts: — I might not either. You know, in this province we know that we don't compete one-on-one with California or Florida or Niagara Falls or Vancouver, whatever it might be. We pursue a niche strategy in our marketing and in our development work because we know that we can outcompete other destinations across Canada and North America and often around the world on that basis. So that's all driven by data.

So we've made a number of significant choices in our marketing and in our development work that are tied to niches. So things like birding we can outperform. We're already outperforming in things like hunting and fishing, nature photography, astrotourism — I'll talk about that maybe in a little bit — and so forth.

All those decisions are made from data analysis. So taking it to actual marketing, to your point, reporting is great. That's something that we do, and obviously we need to do for the purposes of using public dollars and obviously in any context. But more important to us as marketers is our ability, first of all, to use that data to predict behaviour because tourism is all about consumer behaviour.

So we want to be able to predict behaviour, and ideally we want to be able to prescribe behaviour. And I know that sounds manipulative or maybe Machiavellian or something, but ideally you want to be able to say, if we spend X number of dollars on a particular marketing campaign using this type of messaging, we will generate Y in return. So that's the nature of our business and how we want to use that data.

Don McBean: — Okay, so then are there instances — and I'm not asking you to out yourselves — but instances where you're starting a project, you're taking the data, and you're saying, no, this isn't working? We need to reorient? We need to recalibrate something?

Jonathan Potts: — Absolutely. One of the standard approaches in modern marketing and digital marketing is you can course correct all the time. So you don't make a million-dollar investment and then — unless you're doing something like TV advertising, which we don't do anymore — find out that it's a failure.

So what you do is digital advertising, and you see how the market responds to the ads you're putting out in real time. And if they're performing the way that you want them to perform — maybe the way that you predicted, to my earlier point — then you continue down that path. If they're not responding to that, you can pull that type of advertising or modify it to try to get a different result.

Don McBean: — And I don't want to belabour the point so much. I guess when we know that we have X million views and that many hits, do we have the causal connection between that

and an increase in tourism? Because I mean I'm not pointing a finger, but I'm saying our tourism numbers are going up a bit, and I get that there's lots of competition out there, etc. But do we know that the metric that we're using is having dollars on the ground or dollars in the pocket? Is there a way that we're able to identify that? Yeah.

Jonathan Potts: — Okay, I'll try and answer that one in a couple different ways. So we'll start with going back to . . . I'll use this as an example. We did an in-house winter campaign just over the last few months. So we started with . . . We always talk about the marketing funnels. So you start with more data, more content at the top. As I mentioned about course correction, you put it all out there and you start to see what's working and maybe what's not working. So over time you pare that down.

What you want to get to is go from awareness of the experience to a perception that it's a great experience. Eventually work your way down, as I'm sure you know, to actually booking, right? So that's the ultimate metric is if somebody books a trip and dollars are exchanged. That's what we want. And so over the course of our winter campaign we did exactly that.

I was just saying with Amy that it didn't bring those results — much to my chagrin — to answer your question. But our team did a really great job of doing exactly those things, of really focusing in on the things that mattered. So by the end of the campaign, what we were focused on was snowmobiling and cozy accommodations, so you know, kind of getaways for people to get to in Saskatchewan in the winter.

Another piece because — and probably if you read our materials, which I'm sure you did — we do want to be an export industry in general terms and in specific terms, so bringing in dollars from outside the province. And we care a great deal if it comes from within the country but not within Saskatchewan because it's still new dollars to the province, and ideally a true export industry in having the dollars come from outside the country.

So we marketed that campaign basically in Western Canada and out to Ontario. When we saw we were getting more hits early on in Saskatchewan — I think because people in Saskatchewan were familiar with what we were putting in front of them so they were generally interested in clicking — we actually moved away from that so we could get more of those out-of-province visitors from around the country, and then focused on clicks to operator sites, so getting to that sort of “book now” option. So that's how we do that.

I do want to come back to GEO for just a second because that is something that's transforming the way we think about our website. And it's exactly what you described. So even up until the last few years — and people obviously still use things like Google or Bing or what have you to do their searches — but we used to, and we do still, measure the amount of time spent on our website.

One of the things we've noticed over the past fiscal year is that because of GEO, we're seeing less human time spent on our website and more AI tools spending time on our website finding the data for those answers that you're looking for in the types of searches you describe. So our time spent on our website has actually decreased, partly because it's AI tools scraping our

website to get that data as opposed to a human spending time clicking and reading. So you know, some of our metrics over time become, I don't want to say passé, but the relevance decreases due to the advancement in technology.

Don McBean: — Fascinating. As soon as you started saying that I thought, oh, I know where this is going. Yeah, crazy. Okay, thank you. It's very reassuring to hear those answers articulated as clearly.

Little bit shifting gear, I guess, is to go to the whole work readiness pilot — you know, well the specific pilot project that you have, the whole work readiness. You know, I've met with a number of different people. Found out that the guy with Saskatchewan hospitality, I taught his kids, you know, when I had a meeting with him. It's a big deal. And I noticed that you introduced — I didn't catch your name — but the destination workforce development person, who I think I'm looking at.

And again there's all sorts of numbers that come up with this. There's all sorts of different programs. So let me try and start with one specific . . . Maybe just explain — because I wasn't as aware of the Immigration and Career Training until I read it here just a day or two ago — how hands-on Tourism Saskatchewan is in building those numbers of trained persons.

Tracy Breher: — Tracy Breher, vice-president of destination and workforce development. Okay, so I think you've asked a bunch of questions. To start with the Work Ready program, for a number of years — well, almost 30 years — Tourism Saskatchewan delivered a program called Ready to Work which was funded partially by the Ministry of ICT [Immigration and Career Training] and partially from assorted federal government programs. And over the last year and a half, the federal government programming has stopped for that.

So we had a gap and we have managed to build a partnership with the Ministry of Immigration and Career Training to be able to provide funding that we can still provide tourism-specific training to people within the province to get them the extra skills they need to be able to go work within the industry. With the former Ready to Work program, we delivered a very intense 30-week program teaching entry-level skills, workplace essentials, some really basic pieces to help people who have barriers to sustained employment be able to get working.

And what we're doing now, instead of doing all of the entry-level training, is we're partnering with other groups and associations, organizations across the province who are already doing that entry-level training. So there are groups all over the province who are already doing essential skills training, helping people get ready to go to work.

But when we talked to them, there are some gaps sometimes with once they've done that training. And they are pooling together funding from assorted groups to do that training. Once they're done that training, the people, the program participants, don't always have the skills to go right to work. So we've been able to come in and then provide the tourism-specific occupation training at the end of those programming to be able to then get people working in the tourism industry.

And it's working. It's working really well. So not only are the

participants coming out with national certifications in tourism-specific occupations, we are hosting little events after with employers and the participants as well as the programs that we have partnered with to kind of find these participants. And they are getting hired in the lunches. So we bring everybody together for lunch. We bring some employers in, we bring the participants in, and people are getting hired right in the room.

[19:45]

Don McBean: — The way you describe that, it makes a good deal of sense to be training people in a very general sense with a specific tourism part at the end of it. Not sure if this relates exactly, but there is a performance measure in the business plan now. And again maybe just my curiosity. Number of people trained annually, 16,000-some. And then number of individuals trained through the entry program, 125. And I just, I don't understand what we're measuring there.

Tracy Breher: — So the 125 would be the Work Ready program specifically. The 16,000 — and it is now, our number for this fiscal year that's just ending, is just over 15,000 — is number of people trained through all Tourism Saskatchewan programs. So we offer a number of training programs. We deliver the Serve It Right and CannaSell programs. We deliver customer service training. We deliver other . . . we work with businesses around custom tourism training even. And so those numbers, and then including our webinar numbers, will hit just over 15,000.

Don McBean: — The disparity in those numbers kind of struck me. And again there's probably a good reason that it was 125 and now it's 75 is the target. Is there . . .

Tracy Breher: — It's a pilot program. We started as a pilot program. We're in year two of kind of a pilot program and we are working out all of the bumps along the way. So what we found the first year was that there was some more administration than what we had thought. So the second year we've managed to make sure that we've got the staff resources to provide the support to the agencies that we're working with to be able to do a really good job.

Don McBean: — But it's the same program. You still have the same target. It's going to work better with a lower number of people that you're going to be working with. Okay.

And again I'm not sure how this can be answered exactly, but you don't have to have paid very much attention to know that tourism is a very seasonal thing. And this is what I heard from just about everybody that I might have spoken with. You know, how do we turn it . . . And snowmobiling and niche marketing might be part of it. But is there a sense of what can be done to keep people working in tourism 12 months a year? Is there a target for that?

Tracy Breher: — We will always have a seasonal industry, but we are doing a lot of work to help businesses expand. And we're doing that in multiple ways.

So the diversification funding program helps businesses expand into, like expand their operating seasons. We help businesses fund . . . like we fund businesses to winterize cabins as an example, which all of a sudden means that they can be open year-

round instead of just over the warmer spring-to-fall seasons. And those sort of pieces will help with the seasonality.

The rest of it, you know, we talk to employers about innovative business practices, thinking about HR [human resources] a little bit differently. We have, you know, an industry built of a lot of part-time positions, and we know that that is difficult. But there are ways to think about positions differently by partnering with another business in your community and offering a full-time job where you might have two part-time jobs. And there are ways to I guess modernize how employers are thinking about employment that way. And we're doing lots of work that way through the webinars, through coaching with businesses to try and talk about creative solutions to the challenges.

We know there's lots of challenges. Recruiting workers I guess is the largest challenge facing tourism businesses globally, and we see that. I mean what is going on in Saskatchewan certainly parallels that. Younger workers are less likely to accept those unpredictable work schedules that come with tourism jobs, and seasonal demand increases the reliance on those part-time, temporary, and kind of multi-job workers.

So combined with all of that I think we have a widening skills gap, especially around digital and leadership skills. So technical and digital literacy is one of the fastest growing skill needs across tourism roles, and proficiency is pretty low. So there are ways again training-wise that we can address some of those things.

The other piece is that tourism jobs require a lot of soft skills, so those interactions, to be able to talk to people, to be able to think on your feet, respond to questions. And those again are a bit of a challenge with some of those kids who are growing up living on their phones.

And a phenomenal opportunity — 7 out of 10 workers get their first jobs in tourism. And so whether you stay in the industry or whether you go to work somewhere else, the skills that you're learning in those tourism jobs are transferrable to other careers and other occupations that people might take on. So those are certainly some of the places.

And Jonathan was worried about, you know, you unleashing a lot of response around AI. I'm sorry because, you know, our passion towards this I guess comes through here.

Don McBean: — Yeah, no. No, that I guess I already said it. I'm very comfortable with the idea that we're adopting this. Maybe a bit of, kind of jumping around for a few different more little specific things.

Minister Ross, you mentioned some big-ticket events coming in. The Grey Cup. You reminded me about the Brier. So the Grey Cup's in 2027. Is that started? Is Tourism Saskatchewan involved in the Grey Cup or is it a CFL [Canadian Football League]-Roughrider thing? I'm curious. Is there money from the government going to the Grey Cup at this point already? How that might be working, and the Brier and the few others that you mentioned.

Jonathan Potts: — So again, thanks for the question. As you know, the minister mentioned and I mentioned in some of my earlier remarks, event funding is part of what we do. And helping

local partners get their bids over the finish line with the assistance of government is a big part of what our team does.

So for big events . . . And I would suggest that the two biggest events that Saskatchewan really is best suited to realize from a sporting perspective are the Grey Cup and the Brier. The Brier is the biggest curling event in the world and has, you know, 8 or 10 days of national eyeballs turned on Saskatchewan — millions of viewers and great opportunity for exposure but also great revenue opportunities for the host community, in this case Saskatoon.

Grey Cup is certainly a similar thing, as you well know. So yes, part of our role is to work with the Roughriders, the city in the case of the Grey Cup, Regina Hotel Association, and so forth to help put together the bid and to help work it through government to receive some government funding to bring that event here. And that's standard across the country.

Don McBean: — Yes, okay, which kind of tags in with another line of thought that I've had. And some of the learning that I've benefited and enjoyed this year is all the different destination groups — the Discover Saskatoon, the Moose Jaw one. And anyway they're everywhere.

And the question behind that is, you know, how much of that is a partnership? How much of that is a competition amongst them — I get the sense that there's a certain amount of competition between the various centres, the urban centres — and what role Tourism Saskatchewan has in coordinating that or partnering with all of that?

Jonathan Potts: — Yeah. So you know, in Saskatchewan there are two major . . . I had mentioned that the acronym for an organization like ours is PMO. For Regina and Saskatoon they're called CMOs, or city marketing organizations. The structures are very, very different in Regina and Saskatoon.

So in Saskatoon there's Discover Saskatoon that does a lot of that work. And then a lot of its funding support comes from the SDMH [Saskatoon Destination Marketing Hotels], the Saskatoon destination hotel . . . sorry. SDMH anyway, the hotels association. So in Regina there's a separate hotels association and Tourism Regina. Tourism Regina is part of the city of Regina. Certainly they compete for things like business events, sometimes sporting events. Typically though each city has its own specialties or things that it does better perhaps than the other.

If you think of business events, often that's tied to even just different aspects of the agricultural sector that one city or the other might specialize in, different types of mining, you know, forestry, etc. We talked about some of those, you know, areas of strength for the province. If you think about our universities — natural sciences — there's different strengths at each university as well.

So where we love to see things go is when our partners are really focused on their strengths. That doesn't mean they don't end up competing for certain events. But if, you know, Saskatoon will be hosting the Brier here in relatively short order, it's more likely to be Regina's turn next time, right. So that's typically the way things work with the rights holders like the Canadian curling association too.

Don McBean: — Again I warned you I'm going to start sort of jumping around all over. This was already a question, and then during the Parks . . . Sport, Parks and Culture — I really should learn how to say that properly. You know, there was talk about Globe. And I know within Tourism and working in partnership with other shadow . . . You know, we've met with any number of local organizations, from the Wonderhub to the Jazz Festival. All these different things, and in my mind these are Tourism.

But I've heard various . . . You know, it goes back to the metric idea. If you don't have someone staying in a hotel overnight, and you don't have a way of tracking that, won't some of those organizations feel that they're passed over by Tourism? They're not recognized as a tourist event. I'm wondering what interest or focus there is within Tourism Saskatchewan for all of the local festivals going on. Could be theatre. Could be any number of . . . yeah.

[20:00]

Jonathan Potts: — Yeah, so again it's a bit of a multi-part answer, so please bear with me. You know, it's something that certainly I've dealt with throughout my career and our team has dealt with through their careers as well.

You know, first of all I'd say Saskatchewan and Saskatchewan communities, Saskatchewan people are very good at putting on events. In communities big and small you can find, you know, very well-organized events that draw people in from the community and also from beyond in some cases.

We are Tourism Saskatchewan so our focus is always going to be on those things that generate tourism dollars, so generate people travelling, spending more money on things like restaurants, accommodations, you name the activity when they're in the community.

So for us one of the things we look at is the distance that an event draws people from. Ideally, and a lot of organizations do this, but ideally we look at, you know, it's very helpful if an event tracks its visitors. It doesn't have to be an in-depth survey, but if they have the ability to ask people where they're from, how long they're staying, if they're staying in accommodations, if they're eating out, those kind of things, it really helps us in our metrics.

We also look for things, you know, like I said . . . So that leads to economic impact. But we also look for things like brand alignment. So there's literally hundreds and hundreds if not thousands of events in theory we could support, but we do have to draw the line somewhere because our budget is not infinite. So we do look for things like brand alignment, things that are going to help tell the story of Saskatchewan. And as I've talked about our data-driven marketing approach, we're looking often for events that help tell the story of Saskatchewan, help tell the story of our communities.

So some of the events that you mentioned too certainly receive funding, and there's a broad spectrum that do right across the province.

Don McBean: — And I wouldn't take that any further because then I would be outing people who are complaining, you know. Heaven forbid we should do something on that order.

I had Wanuskewin down as something, but I believe, Minister Ross, you pretty much addressed that. You're aware of, obviously, and supporting the UNESCO. I've been out there a few times, partly because my riding goes right up to the edge of Wanuskewin. Again the question would be, you're aware of Wanuskewin. You know how important the UNESCO heritage would be. How do you feel their chances are at this point? And is there something that Tourism Saskatchewan is doing to ensure that they're moving forward? Is there collaboration? That sort of thing.

Jonathan Potts: — So I'm not going to speculate on their chances. I don't think that would be appropriate. But I think they're high. I'll just leave it at that. We work very closely with Wanuskewin, and we have for a very long time. We really enjoy working with their team, and I mean that most sincerely. We did sign an MOU a few months ago with the intention of supporting Wanuskewin in its bid to becoming a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

The purpose of that . . . I mean I just stated the purpose of that, I guess, but you know, by doing so we are agreeing to support Wanuskewin in terms of marketing, in terms of training and education, in terms of experiential development. It's a very complex bid, and in a way I'm grateful they're doing it and not me, because it is extremely complex and multi-faceted. But any of the facets that we can lend a hand on, we are trying to help with.

So that was the purpose of the MOU, to make sure that, you know, we can provide that support and are aware of that support that is needed, and needed at different times as they push to become a heritage site.

Don McBean: — An MOU that the government signs with Wanuskewin, is that something I should have noticed? Are those publicized? Am I not just looking in the right place?

Jonathan Potts: — We didn't . . . I'll be honest. We didn't put a news release out with it. Really it was a formalization of many things that we were already doing, but just clarifying the intent as opposed to having, you know, just various actions and tactical steps that we were doing. We wanted to say this is part of a coordinated effort to make sure that we get there.

Don McBean: — Yeah, and I didn't say that in any sort of accusatory tone. It was more like, you know, I'm just not looking in the right places always. But you say that it's a complex application. A few of us were out there — and I forget the woman's name who seems to be the lead on it — and at one point, for the other members, I'll say I've learned, or if we didn't know that provincial bureaucracy was long and arduous, UNESCO bureaucracy I think is tenfold or a hundredfold. It's just insane what they're having to do. So that's very reassuring to know that we're all on board with that, because it'll be a big deal.

And again, kind of almost jumping around randomly at this point, I had drafted up a thing about, you know, the whole French tourism. There's a bit of . . . And then, you know, maybe I clicked a little further into Tourism Saskatchewan and said, oh yeah, it's there already. But you know that that's something that has become important to me, and it seems like a niche. And so I'm going to specifically ask if there's efforts — without going back

into reading the web page — but in the francophone, Fransaskois French.

Jonathan Potts: — Yeah, really happy to answer that question. So just starting with our customer service team, we receive over 10,000 customer service requests in a given year. So that can come in a variety of forms. It could be a phone call, it could be in person, it could be email, it could be live chat, you know, any number of forms.

So of those 10,000 or so we receive roughly 20 inquiries in French. So that works out to 0.5 per cent if my math doesn't fail me. And I don't say that to say that providing service in French isn't important. I just want to give a sense of the scale and the effort required to service those requests.

You know, of those 20 or so requests, interestingly, typically about half of those come from French speakers who are not from Canada, often from France, so who are travelling across the country, maybe heading to the mountains. And we always resolve those types of requests adequately. But you know, whether it's providing information in print, we're able to translate.

We're able to work with the ministry you were speaking to before, and they do help us translate our visitor guide, which is now all digital. Francophone affairs helps us with that. You know, we are able to use things like AI now and translation tools to assist us if the going really gets sticky. But we're always able to resolve those requests.

You know, Tracy was up here before talking about our training and education program, so I just do want to touch on that. All the courses that we deliver are available in French, and we do have a French-speaking contracted facilitator who can deliver training programs in French. And we do receive occasional requests for that.

Probably there's two more things I want to say. And one of them is we do work with the conseil, the CÉCS [Conseil économique et coopératif de la Saskatchewan], on a variety of opportunities. And typically they come to us. For example they'll market Saskatchewan in Quebec, something we're not — to my earlier point — maybe well-suited to do in terms of doing so in French, but they are able to do that. So we supply them with content and marketing materials and so forth, and then they translate that and use it for their purposes.

The last thing maybe I want to say is if you're familiar with the Économusée program, which is something relatively new to me but something that I had the opportunity actually to participate in one of our Saskatchewan businesses with the Chair of this committee with their launch as an Économusée a couple of years ago.

So it's a working artisan business that combines traditional production — I'm reading this now — with interpretation and visitor education, so allowing the public to see craftspeople or producers at work while learning about history, skills, and cultural heritage behind the product.

So we have six Économusées across Saskatchewan, which I won't name right now but they range from, you know, honey

making to distilleries to pottery-makers and so forth. So they're places where, destinations where service can be provided fluently in French. But there is also that cultural heritage component, typically a food component or something tied to food or perhaps liquor or some other craft beverage. And yeah, it's a growing area and something that's recognized certainly by French-speaking travellers.

Don McBean: — Thank you for that. And I'm going to find out what the Économusée is because I think it's exactly what I was thinking could be such another one of those niche things.

Again jumping around, the other one is the Back to Batoche, you know, which has just . . . In my limited exposure to it, what I knew was Back to Batoche. And then I went there this year and was like, oh my goodness, it is such a huge piece.

And it ties in to what you already identified, Minister Ross, with the, you know, the tourism group that starts with a "P" that I can't pronounce yet either until I practise it a little bit more. Those priorities in terms of niche, in terms of the idea that it's a multi-day trip and travelling. I guess there's not a question there because you've already told me that, or told us, that that's what's going on and that's part of the effort.

I'm starting to wind down. I'm not sure how long your final comments will be. My partners are looking at their . . . yeah. What was I going to say though? I said the French, the increase. All my scribbled notes are getting crossed off.

This has been very . . . Yeah, I enjoy this. It's not, to me I don't feel like I . . . Within tourism at least it's just more of a learning and understanding the work that you're doing. There may be things of controversy, but mostly it's just very reassuring to hear from you and your team how well this is going.

Oh, I know. The final question was, and the way I wrote it down here was, if you had an extra \$10 million what would you do with it? And then I went, like I said, I read *Hansard* from last year. Last year I called it the magic wand question, which is always . . . So if you had a significant amount of money that fell from wherever, what would be . . . I guess I'm looking for something more than just doing everything you're doing a little better. Like what are we missing? What's not on the table that could be if we had some unlimited fund?

[20:15]

Jonathan Potts: — All right, well again I'll give you a bit of a multi-part answer. I did consult with the team so I didn't try to get consensus on one single issue. And we'll cheat a bit because a little bit of what's new is what's old.

You know, we talked about niche marketing. That's been a strategic focus for the last number of years but something we could do a lot more of, and a lot more of around the world. We know that our astrotourism work is really resonating.

So we do work with the largest publisher of tourism content in the world. It's called Matador Network. We released a video online in January on astrotourism in Saskatchewan. So it's primarily in southwest Saskatchewan: Cypress Hills, which is a dark-sky preserve; Great Sand Hills got in there; and I want to

say that Grasslands was in there. Grasslands might not have been in there judging by the look that Amy just gave me.

So in any event it's an amazing, amazing video. It is outperforming every other video on Matador's worldwide network right now. So think of places like Santa Fe, New Mexico, the Black Hills in South Dakota, and so on that are much better known certainly within the US market. So think of, you know, a factor of 10, how much larger the US population is than ours. Our content is outperforming them on the astrotourism front.

So you know, with more money would we take that story and tell those stories more around the world? Absolutely. We know we have incredible product here and incredible experiences here to sell. We're getting more and more industry members that are taking people out that, you know, maybe have done this as a hobby in the past or have some expertise and are . . . We would certainly promote things like that more.

You know, you asked some good questions about AI. So one of the things that helps improve your visibility in AI, in the AI world, is earned media. So you know, our budget is what it is, and our budget is sufficient. But if we had a lot more money, we would certainly — to my point about things like astrotourism and birding — bring even more media from around the world to Saskatchewan to experience those things; get that content published on our website, again so that we are the trusted source for that content; and ensure that people, wherever they may be, are learning more about those experiences being told by people that are relatable to them. So if they're from the US, you know, maybe an American writer or video producer. If they're from Europe, same thing. Asia, same thing. So you know, we would certainly use dollars on that front.

And lastly you did talk about events towards the end. We would want to incubate some events, especially business events going forward. So talking about our sectors of strength and talking about, you know . . . I'll use the U of S [University of Saskatchewan] as an example, and you know, all the great things that happen there. We have a company that we work with out of the UK that helps us search for, find . . . What's the word I'm looking for, Amy?

Amy McInnis: — Lead generation.

Jonathan Potts: — Lead generation. Thank you. Sorry, my mind went blank there. It helps us with lead generation to bring events tied to our sectors of strength or research areas of strength, so we would amplify that work as well.

So there's crossover in the tourism industry, you know, with the university community, with the business community. Anything we can do to help elevate Saskatchewan in different business spheres and in different academic spheres by bringing, you know, the best people in the world in some of those fields here, we would absolutely do with more dollars.

Don McBean: — Thanks. Yeah, I think you sort of encapsulated something that I've been saying for the last year, which is, well yeah, when you're shadow minister for Tourism or Minister for Tourism, it really applies to everything. Like everything can be spun.

A couple of quick ones, and now I'm going to take us right up to the clock perhaps. You mentioned, and I had made myself a note that I see again, about the access, you know, our travel access. Yeah, we've got a couple of wins for Regina into some of the major . . . Does Tourism Saskatchewan have any influence over getting . . . Maybe even Saskatoon can get some international flights going and things like that. Or how viable of a target is that within Tourism Saskatchewan?

Jonathan Potts: — Yeah, so we have a role to play. It's not the most significant role, even within government, in that sphere. You know, we work very closely with the two airport authorities in Saskatchewan. We have two very capable teams at each of those airport authorities.

In trying to bring more air routes to Saskatchewan, it is a very challenging field and for a variety of reasons, most of which are out of the control of anyone in the province, I would say. So it could be market conditions. You know in the US, if they're favourable in the US, you tend to see those American carriers stay within the US. There's all sorts of regulations on the Canadian side or on the American side at the federal level that make it a little more sticky to bring some of those routes here.

Of course there's demand as well. And you know, even when we had three different services coming to Saskatchewan — from Denver, from Minneapolis-St. Paul, and from Chicago — we were the smallest non-resort, regularly served destination for some of those American carriers in their entire network.

So you know, to compete for a plane — and sometimes that's what you're doing is competing for an actual plane to fly on a route — to compete for a plane is tricky because it's much easier and more friction free for an American courier to serve the American market than it is to serve a transporter market like Regina or Saskatoon.

With that said, I think, you know, the government does pretty well in supporting those routes and trying to bring them here. And it certainly helps the tourism industry.

Don McBean: — Thank you. Again, lived in Saskatchewan long enough to know that most people just fly over or drive through. But it's still worth putting on the record that it's an important thing for us.

And then the other important thing that was probably on two or three of my other pages was just, we know the wildfire season impacted . . . Minister Ross, you made reference to that in your opening comments. I guess what I don't know, and maybe if I'd done a little more research, is sort of the support that you were able to bring to some of those most impacted.

There was reference to Waskesiu and that area, but really we're talking about other lodges that would have been very significantly . . . with the road closures and all of that. So maybe just a bit of a specific on that regard.

Jonathan Potts: — Yeah, I can certainly take that one. Yeah, I mean last year was certainly a challenging year for a lot of operators in Saskatchewan. Particularly in kind of the centre of Saskatchewan, if you will, from the forest fringe up maybe to around the Churchill River.

So on the concept or on the question of, you know, damage that they might have received to their property, to their businesses, etc., the first thing I'd say is they have to go through and have been going through — I think in all or most cases — the insurance process and then the PDAP [provincial disaster assistance program] process, the disaster program, the provincial disaster program.

So for Tourism Saskatchewan, our role then is a little different. So we don't provide, you know, funding support for that type of thing. And I'll break it down two ways.

So one was the direct fire impacts — both the answers boil down to the same thing — but we've done some work this winter with Ashlyn George, who you may know. She's a former Saskatchewaner based out of Saskatoon, has her own program called *The Lost Girl's Guide to Finding the World*, which is great and has tons of followers. So in partnership with Travel Manitoba, which was obviously . . . Manitoba was obviously also very affected by some of the exact same fires. She went up and produced some great content — some of which has been published, some of which will continue to be published — in the Denare Beach, Creighton, Flin Flon area.

So the minister referenced that in her opening remarks, I think. So again there's some content out already, and you'll continue to see that roll out over time to provide marketing support to that area which was obviously very hard hit.

The other one, which was a little different . . . and again the minister made reference to the Waskesiu-Prince Albert National Park area. So there was no fire damage that I'm aware of to any structures, to any businesses in the park. As everyone knows, it's a very large park though. And the year prior there, the fire in Jasper which did obviously cause tremendous damage.

So Parks Canada updated its protocols. And even though the fires in Saskatchewan this past year were burning in the northeast corner of the park, or just outside the northeast corner of the park for quite some time — several weeks if not a month — it was close enough to the community that, based on their protocols, they called for a voluntary evacuation, or a non-mandatory evacuation.

So that had a significant impact on the businesses in the community obviously that all rely on tourism. So a little different than direct fire impact, but because that order was issued, then the businesses were impacted. So again our response to that is a marketing one. We did do a small marketing campaign once the fire situation had eased in late summer and into the fall to support especially Saskatchewan residents going back to that community and that area.

And we're doing the same thing again this year to get that, again, consumer behaviour back on track and get people going back up there. Because that's an iconic destination for Saskatchewan and generates hundreds of thousands of visits every year. Lots of overnight stays, restaurant spending, and so on. So really generates a ton of economic impact for the province.

Don McBean: — You usurped my opportunity to say, "What about next year?" because . . . but it's all about promoting the message.

Just because it randomly popped into my mind, I think you heard about us, it might have even been my friend beside here, talking about Reesor Ranch down in the southwest. And I was just amazed because he . . . I say, how do you do this? And he says, oh, we book up a year ahead of time from Germany. And I was like, okay, this is what I don't know about, you know, little treasures in Saskatchewan. So whatever part you might have had in promoting Reesor Ranch and all those other niche things, good on you.

That's got to take us real close to 8:30.

Chair B. McLeod: — So having reached our agreed-upon time for the consideration of these estimates, we are going to adjourn consideration of the estimates for Tourism Saskatchewan. So thank you, Minister Ross and all your officials. I actually very much enjoyed listening and learning and having a good interaction with us all here, so appreciate that so much.

[20:30]

I'll invite you to proceed with any closing comments that you may have.

Hon. Alana Ross: — I'll just thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you for the committee and for the insightful questions that you asked. And thank you to *Hansard*, to the Legislative Assembly staff who get to remain here as long as we're here. And thank you, Jonathan, and thank you also to Tracy, Rae, and Amy because you're very, very knowledgeable in what you do. And thank you for the wonderful work you do for the province of Saskatchewan.

Chair B. McLeod: — Excellent. Any closing comments from committee members?

Don McBean: — I would repeat all of the thanks to *Hansard* and other committee . . . And I hope it's not untoward for me to congratulate Tourism Saskatchewan. You know, as I say, it's a fascinating learning experience. And again, as was just mentioned, you know, the learning that we have when we actually get to sit down and share and ask and answer questions is very positive. So thank you, everyone, and see you next year or maybe before.

Chair B. McLeod: — So that does conclude our business for today. The only thing left is a motion of adjournment. A member to move a motion?

Brad Crassweller: — I so move.

Chair B. McLeod: — I'm going to take MLA Crassweller has moved. All agreed?

Some Hon. Members: — Agreed.

Chair B. McLeod: — Agreed. And that's carried. This committee stands adjourned until tomorrow, Tuesday, March 31st, 2026 at 6 p.m., same location. Thank you so much.

[The committee adjourned at 20:31.]