



STANDING COMMITTEE ON INTERGOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS AND INFRASTRUCTURE

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**STANDING COMMITTEE ON INTERGOVERNMENTAL
AFFAIRS AND INFRASTRUCTURE
2004**

Mr. Ron Harper, Chair
Regina Northeast

Mr. Bob Bjornerud, Deputy Chair
Melville-Saltcoats

Mr. Denis Allchurch
Rosthern-Shellbrook

Ms. June Draude
Kelvington-Wadena

Ms. Sandra Morin
Regina Walsh Acres

Mr. Kim Trew
Regina Coronation Park

Hon. Mark Wartman
Regina Qu'Appelle Valley

The committee met at 15:00.

The Chair: — I'd like to call to order the first meeting of the new policy field committee, the Committee of Intergovernmental Affairs and Infrastructure. And this is a historic moment as this is the first business meeting of the committee. And as many of you will know as background, this reforms that we are experiencing here today is the result of an all-party committee's four years worth of work.

The changes are meant to strengthen the roles of the members and provide increased public input into the legislative process. They are intended to help make the operations of the Legislative Assembly more open, accountable, and responsive to our citizenship. The biggest changes to the rules and procedures of the Assembly is a result of the creation of the policy field committees. The policy field committees are multi-functional and designed to monitor four broad sectors of government and government's activities, such as the various Crown corporations.

The rules permit the policy field committees to review annual reports, legislation after the first or second reading in the House, budgetary estimates, regulations, and bylaws, and to conduct inquiries. The committees may conduct hearings in relation to the inquiries and review legislation, regulations, and bylaws.

To help achieve these goals by making the Assembly more open, the proceedings of the field policy committees are broadcast on television and the Internet. Information on the business before the committees and upon the upcoming meetings of the committees can be found on the Assembly Web site at www.legassembly.sk.ca. And I hope all those who are watching will find this entertaining, informative, and will continue to tune in.

I recognize the Deputy Chair of committees, Mr. Bjornerud.

Mr. Bjornerud: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'd like to take this opportunity to welcome the minister and his officials here today. And at that time also I would like to move a motion:

That in accordance with rules 110 and 3(4) of the *Rules and Procedures of the Legislative Assembly of Saskatchewan*, when this committee convenes during the hours specified by rule 3(1) for the daily meeting of the Assembly during the sessional period, it shall follow the Assembly's recess and adjournment times unless otherwise ordered.

The Chair: — Will the committee take the motion as read? Any discussion? All in favour? Opposed? Carried. At this point I'll recognize Mr. Trew.

Mr. Trew: — Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I move:

That pursuant to rule 119(2), the committee authorize the broadcast of its public proceedings.

The Chair: — Will the committee take the motion as read? All those in favour? Opposed? Carried.

At this point I would ask each of the committee members to introduce themselves and name the constituency in which they represent. I'll start with Mr. Bjornerud, the Deputy Chair of committees.

Mr. Bjornerud: — Bob Bjornerud, I'm the MLA (Member of Legislative Assembly) for Melville-Saltcoats.

Mr. Allchurch: — Denis Allchurch, MLA for Rosthern-Shellbrook.

Mr. Heppner: — Ben Heppner, Martensville.

Mr. Trew: — I'm Kim Trew, MLA, Regina Coronation Park.

Hon. Mr. Wartman: — Mark Wartman, MLA for Regina Qu'Appelle Valley, Minister of Agriculture.

Ms. Morin: — Sandra Morin, Regina Walsh Acres.

The Chair: — Thank you, committee members. Now it's my pleasure and opportunity to . . . and to call on the Minister of Highways to introduce his officials.

General Revenue Fund Highways and Transportation Vote 16

Subvote (HI01)

Hon. Mr. Sonntag: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. Highways and Transportation. I would like to first of all introduce . . . If I could, I'd like to make a few brief opening remarks as well if I could, just to sort of summarize things.

But immediately seated to my right is our deputy minister, Harvey Brooks. Immediately to his right is Terry Schmidt, who is until the end of today the executive director of central region — on the far right. And Terry will be, effective tomorrow morning, assuming the position as assistant deputy minister of operations division. So congratulations, Terry.

And to my left is the assistant deputy minister of corporate services, Don Wincherauk. Seated behind me, I think to the far left, is Fred Antunes, who is the director of corporate support branch. Directly behind me, Cathy Lynn Borbely, who is the manager of business development; Mike Mazenkowsky . . . Makowsky, I should say, immediately to her right, director of transportation, trade and logistics. And on the far right, Terry Blomme, executive director of southern region.

As most of you will know, I'm not new to this portfolio or this department. I previously held it from 1999 to 2001. It's a pleasure to be back here with a bit more money in this portfolio. The first time I started down this road, as most of you will know, it was fairly bumpy. We faced a lot of challenges in repairing the highway system and it was certainly stretched to the absolute limit.

In the spring of 2000, the condition of the provincial highway system, especially the thin membrane surface roads, was of a major concern to us. We heard the public and we knew that we

had to develop a clear plan to fix the roads. We formed a strategic plan that focused on improving and maintaining our highways, supporting economic development in developing the North, and improving, of course, safety within our system. We stuck to our plan over the last three years and it's paying off, and I think with major progress in most of these areas.

Until 2001 the province was targeting a \$250 million annual investment level. With the strategic plan in place, that annual investment target grew to \$300 million. Since 1996-97 we've seen a 75 per cent increase in funding. We are three years into the strategic plan and highway conditions, especially in the TMS (thin membrane surface) system, have improved significantly. We've seen 750 kilometres of TMS highways, including 12 strategic corridors, upgraded to a paved standard, and we have agreements to manage truck traffic with 41 municipal partners on an additional 555 kilometres of TMS road.

To enhance safety and economic development, we committed to twinning the Trans-Canada Highway and Highway 16 between Battlefords and Lloydminster by 2012. Increased provincial commitment and new federal investment has allowed us to accelerate this to 2007. In fact, the final 38 kilometres of twinned highway on No. 1 West was open to traffic on October 27, 2003.

So these are some of the recent accomplishments. And as many achievements as we've made in the past, we are of course looking to the future.

The 2004-05 Highways and Transportation budget is \$294.8 million, which is only \$1.4 million or point five per cent less than last year's budget. This budget positions us I think to continue the progress that we've made in transforming the transportation system. The province recognizes the importance of transportation in meeting our future objectives and as such has provided status quo funding during this challenging budget cycle.

This year's transportation budget allows the province to stay on track to invest \$2.5 billion over 10 years and complete twinning by 2007. We'll open 53 kilometres of twinned highway on Trans-Canada East and on Highway 16 West this fall at a cost of \$29 million, as we continue to work with the federal government to complete these corridors by 2007.

To support Saskatchewan trade with the US (United States) and to enhance tourism, we'll upgrade Highway 6 north of the US border at a cost of \$2 million. Highway 6 between Regway and Regina is another US trade corridor that we will have completed to a paved standard at an overall cost of \$10.2 million.

We'll protect our investment in our paved highway system by resurfacing over 325 kilometres this construction season. To support rural economic development, we'll upgrade 185 kilometres of the thin membrane surfaced highways to a paved standard. We'll do this in partnership with the federal government, rural municipalities, and industry.

We'll provide \$3 million for improvements to ease traffic congestion and upgrade the Highway 1 connector to Victoria

Avenue East in partnership with the city of Regina and the federal government.

And in northern Saskatchewan, we'll partner 50/50 with the federal government to improve the Athabasca seasonal road at a cost of \$2 million. To support economic development, northern community groups will be given the opportunity to complete this work.

Along with the projects I've already mentioned, our other major projects this year include paving the 13-kilometre gravel section of Highway 42 near Brownlee — a year ahead of schedule and at a cost of \$2.4 million — to fix the worst part of this road and improve tourism to Douglas Park and Lake Diefenbaker; paving 15 kilometre . . . paving, I should say, the 15-kilometre Anaheim access road a year ahead of schedule at a cost of \$1.2 million in partnership with industry and municipalities; and lastly, paving 29 kilometres of Highway 13 near Ponteix and Viceroy at a cost of \$4.8 million. This will nearly complete the transformation of the Red Coat Trail from a thin membrane surface to pavement between the Manitoba border and Cadillac.

A significant part of the transportation system — air, marine, rail — is largely regulated by the federal government.

On the policy front, the province has taken a leadership role in transportation policy. We're working through the western council of transportation ministers to present a united voice on many issues, especially federal funding for the national highway system.

We will continue to press the federal government for a national highway funding program, and we will also want to ensure we're managing our budget in the most effective way possible — that is, putting as much money as we can into our roads.

In recent years we've been fortunate to receive funding that has not been available to other departments, and we have a responsibility to manage these resources prudently.

Over the last four years we've held the line on administrative costs, clustered our IT (information technology) service delivery with other departments, and we've taken a leadership role in government performance planning and accountability initiatives.

I encourage all members to review our '04-05 performance plan, which has been developed as part of a government-wide initiative to improve public reporting so that government is more accountable and transparent.

Part of the effective management, Mr. Chair, is to ensure that you get what you pay for. We have been focusing on the quality of contractor and department work and have made, I think, significant improvements in this area. Thanks to the efforts of our staff, the road building industry, and the engineering consulting industry, we have had very few quality issues last year. We'll continue these efforts with better construction specs, procedures, and training in 2004.

2005 will again be a busy year in Saskatchewan. We've got the Canada Summer Games, the Midwest Legislative Conference, and of course the province's centennial celebrations. We want

to make the most of all the spinoff tourism opportunities these events can produce.

The continued enhanced tourism signing program for our parks and attractions, border improvements, access to Douglas Park, Victoria Avenue upgrades and twinning — all of these initiatives will contribute to showcasing Saskatchewan as the beautiful, larger-than-life province that it really is.

We're resurfacing the highways, rebuilding rural roads, accelerating twinning, and meeting our commitments. We're helping to create a prosperous economy and quality of life that will in turn allow Saskatchewan to build for the future.

Thank you very much for giving me the opportunity to give that brief overview. And we, including myself and officials, would be happy to answer questions.

The Chair: — Thank you, Mr. Minister. Mr. Heppner.

Mr. Heppner: — Thank you. When I mentioned to my people in my caucus that I was going to be involved in the questioning, they right away knew where I was going to go. But I'm going to go there anyways.

When you decide to improve a highway section, which takes priority in your thinking — the safety aspect or the traffic count?

Hon. Mr. Sonntag: — Let me just first of all, in this new committee structure . . . It has been sort of the practice that the minister's answered all of the questions, and I think this new structure will work particularly well for, in this department, Highways and Transportation. I expect for most questions probably it will be time-saving for most of you asking questions that the officials will answer. If there's a specific question that you'd like me to answer, please just indicate that. But for this one and probably for most of them, I think the officials will answer. So I will turn that to the deputy. Okay.

Mr. Brooks: — It certainly is a combination of factors when we look at an upgrade. I take it from the question that there is a safety concern at the bottom of the question.

When we're looking at an upgrade, we would first of all look at the existing roadway configuration to see whether or not . . . whether it is contributing to any safety issues. We look at the accident record on the road. Yes, we do look at the traffic count of both cars and trucks, try and look at the next number of conflict opportunities that there are on the existing roadway.

So there are a number of different aspects that are taken into account, and usually we will have outside expertise, in particularly difficult instances, come in and make recommendations.

Mr. Heppner: — Highway No. 11, basically from where the twinning ends, which is close to Osler through to probably just past Rosthern a mile or two, how do the traffic counts and accident counts relate to the other stretches of highway that you're twinning right now?

Mr. Brooks: — We have right now from Warman to Osler an

average annual daily traffic of 5,360 vehicles. From Osler to Hague — our list from 2002 I should say — is 4,750. Hague to Rosthern, 4,040; Rosthern to Duck Lake, 3,440; and from Duck Lake to the junction of Highway No. 2 between twenty-nine hundred and thirty; and then up again as we approach P.A. (Prince Albert) to 3,690.

Those traffic counts are in line with — particularly from Warman to Rosthern — they are not out of line in terms of the average with the parts on Highway 16 in particular. The truck traffic tends to be a little lower, and the configuration is seen to be that the safety is relatively in line with the other aspects of highway . . .

Mr. Heppner: — On Highway 16, you're having as many deaths per mile as you do on that stretch from Rosthern to Osler?

Mr. Brooks: — We haven't got the statistics immediately available, but we can supply those to you.

Mr. Heppner: — Yes, I guess I'm directing this question then to the minister. This is part of the concern that I've had, and I've been on this case of this highway for probably just about 20 years, back when . . . It started off when Trish Lamers from CTV (Canadian Television Network Limited) came out to check on an accident that happened there. And she and I sat in her van watching the traffic go by and saw two very near accidents happen in a period of about 20 minutes. And that's the way that highway is all the way through.

So now when I ask these questions and want to get some specifics why that highway isn't getting any work done on it, it seems as if that information isn't sort of at the fingertips. Well that should be at the fingertips because that's the key thing.

I'm actually getting members of government side, and I got flak from members on the NDP (New Democratic Party) side last year for not leaning harder on the Highways department for not doing work on that particular highway. So obviously you're very aware of what the problems are over there.

The one intersection of . . . going into Rosthern, I personally have seen two accidents that have taken three different lives. We had one this summer, or this last summer, where you had the two semis, and that was due to the problem with not having a left-hand turning lane — and I'll get into that in a minute or two. We had one some years before that where there was a car was rear-ended, and a whole lot of accidents where there weren't deaths that took place.

We've had similar things at the intersection of Highway 312 and Highway 11 and the south intersection at Rosthern. We've had deaths that have occurred in the Hague intersections and at the Osler one. And that stretch of highway is being largely ignored from a safety perspective — largely ignored — because virtually nothing has happened.

We had this last year, a couple of lanes that were widened a little bit for people to turn off to the right. Well that hasn't been a serious problem. The most serious problem are left-hand turning lanes, but the Department of Highways seems to ignore that regardless to all the deaths and accidents that take place.

Twinning would deal with that as well.

So I think one of those should move that stretch of highway, and particularly some of those intersections, to the very top of the list.

Hon. Mr. Sonntag: — Well let me say first of all it may not be obvious to you but to myself and I think predecessors and myself again prior . . . when I was the minister before, your concerns are not falling on deaf ears. It is, as the deputy has indicated, I mean it's a balance between finances available, safety, and as you indicated most correctly, volume of traffic — traffic count.

Having said that, it is to the . . . I leave it . . . as a minister I leave it to the officials who are much more knowledgeable in this area than I as a minister and to prioritize within that framework, prioritize the road construction that is conducted each year.

We've increased our budget, as I've indicated in my opening remarks, significantly. Road costs have also increased significantly. Construction costs have increased significantly. But I think there has been a marked improvement in the province.

Having said that, the concerns that you've raised with respect to Highway 11 are in my estimation legitimate concerns, and I think you raise fair concerns on behalf of your immediate constituency and sort of the general constituent issue.

But it is a matter of those three priorities that I've described — traffic count and safety and resources available. And it is also about, to a greater degree although sort of further down the list, tied to the finances and resources available. It's tied to federal funding that specifically targets specific roads. And in this particular case, the twinning portion that we are putting . . . that we have worked on in the last few years and will be into the future, are tied directly to Highways No. 1 and 16.

So our hands are sometimes tied a little bit in the . . . Well not a little bit, to a greater and greater degree, I should say, in the roads that we actually are able to construct. Having said that, it still remains, I think it's fair to say, a very top of mind issue for us and something we'll do our best to improve in the future.

Mr. Heppner: — Without question, I'm trying to move the twinning or the work on Highway 11 a little higher up than whatever it is. I guess that's my main purpose that I'm here this afternoon.

Traffic counts were similar to those other highways; you know, they were comparative. Safety in this section is very, very serious. It's a much greater safety concern. Some time ago . . . There's a bad stretch, as far as safety's concerned, in the Gull Lake area, No. 1, some years ago. And there was a specific effort put into improving that section to get that unsafe section dealt with.

And I think everybody in the province applauded that. They said, well here's a stretch that's going to get paved, but here's a particular section that has a high accident, and people don't know why but it just was the case. And that highway was

twinning. Because of the safety aspect, it was just moved up. And like I said, I think everybody in the province applauded that. And I'm saying that Highway 11 needs to have exactly the same thing done to it.

My next question kind of follows or almost crosses purpose with that one, and that is, if you're not going to pave the thing in the next decade or two, then there is a definite need to have left-hand turning lanes. Almost all the serious accidents, almost all the serious accidents would have been avoided had there been a left-hand turning lane.

I'm not saying that you put another lane on the right-hand side for people who are coming through to sort of swerve out of the way. Because people get somewhat mesmerized when they drive and if there's a car stopped ahead and has slowed down, by the time they see it they've hit the thing. And so there needs to be the opportunity for people making a left-hand turn, and particularly into the communities of Osler, Hague, and Rosthern because those are the ones that are affected mostly and have the highest number of accidents.

If twinning isn't fairly immediate on the horizon — I guess that's one of the things that I'd like some information on; where is it in the timetable? — then I think there's a need to look at the left-hand turning lanes. Now if you're going to twin it in one year or two, then I guess there's no sense spending the money on a left-hand turning lane.

But I would like some information, probably from the deputy minister, on where we are with that timeline.

Mr. Brooks: — Just responding to some of the safety issues in the area, we've certainly been out and done the functional design, engineering design on all the communities from Warman through Rosthern and have looked at various alternatives to trying to improve the safety.

In the meantime, until we get around to the bigger capital expenditure, there are centre line rumble strips both north and south of Rosthern at this point in time to try and see whether or not they improve driver awareness and driver attentiveness in and around the community. And we've certainly looked at several alternatives on the Highway 312 and Highway 11 interchange.

One of the unique aspects of doing the capital work in the province is trying to ensure that whatever money is available is used to the greatest extent it can in addressing the issues across the province as a whole. And one of the interesting aspects of that is that our ability to utilize federal funding throughout Saskatchewan has been linked with the national highway system of which Highway 16 and Highway 1 are part, and they are eligible for the Canada Strategic Infrastructure Fund and the strategic highway improvement program.

We are working very hard to include Highway 11, to get the federal government to include Highway 11 north of Saskatoon in the national highway system to make it eligible for federal funding initiatives of that same type, and we feel that we are making progress there. We certainly would like to see federal participation in that twinning project because we believe that there is a federal role there that should not be overlooked. It's

an expensive, a relatively expensive undertaking and the federal dollars would make it happen that much sooner.

Without a good understanding of where the next sort of federal program would come out and the type of issues that it would address, it's premature to address the timing. Having said that, the current allocations of federal funding will be necessary to complete the twinning on Highway 1 and Highway 16. We have other federal funding through Prairie Grain Roads Program and through the Border Infrastructure Fund, but they would not be applicable to this stretch of highway.

So we would look somewhere beyond a three-year capital plan for initiation of this, and it would greatly benefit by federal participation. And we'll be working hard over the near term with the other Western provinces and the other provinces as a whole to try to get more funding and more dedicated funding for the national highway system, and hopefully this stretch will be a part of that system.

Mr. Heppner: — Okay, thank you. That's sort of the answer I was afraid that I was going to get, that it won't be within the next three years and no idea how far past that.

I would hope that your discussion with the federal government does get something allotted as far as Highway 11's concerned because it is the . . . probably one of the key roads up to the uranium industry. It handles a lot of the lumber coming down. And it just — on top of the usual kinds of things that happen in Saskatchewan with the grain and the other industries, farm equipment and this sort of thing that move up and down that road — it is a very busy road.

I would like for the deputy minister to discuss to some extent if they are at all considering the left-hand turning lanes, if the other one is going to be that many years down the road because we can't afford to lose lives at the rate we've been losing them now.

Mr. Brooks: — At this point in time, we are reviewing the safety in and around all of the intersections, and as I said we've done the functional work for the twinning. We do have a list of safety improvement projects that we maintain and score across the department. And at this point in time, my understanding is that over a three-year time frame that we would not be putting the capital to these projects.

I can sort of clarify that a bit. There are changes that we could make, particularly to the 312 and Highway 11 intersection, that would not be dependent on the twinning initiative itself. That capital would still remain active as the other lanes were added. However we are still waiting to program-in that realignment. We have the design and are waiting for a window where the capital can be put towards that project.

Mr. Heppner: — Going from a fairly large issue to something a little smaller, but it's one of those things when . . . in the three considerations that you mentioned in looking for the ability to be able to do the twinning, and money was one of them . . . and there's one issue that I do want to, you know, bring to your attention and ask for the rationale behind it.

Some time ago all the signs . . . I believe from Regina through

to Prince Albert, where you had the signs that are beside the highway that basically say how far it is to the next community, I mean the nearest community which is sort of . . . Bladworth 1 or whatever. Those were changed, I believe.

It was quite an enterprise to watch that happen. And when I looked at that I said, here's a massive waste of money. It was done during the wintertime, and first along came the tandem truck with a trailer behind it and a front-end loader on it, two men in it. One ran the truck and one would run the loader. The loader would then be taken off the trailer, and the snow would be cleared off around the post where this sign was supposed to be changed. And then the loader would be loaded back up, and the two would take off. And then another truck would come along with two more people that would take down the sign and put it back up.

So we've taken basically four pieces of equipment and four people to change a sign that . . . I'm sure if you would have subcontracted that, there's just no end of farm boys in a three-quarter-ton truck that would have put up those signs very happily for just one fraction of the cost. That, without a doubt, was a money waste. And I would like for someone to comment on . . . if that's the sort of thing that goes on a lot, or was this just an isolated incident that I happened to catch somebody at?

Mr. Brooks: — So without knowing the very specifics of the work that was being conducted that you observed, we can comment that when we are replacing single-posted signs, it would occur very much as you would like to see it. We would have a half-ton go out with two individuals and they, according to the occupational health and safety guidelines, would replace that sign in an efficient fashion.

When we are looking at the double-posted signs — and the community advance signs are for the most part are in that frame — we would be looking at certified crane operators and having the crane go out and do that according to the occupational health and safety protocols that are in place for that procedure. And that has to be followed very strictly.

And certainly we have instituted a program of replacing the sign complement through the province. It is a daunting undertaking given the amount of signs and the condition of the signs at present. So it will take some time to bring the average condition rating of the signs back to a more acceptable level for the travelling public. And we will be working away at this for the . . . we do have a plan in place for the replacement of signs. It will take some years to make the change.

Having said that, again on the four-posted signs, there is a protocol in place that must be followed fairly strictly.

Mr. Heppner: — Couple of questions dealing with highways other than 11 and 12. So it obviously gets us to 312; 312 from Laird, corner to the junction of 312 and Highway 12 is a really a fairly decent secondary highway. It's good.

From the Laird corner to the intersection of Highway 11 . . . has always been a disaster. It's been repaired or resurfaced a number of times, and I'm wondering is there something in the works to bring that stretch of road up to the same quality as from the Laird corner through to the intersection of 312 and

Highway 12?

Mr. Schmidt: — I can address that question. Highway 312 from the junction of 12 to Laird was constructed — I believe it was back in the late 1980s — to a paved standard highway with the asphalt concrete surface on top which was the standard at that time. And it was determined that that was the appropriate standard based on economic analysis.

The section of Highway 312 from the Laird access to the junction of Highway 11 was constructed I believe under the, either the CAIP (Canada/Saskatchewan Agri-Infrastructure Program) or the Prairie Grain Roads Program. That would be now four, five, maybe six years ago it was upgraded.

The grading was done some time ago, and then the granular pavement structure was constructed on there about four or five years ago. It was constructed to a granular paved structure with a double seal coat on top which has the same carrying capacity as the asphalt concrete structure to carry the tonnage and the weights and serve the economic development. However at that time, the economic analysis determined that the granular structure would be the most appropriate to do on there with the seal coat aggregate.

Mr. Heppner: — There's a highway, and I wish I had the number right now, but it will probably be on your map. There's a Pioneer high-throughput elevator just north of Saskatoon. I see some heads nodding; that's good.

That apparently has a fairly light load limit on it, and I've had concerns raised from people hauling grain from off of Highway 12, that they have to go around almost through Saskatoon to get onto Highway 11, rather than just cut across, which is only a distance then of — I don't know — four or five miles. But instead they have to put on a fair number of miles, drive almost into city traffic to get around there. Is there some way to address that? It would cut back on a lot of highway usage as well as a safety issue and the time issue.

Mr. Schmidt: — Okay, if I understand the question correctly, it is that traffic coming down Highway 12 southbound carrying loads en route to the Pioneer grain, must come down Highway 12 primary weights, then come back up Highway 11 north primary weights to get to the terminal. Is that correct?

Okay. The cut-across roads, the east-west roads joining Highway 12 and Highway 11 are under the jurisdiction of the rural municipality, so the weights would be under their jurisdiction. So it would be under their control if they would wish to designate them as primary corridors or to maintain them as secondary corridors.

Mr. Heppner: — I would like to conclude my part today with just a comment that doesn't need a reply unless you choose to give one.

When you're going to look at the dividing of that highway . . . and I'm just full of concern that it's a very long ways down the road. I have some serious concerns that that design is not going to allow for adequate and good access to the communities.

Osler, for example, has one main street that comes off of its

main business district onto the highway right now. If that's lost, the . . . or Osler right now has a growing business district. It would basically isolate that from traffic. It would do some serious damage to the community. Almost a similar thing for Hague as well — they have some good-sized automotive dealerships. A very large lumber yard, that's actually an interprovincial operation, would be essentially cut off if that road was closed. And similarly for the community of Rosthern — if 6th Street doesn't have a good, easily accessible access, all three of those communities will be fairly seriously economically affected.

And I know that your plans are probably not firm at this particular point. I would just ask that you very carefully look at those particular plans and ensure that those communities aren't cut off from all the traffic that goes through there because, as we just said earlier on, there is some 5,000 vehicles a day go by there. And to cut the community off from that kind of traffic can be somewhat disastrous.

Having said that, I would like to just thank you for the time that you've given to my questions so far this afternoon.

The Chair: — Mr. Trew.

Mr. Trew: — Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I want to switch gears a little bit. We've talked a little bit about Highways 1 and 16 and 11, and those are very important and major thoroughfares that receive just huge volumes of traffic, and as such they do deserve our priority attention.

I'm not in disagreement with that, but I am a resident of Saskatchewan and many, many people over the years have commented about our thin membrane highways which is a huge part of our network — less well-travelled, but still very important to the lifeblood and the livelihood of Saskatchewan people.

I don't have a lot of detailed questions, but I do want to know how the department defines a good thin membrane surface highway. What's the definition of good? Or do you have such a thing because where I'm coming from with this question . . . is thin membrane surface highways of necessity or of reality . . . are not going to be built to the same standard of smoothness as is Highway 1, 11, or 16 or some of the other paved highways, if I can describe it that way.

But I am wondering what the department's view is. What's a good thin membrane surface?

Mr. Brooks: — Just to start by indicating that the department does not construct thin membrane surface highways and is not intending to within its strategic plan. The change in truck technology and the change in trucking patterns has led to a change in the required structural strength on the roads.

Having said that, we do have a legacy of approximately, currently around 6,900 kilometres of thin membrane surface highways in the province, and we are committed to upgrading those to a structural highway if they are in the perceived core part of our network in the future. If they are acceptable to the communities that they serve as a mud-free, dust-free surface, we try to keep them in good condition.

And your question with regard to good — we measure the ride quality to determine whether they are in good condition, and we use a device that generates a measurement of smoothness based on an international standard called the international roughness index, the IRI. And then we actually report that condition in our annual report, and we have seen that over the past three years that our percentage of TMS highways in good condition has been increasing because of the availability of the funds to address conditions.

Mr. Trew: — Thank you, Mr. Brooks. My observation from my travels are that the TMS roads are improving, but I sort of make the casual observation as a non-expert that part of that is where there's heavy-haul, the highways, the road has been upgraded, or often that seems to me to be the case.

Is that done . . . I guess I'm interested in two things. One, your comment on what road . . . what truck traffic, loaded trucks particularly, does to the road system, particularly the TMS. And then, what causes you to — the department — to prioritize which TMS gets upgraded? Is it on it falling apart, or is it tonne miles, or is it the sheer volume of vehicles a day? Or you know just how does that . . . how is that determination made?

Mr. Brooks: — With a portfolio of approximately 6,900 kilometres it's . . . the upgrading of the total portfolio of roads is beyond our current fiscal capacity, and therefore strategic decisions have to be made. And we would look to a number of factors to determine how to prioritize that group of roads for upgrading. Certainly we look to see whether they're in a long-term heavy-haul corridor, or a corridor that will serve heavy-haul needs, be it high-throughput elevators, intensive livestock operations, mining operations, forestry operations — things of that nature.

And then we would also determine the timing of work by our ability to partner with other funding agencies, whether that be the federal government through the Prairie Grain Roads Program or a local community through their own rural jurisdictions and their ability to fund on that level.

When we upgrade roads, and the vast majority of them are upgraded through the use of the Prairie Grain Roads Program in the last number of years, those roads are prioritized by a committee structure. And the committee includes representatives from PFRA, the federal funding agency — Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Administration. It also includes representatives from SUMA (Saskatchewan Urban Municipalities Association) and SARM (Saskatchewan Association of Rural Municipalities) and from our department.

And essentially candidates are put forward on the basis of their ability to contribute to the long-term core transportation network, and then we try and see which corridors we can complete sooner, which are vulnerable, and in terms of supporting economic development, which ones contribute the most, you know, in a quick fashion.

Mr. Trew: — So economic development, if I can put it that way — counting grain deliveries to an inland terminal as economic development, which I think it is — that rates very highly on the list of how you prioritize the roads, recognizing limited funding.

Mr. Brooks: — Yes, it's one of the factors and it's . . . along with other economic development opportunities out there would be a key attribute.

Mr. Trew: — Thank you. The question that I asked or that wasn't answered was one of truck traffic and how that affects various asphalt surfaces, whether it's TMS or asphalt or some other newer product. Can you . . . I'd be interested in hearing your comments on that.

Mr. Brooks: — We would certainly look at the average annual daily traffic on the various routes, and then the percentage of that that was trucks and the type of truck traffic that it was and . . . or that it could be according to the expectations for a heavy-haul. We would certainly draw on the knowledge of the area transportation planning committee, and these are the 11 committees that we have set up across the province to provide us with a local input of the economic development needs and the . . . their recommendations with regards to the heavy-haul corridors that they would like to see developed within their area.

So we look at their view of what they believe is going to be the long-term traffic configuration, the type of trucks, the weight of the trucks, and what type of surface then is most economical to put on that road. And that would include both the width of the road, the . . . whether it would be an asphalt concrete or a sealed granular or perhaps just a gravel surface.

Mr. Trew: — Thanks. The final question I have is, in my mind I believe that 20 and 30 years ago highways were built essentially for a 15-year expected life span. Is that still the number or is there some other standard? And that's really my questions for now, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Brooks: — Certainly the department has a number of standards to which it builds roads. When we construct a new road, the average life is theoretically in the 15-year time frame, but with proper maintenance that life can be extended quite considerably. And currently we have life cycles of roads that have been extended quite beyond that.

And in fact, part of our performance measures are to bring back the, the life cycle of roads on our principal highway network to a 25-year life cycle.

Mr. Trew: — Thank you.

The Chair: — Mr. Hermanson.

Mr. Hermanson: — Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you, Mr. Minister, and your officials for appearing before this committee.

I have four areas I want to touch on; three I have raised in the past so I'm looking for updates and hopefully positive information. Then the fourth area is a new issue that I would like to raise.

The first issue is regarding the Riverhurst ferry, which recently went through a retrofitting. I've heard complaints about the service over the last couple of years since that has been completed. I just wonder if you could tell me how many

complaints you've had and what the nature of those complaints are.

Mr. Blomme: — As you make reference, we have completed a major retrofit of the Riverhurst ferry. That retrofit was driven by the need to comply with updated Transport Canada regulations, as well as provincial OH&S (occupational health and safety) regulations. The retrofits, in addition to meeting those regulatory requirements, provide for increased tonnage capacity of the ferry in terms of handling larger trucks.

At the same time, the complaints that we hear are those that are usual with a scheduled ferry service. Is the ferry leaving on the posted time? There was concerns with respect to how people had to wait and load on to the ferry. Some of those changes which may seem a little onerous in rural Saskatchewan do relate to the regulatory regime that we have to comply with that comes from Transport Canada.

And I think we had and the member raised concerns with access, wheelchair access to the washroom facilities. And operating procedures have been put in place to address that on an as-needed basis.

Mr. Hermanson: — Thank you. Could you, though, indicate how many complaints there have been since the retrofit was completed?

Mr. Blomme: — I would not have those figures at my . . . available to date.

Mr. Hermanson: — The department no doubt would keep track of those complaints. Would the, would the minister and his officials be able to supply me with the number of complaints that have been received?

Mr. Blomme: — Yes. As we receive written complaints and have . . . we would have records of those as well as the responses to those written complaints.

Mr. Hermanson: — Mr. Chair, thank you. I just wondered then if the department could pass on to me the number of complaints in the — say in the last two years, for the year, the season 2002 and the season 2003. We've just commenced the season 2004 so there's no sense supplying any information for the current season.

Mr. Brooks: — The retrofit was completed for the spring of 2003 so you're wanting the complaints since that time?

Mr. Hermanson: — Mr. Chair, the complaints for 2002 and 2003 just so we can, you know . . . I'm hearing more after the refit, so I just want to see what the number of complaints are before and after the refit.

Mr. Chair, just one other question with regard to the ferry and safety of the ferry. Before the retrofit there was a stairway, an enclosed vertical stairway for ferry operators to get up to the bridge. That has now been replaced with an outdoor stairway which is an angled stairway. For an observer who doesn't, I guess, fully understand the safety implications, knowing the amount of winds, knowing that there can be icy conditions at times, I'm wondering why the retrofit would have called for an

outdoor stairway which to me appears to be quite dangerous as compared to the covered vertical stairway that was in place before.

Mr. Blomme: — I can speak in a general sense. The existing stairway, it is my understanding, would have been one of those areas that would have not met the regulatory requirements for steepness and . . . steepness of access, so that's what would've been driven the change by the marine architect. With respect to the outside stairwell, it and as well as most of the other areas on the ferry boat, it would be a requirement under both occupational health and safety and just our general safety requirements to keep them in a safe and reasonable fashion.

And so I think notwithstanding that they are in an outside environment, given the extended season that we try to operate the ferry, there should be no reason why we can't do that in a safe and prudent manner, the same way we would for users of the ferry that would access the vessel.

Mr. Hermanson: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. I would like to go on to the next item which is Highway 4, where it crosses Lake Diefenbaker at the Saskatchewan Landing Provincial Park. Similar to my colleague from Martensville, this is a stretch of highway which at times can have very high volumes of traffic — not all of the time, of course, but because there is a park involved with holiday traffic and because there is heavy truck traffic on that stretch of highway.

To my knowledge it's probably the only location which has such a steep grade with that high a volume of traffic that doesn't have a passing lane. It's a stretch of highway that has been the scene of many unfortunate accidents, some that have claimed lives. Guardrails have had to be replaced on many occasions; there is a wildlife hazard through that area. Truck traffic, particularly northbound, going up the south side of the South Saskatchewan River Valley, sometime is crawling at speeds of 10 to 20 kilometres an hour. And that poses danger and risk. At other times the highway can be slippery and with traffic moving that slowly it becomes particularly dangerous.

When I asked this question before I was told that the passing lane was not on the schedule at all. I was encouraged by comments that the minister made in his opening address that some things had been moved ahead in the schedule. I would ask, has consideration been given to putting passing lanes on both sides of the valley where No. 4 crosses Lake Diefenbaker, with a particular emphasis on the south side.

Mr. Blomme: — This issue, as you noted, has been raised in the past and was looked at by the department. The member from Swift Current raised the issue with respect to the safety concern and the level of service.

In 2000 an engineering assessment was done with respect for the need of the traffic lanes. It would look at the length of the approach grades as well as the truck volumes and the passenger volumes. That assessment, which was based on the methodology used by the Transportation Association of Canada applied through Western Canada as well as across Canada, indicated that truck climbing lanes weren't warranted at that time.

But at the same time the department recognized that when we would be resurfacing the roadway, that construction of the truck climbing lanes could be done in a more economical manner. And we committed to reviewing that aspect at the timing of resurfacing.

Resurfacing isn't a plan for this year but as we do the assessments and make the annual plans for resurfacing, we will review the need and the opportunity to provide for truck climbing lanes.

Mr. Hermanson: — Mr. Chair, I would just point out, particularly to the minister, that there have been passing lanes on Highway 2 north of Moose Jaw through the Qu'Appelle Valley at the lake there for as long as I can remember. Of course passing lanes on the highway — was it Highway 9? — to Yorkton through the Qu'Appelle Valley at Fort Qu'Appelle where the grade is not nearly as severe and where the road is straight, or much straighter, let's put it that way. This is an urgent need.

And I would ask you to urge your officials to review the need for a passing lane on Highway 4 at the South Saskatchewan River Valley. I think lives hang in the balance. And certainly with the increased volume of traffic with the park there, golf courses put in place, a marina down there, boats are being hauled up and down this road, I think it warrants a review and I think that the timetable should be reviewed and the project should be undertaken as soon as possible.

The other issue I want to raise — and I've raised this in the past and I keep raising it because it needs to be addressed — and that is the fact that when heavy loads are hauled over secondary highways, a tariff is charged to the transporter of the overweight load. And I don't have a problem with the fact that those tariffs are put in place because I think it's meant to help cover the cost of the damage to the secondary highways.

What I do take issue with is that the current policy is discriminatory to haulers who particularly are in the interior of the province, and also could be even more discriminatory to haulers near the edge of the province if they have to haul across the province to get their goods out of the province of Saskatchewan.

Just to simply explain, and I'll relate it to something, Mr. Minister, that you're very familiar with from your past days, and that's the whole potato industry. It just was not viable for the growers and for the suppliers of potatoes to harvest the potatoes and at that time haul them out to a primary weight highway. It just was not . . . that's not feasible. Nor is it feasible then to have an unloading point on a primary highway where they unload a lighter load and then have to have a larger truck take the heavier load at, you know, at a point on the primary highway.

So they're prepared, I think, to pay the extra tariffs but the unfair part is that they have to pay this tariff not on the kilometres that they haul the load on a secondary highway, but they have to pay the fee on all the kilometres till they reach the border of the province — whether it be the eastern, southern, or western boundary — which is particularly discriminatory to any hauler in the centre of the province.

And I would say that if someone is near the Manitoba border and has to haul on a secondary highway to get their product west, it's even more discriminatory. Or if someone is on the west side of the province, has to use a secondary highway to get to a primary highway and has to go east, it is terribly unfair.

Why does the department not change its policy so that the tariff is charged only on the kilometres travelled on secondary highways?

Hon. Mr. Sonntag: — You'll be pleased to know that we actually did change the policy, and I'll leave it to the deputy minister to give you the detail. I think it's almost exactly as you would have requested it to be designed.

Mr. Brooks: — So the department has been conducting a review of its weight management policy for . . . throughout this year, and in consultation with the area transportation planning committees have been getting feedback on what parts of this system that they would like to see carry primary weights and which part they would like to see carry secondary weights.

And as well, the department has been following up with regards to the change it made a year ago to change the 10-month primary weight highways to 12-month. And that certainly was something as well that was, seemed to be very beneficial — particularly for the potato industry in around Outlook coming out that way.

And also at the same time the ACRE (Action Committee on the Rural Economy) Transportation Subcommittee had put forward several recommendations with regards to weight management and transportation. And in response to that, and with consultation with other stakeholders, we felt that even though this is a part of weight management total and we were not ready to come to conclusions and recommendations with regards to changes in the weigh management regime in total, that we could make these changes to the transportation partnership program to allow for the agricultural commodities that you mentioned to be hauling simply from their point of origin to their primary weight highway — the nearest primary weight highway — and that charges would be levied on the cost component from origin to that primary weight highway destination.

And then from there, they were on an equivalent basis with other haulers. And that change took effect April 1, 2004.

Mr. Hermanson: — All right then, that is . . . I was going to ask if it's already taken effect. That is good news. We also have a plant that produces salt and transports Epsom salts out of my constituency. Would that product also be covered under this policy change?

Mr. Brooks: — Not at this point in time. We are looking at those issues in the context of the broader weight management aspect. And it was felt that those types of extensions would essentially be too much of a change at this point without the full consultative process being undertaken.

Mr. Hermanson: — Just a comment. I would say if it's wrong for potatoes, it's wrong for every commodity. And again, I would urge your department to make that a consistent policy across to all products that are transported.

A final question. This is a new issue and I don't plan to belabour it, but in some of my travels outside of Saskatchewan I've noticed that many enterprises, particularly gas stations, hotels, motels, motor inns, whatever, fast food places, are advertised with very attractive small signs on the highway that I'm sure they had to have permission and probably even paid money to allow those signs to be put up. It might say, you know, the Travelodge next exit, or, you know, there might be three or four signs. They are quite tidy. I think they look better than a lot of the big, you know, the bigger billboard corridors. Now I'm not against billboards, but is it possible to allow these signs to be put up on Saskatchewan highways? Would these commercial entities pay a fee, a rental fee if you like, for the privilege of advertising on our highways in a very neat and appropriate way?

Mr. Brooks: — The department has in the past looked at this type of model and is aware that the model is in use, particularly in Alberta. At the current time we believe we can accommodate this type of request through promotion of the urban transportation signing corridors, and we're trying to promote that and the use of that. We have had a limited request for the tab signing; it hasn't been much of an issue. We are looking at other alternatives as well as the transportation signing corridor, but we haven't got those alternatives available at this point in time.

Mr. Hermanson: — Mr. Chair, do I understand that there has been discussions, you know, say with the chamber of commerce or with gasoline retailer chains or hotel chains as to whether they would be interested in paying a fee for that kind of signage to be available to them in Saskatchewan? Have those discussions been undertaken, or is it just that they haven't contacted you and you haven't contacted them?

Mr. Brooks: — Most of the discussion of this type has taken place through the tourism associations and looking at tourism signing initiatives. We haven't dealt specifically or had representation specifically from the groups that you mentioned.

Mr. Hermanson: — All right. Thank you, Mr. Chair. I would just close by saying that maybe that's a way that the provincial government can raise some revenue so that we don't have to close any more long-term care beds in Saskatchewan.

The Chair: — Ms. Morin.

Ms. Morin: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. So with the increase in funding available that Minister Sonntag is pleased about compared to when he held the portfolio previously, and the infrastructure improvements that would be undertaken because of that, what employment opportunities would thereby be created for Saskatchewan people?

Mr. Brooks: — So the department does generate significant employment opportunities. It employs more than 1,500 employees in 108 communities across the province, and many of those employees are in rural and northern Saskatchewan and choose to reside in communities in which they're stationed.

This year we will generate more than 100 million in direct payments to the road building, consulting engineering industries. We look to partner with northern contractors and

community-based organizations to generate employment opportunities in the building, operating, and maintaining of the northern transportation system in those areas.

And our partnerships with private sector companies like International Road Dynamics and Pavement Scientific International are creating good-paying jobs and exciting new industries within the province.

With approximately, this year, 150 students — on average that's what we would employ — we are one of the government's largest employers of summer students, giving young people a chance to experience the road building industry while our staff require the help.

Ms. Morin: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. You already twigged on something that I was going to ask you about next. Because we're trying to make Saskatchewan a first choice for youth as a place to live and build and start families and their careers, and it being the primary objective of this government, what are we doing to support that goal? What is your department doing to support that goal?

Mr. Brooks: — The department has many aspects of its planning that takes into account the need to replenish its staff and to create employment opportunities through the province. We have a significant number of our employees that are set to retire over the next coming years and we have a plan in place that would look to replace them. And we then actually focus on the specific skills that are going to be required by the department.

We have initiatives targeted at youth. I mentioned the 150 summer co-op or intern students that are hired each year by the department, many of them of a technical nature. And this places us as the largest employer of summer students by the government. These students are able to gain a wide experience specific to their future careers, and our department gains an ability to review the workers and their suitability for future employment and their capability of delivering projects that we hope will turn into a long-term relationship.

We've also worked in a number of areas with youth last year and this year in an advertising contest aimed at high school students to get them involved in promoting one of our key safety themes for the construction season, which is slow down in the orange zone. And our winners last year were students from Campbell Collegiate that developed the creatives that were put on the airwaves to promote the 60 kilometres in the orange zone.

And we also instituted in this last year a partnership with First Nations communities — P.A. Grand Council and others — an Aboriginal heavy duty mechanic apprenticeship program, which will see some funding from the First Nation communities to support the apprentices. And with increased work to those areas, we'll hopefully turn out fully certified heavy-duty mechanics on a regular basis that the department will have an opportunity to employ.

And finally, improving and maintaining on the transportation system, we're hoping and directing our activities in a way that generate general economic and social development that will in

turn generate more opportunities for youth in the province.

Ms. Morin: — Well I'm very pleased to hear about the heavy-duty mechanics and partnership program with the P.A. Grand Council and SGEU (Saskatchewan Government and General Employees' Union). I think that's quite exciting news.

Having said that, the diversity goes beyond that. So what other things is the department of Saskatchewan Highways and Transportation doing in terms of having a diverse and representative work force?

Mr. Brooks: — One of our department objectives is a efficient work force, and part of that we do believe includes creating a respectful, welcoming, and diverse work place. The department does have a history of a geographically dispersed and on-site work force and that has historically been conducted by a male workforce.

With 60 to 70 per cent of our work force set to retire in the next decade, the department does recognize that it needs to look at all of the aspects of our society if we are going to be successful in replacing those workers, and that we are going to have to be extremely competitive in attracting women, Aboriginal people, visible minorities, and people with disabilities to replace our retiring workers.

And we've got several initiatives. I mentioned the Aboriginal heavy-duty mechanic apprenticeship program. We've developed also a unique program for people with intellectual disabilities, and we currently have seven people working in our repair depots with . . . learning skills that will help them gain long-term employment.

We have an active group in our department called Women in Non-traditional Occupations that is developing programs and creating a welcoming mentorship and welcoming supportive structure for women in non-traditional occupations, whether that be technical or equipment oriented. And that group is promoting and attracting more women into the department.

And many of the occupations in the department, whether that be engineering, geoscience, information technology, and heavy equipment offer a rewarding and potentially lucrative careers for people, and that we are doing what we can through trade fairs and other aspects to try and attract these individuals.

The Chair: — I recognize the minister for the Crown Management Board, Ms. Atkinson.

Introduction of Guests

Hon. Ms. Atkinson: — Thank very much, Mr. Chair. I'm pleased to introduce to you and to all members of the committee, a group of students from St. Mark School, which is located in the Premier's constituency; it's Saskatoon Riversdale in Saskatoon.

There are 33 grade 6 students and they're accompanied by their teacher, Mr. Strasky, along with I'm sure others.

Mr. Speaker, I would ask all members to welcome these group of students to the legislature. They're going to receive drinks in

room 218 at approximately 4:15, and the Premier regrets that he isn't able to be here to welcome them but he's very pleased that they've made the trip from Saskatoon to Regina.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

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Subvote (HI01)

Ms. Morin: — Thank you, Mr. Chair. Those were my questions. Thank you.

The Chair: — Thank you. Mr. Elhard.

Mr. Elhard: — Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Good afternoon to the minister and his officials. I'd like to welcome them here today.

We've covered a number of topics but there are some very important issues to the constituents of Cypress Hills that I would like to raise. And before I do that, I'd like to congratulate Terry Schmidt on his ascension to the new position. I understand that you start as assistant deputy minister tomorrow. And you've got your work cut out for you, Mr. Schmidt. I know your predecessor quite well and I think he worked long and hard in that job, and you've got big shoes to fill as well. So welcome.

I want to address the construction schedule of the river hill project on Highway 37 south of Shaunavon first. I've had occasion twice in the last couple of weeks to go to the community of Climax, and as a result I've had to pass through that construction zone. And it's an immense project, and I think that the project is substantially larger than even the locals anticipated it to be. What I would like to ask is, can you refresh our memory as to what the original expected time frame was for that construction project, and what your original budget for that project might have been?

Mr. Blomme: — I can speak to the time frame. As we work on that corridor, it consists of both the grading and the surfacing. Our plan was to complete the grading such that the surfacing contract through the Frenchman, I believe it's approximately 7 kilometres in length, could be completed during this construction season. As we were undertaking the grading project, which was anticipated to be completed late last fall or some carry-over into this construction season, we've had some significant issues with slope stability and been doing some detailed engineering assessment of that over the winter period. We expect we have a solution for that issue; it will require some additional grading, modification of the existing design location. And we would expect construction on that grading to commence when the conditions in the area are appropriate for the contractor to commence. And I expect that to be very soon.

At the same time as we've been proceeding with the engineering for the surfacing design, finding where the materials come, we think there may be some significant economics in using the new technology, the PSI (Pavement Scientific International) designed aspect. So we're following up

on that. Our plan would be to tender the surfacing as planned with the target of completing the surfacing in this fall as per the original schedule.

I don't have the cost estimates before me, but we could provide those if so desired.

Mr. Elhard: — Thank you. Given the delay that you've talked about though, do you anticipate there will be a cost overrun on the actual construction, the grading part of the project?

Mr. Blomme: — The occurrence . . . And the Frenchman Valley is, as we find and even more so as we get into more detailed engineering, has been and continues to prove to be an unstable valley — not uncommon for many of the valleys in Saskatchewan.

The need to mitigate and take action to reduce the risk associated with the slope stability will necessitate increased earthmoving. The plan now is, from the detailed engineering, is to relocate a short section of the road off the unstable area to a much more stable area for the long-term stability of the road. That move will increase the yardage slightly and that increase in yardage does reflect an increased cost for the project.

Mr. Elhard: — Thank you. If you're driving through that area now, can an individual gather where the new route is going to go? Are we far enough along in the selection of the new route that that could be seen? I mean can you tell . . . I mean there's several different grades there. There's the original grade, the current grade, the new grade, and now I suppose the alternate grade all being kind of laid out there. Can people who are driving through that area identify where the new route is going to be?

Mr. Blomme: — In a general sense and one of the . . . We've been in ongoing discussions with the local citizens in the Climax area. We've made a commitment to hold a public meeting and try to give them an overview of what the current status of the road is — what was the issue and what is the resolution. I expect we will be doing that in May.

But in a general sense, being familiar with the area as you are, if we look at the existing roadway, the initial construction was looking at a location and had proceeded on a location to the west of that. The detailed geotechnical assessment that has gone forward over the winter has identified that the least risk and the greatest stability would exist to the east of the original roadway and we will see some rerouting of the new roadway to the east of the existing roadway.

Mr. Elhard: — Okay. Thank you. I assume that the instability you're talking about has to do with springs that are being uncovered or located in the original proposal for that road. Is that right? Or is there something associated with sandstone and other materials that are affecting the stability issue?

Mr. Blomme: — This is an area that will be better spoken to by a geotechnical expert. The Frenchman Valley as we look at the wall, there's stability problems through a fairly large portion of it. The stability that exists does relate to the soil types and the layers of soils that are encountered very deep into the valley. So it's not only the springs. The springs can be a contributing

factor to the risk associated. But it's more to do with the soil, soil layers that were encountered and the slip plains that naturally exist in that valley location.

Mr. Elhard: — One of the concerns that has arisen as a result of the complications with the project to date is that the Highways department has done some surveying for the highway south as it proceeds out of the valley and on into the community of Climax. And I think the concern is that with the cost overruns that are anticipated that the department will delay its plans to continue with the construction or the reconstruction of Highway 37 south to the community of Climax and eventually, I'm hoping, down to the border.

So can the department, can US officials give us some assurance today that the timetable for the rest of the construction there won't be negatively affected? We will have a beautiful highway through the river hill that's been long anticipated, long-awaited, but if there isn't something done to rectify the very narrow, very rough, and sometimes nearly impassable conditions of the highway south of that point, you know, it won't augur well for future heavy traffic in that area, and let alone passenger traffic.

Mr. Brooks: — Certainly the amount of funding that's available to the department is critical to its ability to complete its work. And we try and be as prudent as possible when we're putting the plans together to ensure that we actually can finish the corridors because, as you point out, the corridor needs to be complete to deliver the full economic benefit of the investment that's made all the way along.

So it's a key consideration, and it's a consideration that we have as we develop all of our, of our plans. So certainly we see that as a key factor in making sure that the investments that we've already put in there yield the economic payback.

Mr. Elhard: — Thank you. Assuming funding levels remain relatively static and assuming that the priority for that stretch of road as would be suggested by the southwest transportation planning committee and accepted by the department, can we on the basis of your three-year or four-year plan for the department though suggest, on the basis of those assumptions, that the next stage will be the building of that highway south?

Mr. Brooks: — It is the department's intent to proceed with the engineering of that next stage this summer, with the intent to look at tendering for the work next year on the next stage. This is all contingent on the Prairie Grain Roads funding, and hopefully without any unforeseen circumstances we should be in that position next year.

Mr. Elhard: — Thank you. I raise that because I know most of the people who live along that highway, and they said that they've seen stakes out there before. It's not necessarily a sign that the highway's going to be fixed. They just want some assurance that those stakes actually mean something this time. And I'm glad for that certain level of commitment given. I hope to be able to see it through to completion.

I'd like to change focus here just for a few minutes. I want to talk about some of the issues that have come to my attention as a result of transportation matters affecting the community of Gull Lake. As you know, the No. 1 intersection with Highway

37 has been a very dangerous place over the last number of years. We've had two serious incidents just this last fall and winter; we've had a couple of lives lost there. And I know the community and individuals in the community have made significant representations to both . . . well the previous minister and I assume the department and maybe the current minister as well.

And I know that there was some promise on behalf of the minister. I think I have a copy of the letter written by the minister to the community, assuring them that some attention would be paid to that particular intersection. A couple of different options were offered to the people to provide increased safety there. I'm wondering which option is being pursued and which is likely to take precedence over the others.

Mr. Brooks: — We have certainly responded to a number of requests from the local area with regards to the safety of that intersection, and we have taken some steps to see if some mitigation is possible. We have advisory speed reduction signs there, and we are looking at whether or not a speed study would assess whether or not a mandatory reduction in speed would mitigate safety in that area.

We have gone to slightly larger signs. There currently is a flashing light on the Highway 37 intersection coming onto there, so that is also a consideration. And we are looking to what can be done the next time a surfacing or resurfacing of that is completed to see what would be an appropriate adjustment to make if there is one that would mitigate the safety side.

Mr. Elhard: — Thank you. As you can appreciate, Mr. Brooks, the intersection is one I travel through every time I go home and come back to Regina. And so I've had several opportunities to sit between the two lanes watching the speed at which traffic moves through that intersection while I'm waiting to cross. And to my knowledge . . . and my experience anyway has been that the current warning signs — the reduced speed limit warning, the lights, and so forth — while they may have captured the attention of motorists at one time, they no longer do.

I think there's just no question about it that, you know, people who drive through there on a regular basis find that to be routine and almost something . . . they don't choose to ignore; just by habit they do ignore. And so I don't think that that is effective any longer.

And I'm wondering really if making a clear decision to reduce the speed through there — as difficult as that might be because it is Canada's national highway and because we don't want to impede traffic unnecessarily — but if we could restrict the traffic speed to an 80- or 90-kilometre-an-hour limit through there which is enforceable . . . because as I understand it, the warning speeds that are in existence now are really not enforceable. But if we went to an enforceable speed limit through there and actually tried enforcement which would help to make the point . . . whether that isn't our first and least expensive alternative, I know there's going to be other alternatives proposed. But they are going to be much more costly.

But how long will it take to make a decision by the department to move to an enforceable reduced speed through that

intersection?

Mr. Brooks: — We do expect that we will have the speed assessment completed this summer and would note that there are a number of considerations that are taken into account when these are conducted. One alternative is strict enforcement of the current maximum speed limit through the area and also strict enforcement of other vehicle operating practices as people enter the highway.

The judgment that's taken into account when these speed assessments are done is to try and strike the balance between the natural flow of the traffic — what traffic is comfortable travelling at and is likely to migrate to — and to make sure that whatever signage that we put up gets the attention of all of the drivers so that we don't increase the potential for traffic conflict, having some slow down to obey a signage where others feel that the natural flow is faster than that, and therefore widen the speed differential among the traffic going through there and potentially increasing the traffic conflict in the area.

So as that assessment is done, they'll be reviewing all of those aspects. And currently we wouldn't want to prejudge that but rather get the expert assessment and be available to take that into account.

Mr. Elhard: — So what kind of a time frame will that assessment require? When can we expect that to happen? You said the summer. But you know, there's lots of time between now and September 21.

Mr. Brooks: — Well we haven't got a specific date for this at this point in time. We would expect, you know, that by the end of July we would have that completed. But again, we haven't got a particular target at this . . . brought forward with this.

Mr. Elhard: — I appreciate, you know, the importance of doing the job right. But I looked at the other alternatives that were proposed in a letter to the mayor, Ken Wiebe, in Gull Lake by the former ADM (associate deputy minister), and it looks to me like the other alternatives are a lot more costly and a lot more time consuming.

And I'm wondering whether, you know — given the propensity for accidents at that particular intersection — whether we really need to have a detailed and lengthy study, whether we shouldn't move to something like the proposed reduced speed . . . enforceable reduced speed through that intersection while other initiatives are evaluated because I think this might also end up being a stop-gap measure.

That's a very difficult intersection. From anybody's point of view, it's not a good intersection. And it's going to require . . . To do the job right, it's going to require a fairly extensive repair or renovation I think at some point, especially as more and more heavy truck traffic goes through there. And with the, you know, with the twinning that we've just completed west of there, I expect we're going to see more truck traffic in that particular vicinity. So I guess I'm urging the department to do as much as possible as quickly as possible at the least immediate expense to the department. And I think that the people of Gull Lake would understand that just as a matter of recognition of the seriousness of the collisions there and the

numbers that are happening.

Can I move to another . . . I'm not asking for a response; that's just my admonition. I want to move to another issue that affects the community of Gull Lake.

Highway 37 runs through Gull Lake proper, and there is a number of weak spots in that particular road. There's some repairs required from time to time. There's a lot of heavy traffic going right through the heart of Gull Lake. And it's not traffic that the town itself generates; it's the host or recipient of traffic that is going right through the community to serve other communities. Now I guess I need to know what it would require of the department to agree to helping the town of Gull Lake fund the repairs to what essentially is a provincial highway running through the heart of their community.

Mr. Brooks: — One of the most promising options for the town in addressing the capital requirements on the road would be the exploration of the Prairie Grain Roads Program through the municipal side. Because of the association of that traffic with agricultural haul, this would make it a very good candidate for that funding, and we've indicated that to the town. That would bring in the neighbourhood of two-thirds of the funding for those capital improvements to the project.

Mr. Elhard: — So in view of what you've just said, are you just waiting for an application from them? Is that as simple as the requirement might be?

Mr. Brooks: — The application would go to the agreement management committee of the Prairie Grain Roads Program.

Mr. Elhard: — We just are running out of time way too rapidly here, but I'd want to ask you a couple of quick questions about the Gull Lake maintenance facility. Now I know that there was an effort to indicate that there was not a need for that facility now. Has the department come to a conclusive decision on whether or not they're going to maintain that facility or close it permanently?

Mr. Brooks: — The department has not yet come to a decision on that. We were to a certain extent waiting to see our annual budget and come to an assessment of the needs that we have that are very pressing this year. The department recognizes that it is the recipient of very scarce resources and wants to use those in the most prudent fashion possible.

And we also are attempting to make a change that minimizes the impact on staff and on the service levels that communities would experience for their winter snow and ice control. We expect that we are able to do this through . . . as equipment improves and our capacity to manage the highways through section offices that take care of more length of highway than they had traditionally, and that brings in operational efficiencies.

And we are reviewing a number of offices as we go through each year. And this does mean that some sections may become bigger while others are looked at as a view to provide efficiencies for the system as a whole — again with an eye on the service levels for the communities.

Mr. Elhard: — With the time running out, I'm going to pursue this line of questioning at another date in the future. Thank you, though, for your time today.

The Chair: — Sir.

Mr. Brooks: — I'd just like an opportunity to read in the record. I had misspoke with regards to a question from Mr. Trew, that with regards to the life cycles of the principal highway system, we are targeting there for a 20-year life cycle. And on the regional highway system, it's the 25-year life cycle.

The Chair: — Thank you, Mr. Brooks. Mr. Minister.

Hon. Mr. Sonntag: — Thank you very much. Can I, just in conclusion as well, first of all just say thank you for the very good questions, and I'll make this observation. Since I was minister last time, to have approximately \$80 million more in the portfolio and this new structure where all the officials answer all the questions, it's quite enjoyable being the Minister of Highways and Transportation now.

Let me say as well, just because I think it's an appropriate time to say it. I know neither one of them are here, but I know almost all of my colleagues, both in the government and the opposition side, I'm sure will join me in saying this, by first of all of course welcoming Terry as we have.

But tomorrow is also the last day in the office as I understand it, tomorrow is the last day for Stu Armstrong who has served the department for 35 years and also Barry Martin who has left about a week or so ago, for 38 years I think. And I want to read into the record and thank in a very public way those two gentlemen who have served our government — and other governments before ours and the people of Saskatchewan most importantly — very, very well, and it is I think deeply appreciated by all of us. Thanks to both of them.

Some Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

The Chair: — Mr. Bjornerud.

Mr. Bjornerud: — Mr. Chair, I think at this time I would move that we adjourn. I want to though first thank the minister and especially thank the officials. We actually got answers today which was great, and we thank the officials for that. I would suggest that by August or September, we will be on a first-name basis with those officials when we finish coming back at the Highways estimates.

The Chair: — Thank you, Mr. Bjornerud. The committee now stands adjourned.

The committee adjourned at 16:52.

