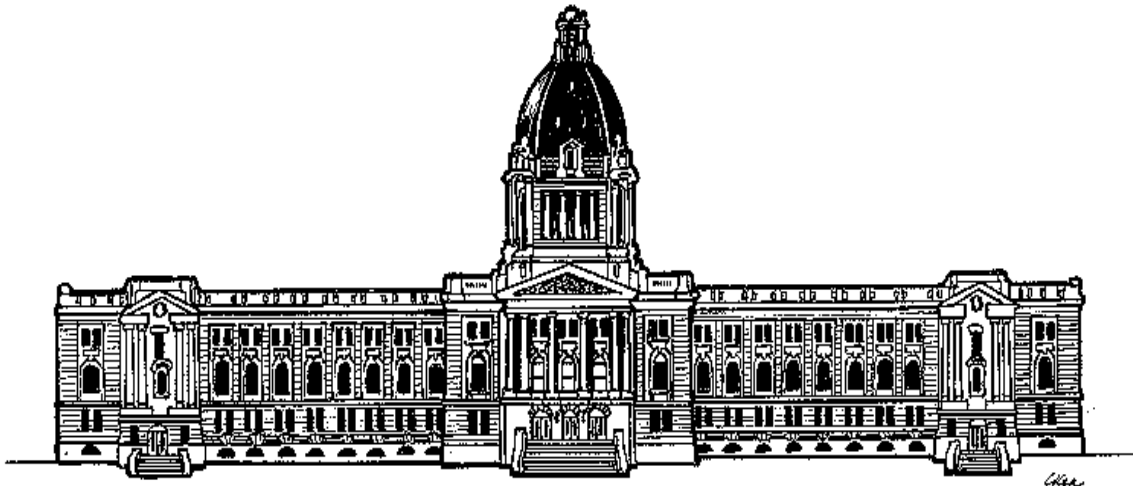




# **STANDING COMMITTEE ON INTERGOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS AND INFRASTRUCTURE**

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**STANDING COMMITTEE ON INTERGOVERNMENTAL  
AFFAIRS AND INFRASTRUCTURE  
2007**

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[The committee met at 15:37.]

**General Revenue Fund  
Supplementary Estimates — March  
Highways and Transportation  
Vote 16**

**Subvote (HI10)**

**The Chair:** — I'll call to order the Standing Committee on Intergovernmental Affairs and Infrastructure. The item of business before the committee this afternoon is the consideration of supplementary estimates for March and that's for the Department of Highways and Transportation, vote 16. And that's found on page 9 of the Supplementary Estimates book.

Mr. Minister, you have the opportunity now to introduce your officials.

**Hon. Mr. Lautermilch:** — Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I will begin with the gentleman to my right, who is Terry Schmidt. Terry is the assistant deputy minister of operations division. To my immediate left is John Law, who's the deputy minister of Highways and Transportation. To his left, on the far end, is George Stamatinos, who is the assistant deputy minister, policy and programs division. And at the table behind, on the left is Tim Kealey, who is the director of corporate support branch, and Ted Stobbs is sitting to Mr. Kealey's right. And Ted is the assistant deputy minister of corporate services division.

**The Chair:** — Thank you, Mr. Minister. I would like to draw to the attention of the members of the committee that the time agreed to this evening is two hours. So we will sit for two hours in estimates today. Mr. Minister, if you have an opening statement, we will entertain that now.

**Hon. Mr. Lautermilch:** — Yes. I'll just make a few brief comments. What we are, as you have described, debating today is a \$4.4 million appropriation, special warrant funding, for the Department of Highways and Transportation.

This is a practice that has been used by the Department of Finance and by Highways and Transportation for a considerable period of time. This money is to be allocated for the winter snow and ice program. We generally budget, I guess, sort of a ballpark figure because there are so many different impacts. Inflation is obviously one and you can, I guess, be close on that. But the severity of winter and road inventory changes as a result of twinning and upgrades are obviously an issue — the Athabasca seasonal road. So I think it's fair to say that with global warming and the variation from year to year, the unpredictable weather of snow and ice events makes it very difficult to be totally accurate. So we have used special warrants as a tool to support this budget in the past and this year we're asking for, in the special warrant funding, 4.4 million.

The current expenditure to the end of December would indicate that winter snow and ice control costs could reach about \$26.5 million and so the flexibility in the fourth quarter is really limited. In 2005-06 the department accessed \$5.1 million in

special warrant funding, so this is a little bit different. The base is 22.05 million and so it would, as we see, a shortfall of about 4.4 million. And so the officials are prepared to assist me in discussing that with members of the committee. And that, Mr. Chairman, would be my opening comments.

**The Chair:** — Thank you, Mr. Minister. Mr. Hart.

**Mr. Hart:** — Thank you, Mr. Chair. Minister, I have a number of questions dealing with the winter maintenance. And the first question that I would have deals with the difference that I have observed in snow and ice removal and maintenance of driving surfaces.

And I've noticed quite a difference between the condition of the highway on No. 6 from Regina to junction 16 and particularly that area that I quite often travel when I go to Saskatoon, from junction 22 to No. 16. That stretch of highway seems to be maintained quite well in my opinion given the, you know, various winter driving conditions that we have. But yet when one travels from junction 6 to Saskatoon, west on No. 16, the Yellowhead, I've observed on a number of occasions over the last two or three years that the winter maintenance isn't what one would expect it to be on that particular section of highway given that that's the Yellowhead Route.

And so I would just ask for comments as to why the difference, what maintenance areas are involved in the various sections of highways, and what are their priorities, and those sorts of things.

I can recall a trip to Saskatoon two years ago where we did have snow and ice, and we had a bit of a snowstorm during the night. And that section of highway, the Yellowhead section between 6 and Saskatoon was barely drivable, yet No. 6 was at least reasonable driving conditions. So I wonder if you could explain the maintenance responsibilities for those two sections of highways, and why the difference.

**Hon. Mr. Lautermilch:** — I'm going to, Mr. Chairman, ask Mr. Law to deal with this question. And I think perhaps Mr. Schmidt will have some additions to Mr. Law's comments.

**Mr. Law:** — Thank you, Mr. Minister. The areas of the highway that the member refers to are in fact serviced by different of our section offices. And I should make maybe two or three comments with respect to the level of service.

The first one is that that particular . . . Both of those sections of highway that you referred to are maintained to the same standard. And so technically we've determined that for our first order of the provincial highway system, the highest order of the system that we want to maintain — this being one example — the standard will be consistent from one place to another.

Most frequently the differences that occur have to do with timing. Oftentimes we hear from travellers who will be travelling a particular section where there is a separation between the section offices where, despite the relative priority being the same, the time, if it's a difference in terms of access or travelling distance in terms of, perhaps, the loading up of salt or sand or chemical that we might need to use on the highway,

one section may have been treated earlier than another section may have been treated.

But we have a protocol that calls for a minimum threshold around the time frames that we aim to address that. And so usually we're able to meet those, and the highways would be treated to the same standard.

Your observation is correct to the extent that there will in all likelihood be circumstances where the travelling distances, the access to materials or other things, may have affected a difference in timing.

The second thing that I wanted to comment on with respect to the common standard is that over the course of the last two years we have been working to implement an updated protocol with respect to our standards, which reflects not only our best position with respect to establishing the highest level of service that we can, it also incorporates relative information in terms of how other jurisdictions, neighbouring jurisdictions, are also managing that same protocol.

And we have set out our time frames in terms of the response times and the clearances and the applications on the basis of coming to terms with what we think makes sense, in terms of not only our local conditions and the uniqueness that may exist in our province compared to others, but also with reference to some of the technical work that is being done in terms of understanding what the best protocols are in other jurisdictions as well.

And within that we have undertaken in this . . . And last year would've been one of our first two seasons working at this. We're trying to smooth out some of those perceived inconsistencies that you're referring to where we're increasingly having the different section offices communicate with one another around timing and have tried to equip them with a little better technology so that they can stay in touch with one another with respect to the timing associated with when they will be doing their work. So there won't be particularly significant differences between, you know, the same sections of road where a driver may be travelling in this instance between, say Regina and Saskatoon, and become accustomed to a particular driving comfort level and then find themselves dealing with a different circumstance sort of all of a sudden.

So we have instituted some new protocols and undertaken some fairly detailed study work in terms of both the establishment of our standards and how the protocols are being applied by our operations staff.

Maybe I'll stop there and then refer . . . Mr. Schmidt may be able to speak more specifically to the time frames and the resource commitments that are available through those two offices. That's sort of at a level that Terry can speak to better than I can.

**Mr. Schmidt:** — Thank you. I can elaborate on that a little bit. The deputy did a very good job of summarizing our winter maintenance practices. At a little more detailed level, we have three different levels of service for winter maintenance. And we've recently reviewed these in the last year or two and updated our policy.

We have the highest level, or what we call level 1, is that we strive to within six hours of the end of the storm on economic connectors that service commuter routes around our major cities, major interprovincial and international travel routes — which Highway 16 and 6 would be part of routes that connect communities with a population of 3,000 or more or have an average daily traffic count of 1,500 or more — that's our level 1. So we will try to, within six hours of the end of the storm, remove all snow and ice. Now it depends on conditions. Sometimes the storms can last for 12 or 14 hours, so we say six hours after the end of the storm.

The second level or the level 2 is within 12 hours at the end of the storm, we endeavour to remove all the snow and ice. These are on highways with an average daily traffic count between 300 and 1,500 vehicles. So this would be the second level.

And then the third level is within 24 hours of the end of a storm — is when all other highways, we strive to remove all the snow and ice within 24 hours of the end of a storm on all highways with 300 vehicles or less.

And then following that, the final thing we will do after a storm is what we call the cleanup. That will be the service roads, the median approaches, the approaches. That type of cleanup work will be undertaken when we've cleared all the other roads.

Highway 6 and 16 would both be a level 1 corridor. And there's lots of complexities that go into winter snow and ice. And as the deputy mentioned, we locate our resources — our equipment and our labour, our people, our men and women — in the locations that will model that we can meet these levels of service requirements. So we actually do modelling that says, if the truck can plow snow at 60 kilometres an hour and it takes so much time to load in between, we actually do that modelling to ensure that we can meet those in normal conditions.

Winter is not very predictable though. And you've got a highway that runs north-south that oftentimes can be very different than a highway that runs east-west in Saskatchewan. So you can have conditions where the wind is blowing from the northwest and you'll have a north-south road that needs very little attention, like Highway 6. Or you have predominantly northwest winds like we get in the winter in Saskatchewan, our east-west roads tend to see a little more need for snowplowing. They get the finger drifts. If the conditions are such the snow will stick, and we'll have to wait for the wind to subside and do salting or sanding. So even just the direction of travel can have an impact on the type of maintenance procedures.

As well the amount of traffic can have an impact. We try to get out as quick as we can. The traffic volume on Highway 16 is almost double or near double that of 6. You get a lot of heavy trucks out there before trucks can get to plowing the snow or treating the ice. It just makes it more difficult and harder for us to get out and break that ice off and treat it off.

So there are lots of factors that come into play but, as the deputy mentioned, the crews are in communication with one another even though they may have roads that are assigned to them. The practice that we are working towards, what we're working towards is they communicate with one another and the resources are mobile. They are not just assigned specifically to

the headquarters. They go where they are needed to meet the priority levels of service.

**Mr. Hart:** — Thank you, both members of minister's staff for that explanation. Just a follow-up question. The service, or areas that are, shops or maintenance shops that are responsible for maintenance on those sections of highways — particularly the, say No. 6, Southey, Raymore, up to the junction — where did the crews come from to maintain that area? And then 16 out of Saskatoon to Lanigan and up to Dafoe. If you could just outline which maintenance crews are responsible for what section of highway, that perhaps may help me understand the procedures that are in place for the overall maintenance.

**Mr. Law:** — Through you, Mr. Chair, perhaps the best way for us to address this, we can provide you with a map that shows you exactly what section boundaries are. And again, subject to what Mr. Schmidt said with respect to the mobility of crews, we can tell you where people are being sourced from on a general basis, and it will give you an understanding of that for these as well as others.

**Mr. Hart:** — That'd be great. That'd be very acceptable. Thank you. Just one or two more questions, Mr. Chair.

This additional funding for winter maintenance costs, are any of these dollars, will any of this additional funding be used to perhaps replace gravel stockpiles that had to be used for or that may have been used for winter maintenance that were intended for spring construction? I'm thinking along Highway 22 between 6 and 20 in the 310 area, the Balcarres-Ituna area. I understand that there may have been some work done in preparation for perhaps some construction that may be coming fairly soon. And my question is, are these funds being used to replace perhaps some gravel that may have been needed for winter maintenance?

**Mr. Schmidt:** — The funds asked for here are part of our winter snow and ice maintenance control program. The materials are specific to winter snow and ice control for this program. So we do put up winter sand, but that is used specifically for winter maintenance treatments. Aggregate put up for the summer programs would come out of surface preservation or other programs, so that would not be part of this program.

**Mr. Hart:** — Okay. I'm good.

**The Chair:** — Mr. Brkich.

**Mr. Brkich:** — Dealing with supplementary estimates, as you know, last year we had extensive flooding on Highway 15. Is there any of that money going to be set aside for any work being done there either this spring or that was done there this fall to correct the problem or now that the water is starting to flow again?

**Hon. Mr. Lautermilch:** — Mr. Chairman, Mr. Brkich, we have been, as a matter of course within government, the departments . . . Government Relations have been working with the Department of Highways and Transportation, knowing that we have some very serious water levels in some areas of our province, in anticipation of spring — preparing through the

budget process and through coordinating work efforts and jobs that the different departments do in preparation for that.

Of course you can never be, as you well know . . . And many of your colleagues have been involved in municipal politics in their former careers. And obviously the rate of thaw in the spring will be in some cases determine the severity — the amount of snow, the amount of residual. So obviously we do the best to anticipate weather, climate, and that's part of the process. That's part of what the officials do.

**Mr. Brkich:** — Thank you on that. Just to follow up, I guess I was asking is, are you planning doing anything this spring, like keeping the culvert open? That's a huge culvert there. And I think the problem last year, it got iced up and blocked.

Now I know I have noticed that there was a backhoe there about two weeks ago, digging, and I think that's what it was doing. It was probably trying to keep it clear. My question is, are you . . . is that going to be an ongoing process? Are you going to have a piece of equipment there, a backhoe fairly close if you have to open it?

**Hon. Mr. Lautermilch:** — Well, Mr. Chairman, I'm going to ask the deputy, Mr. Law, to respond to you. I should also say to members of the committee that we are here prepared to deal with winter snow and ice control special warrant, which is this budget item and this part of the supplementary budgets. And there may not . . . There may be information that you would require today that are outside of the parameters of the budget we're voting, vote 16, that we could deal with during general estimates this spring as part of the budget process. But I will ask Mr. Law to attempt to assist you in this specific issue.

**Mr. Law:** — Thank you, Mr. Minister. The member is correct that our efforts around trying to enhance the responsiveness to some of the more dramatic weather conditions that we've had to deal with in this past spring, for example, have required us to undertake to do some things of a preventative nature where we can or to be in a better position to be more responsive to circumstances that may come up.

In this instance the minister is correct that the funds that we are talking about for this particular special warrant are not targeted for any of the spring components. But we will be endeavouring, as we are doing now, in terms of the monitoring of some of the snowfall that has taken place over the course of the winter.

We're expecting that we will have to be prepared this spring to again provide some higher levels of responsiveness to some of the conditions that will be out there. And there are two or three areas of the province in particular where we are anticipating that we are going to have similar circumstances to deal with that. But that is not the substance of where we are proposing to spend this funding.

**Mr. Brkich:** — Thank you for that. Yes, because I kind of monitor it because it's not too far from me and it probably will be a problem. Hopefully it won't be this year.

I guess one more question on the supplementary estimates, still dealing with that. Is any of that money put aside for . . . I believe you're in a court case on that particular flooding on

Highway 15. Is any of that money set aside for dealing with that?

**Mr. Law:** — No.

**Mr. Brkich:** — And one other question of ... was talking about abandonment of the rail line between Regina and Saskatoon — a major, major rail line, link of transportation. CN [Canadian National] has made the notice that they are going to abandon from Davidson to Regina. Is any of that money on this particular estimate being dealt with that particular problem?

**Mr. Law:** — There's no funding set aside for anything outside of our direct winter snow and ice program.

**The Chair:** — Mr. Stewart.

**Mr. Stewart:** — Thank you, Mr. Chair. To the minister: is there any money budgeted under supplementary estimates for the Riverhurst ferry refit?

**Hon. Mr. Lautermilch:** — Mr. Chairman, this budget is for winter snow and ice control. There's nothing in this subvote budgeted for ferries.

**Mr. Stewart:** — Mr. Chair, this is a matter of some urgency. Spring is coming. The ferry was down most of last summer, causing tremendous financial hardship to the people of the Lake Diefenbaker area. The government's response was weak at best.

I'm here, Mr. Minister, you're here, you have a number of officials here. I think it's my duty to ask these questions as soon as possible about what's being done with the Riverhurst ferry. It's not good enough to wait until the waters open, and it's spring already. The people of the area have a right to know. And I'm going to ask you, how much money is budgeted in supplementary estimates or not for the work that's being done on the Riverhurst ferry?

**Hon. Mr. Lautermilch:** — Mr. Chairman, I would say that the money that we debated in last year's budget — in the '06-07 budget — those questions could have been, would have been, I would assume asked when we put last year's budget together. I would remind the member that we have put and allocated more dollars this year to the global budget than was part of last year's budget. And he is right that this \$4.4 million in special warrant funding is not related to ferry service expenditures.

And I would say to the member, I am more than willing to brief him on what has been done over the course of the winter. And if he would be interested in having a meeting with the officials and with myself; we would be more than willing to facilitate that. We're in session right now so quite obviously we would be able to do that sooner rather than later. And if the member's interested in detail about what has happened over the past winter and if he would like to share some of his thoughts with us, we would be more than willing to have that meeting.

I would want to be briefed and I would want to have up-to-date briefings so that I can best answer his questions with the most current knowledge that can be obtained with respect to the mechanical breakdown, to the engineering, to what has taken place to ensure more reliable ferry service. And I would want to

make sure that I have all of the information pertinent and I'm more than willing to help facilitate that meeting.

**Mr. Stewart:** — Thank you, Mr. Minister. Mr. Chair, I will be waiting eagerly for a contact from the department as to us having a meeting to discuss the intimate details of the Riverhurst ferry refit. Thank you.

**The Chair:** — Mr. Hermanson.

**Mr. Hermanson:** — Thank you, Mr. Chair, and just by way of segue into my questions, when that meeting occurs I'd like to be present as well because everybody that crosses the ferry, 50 per cent of them end up in my constituency and I'm hearing the same concerns that Mr. Stewart is hearing.

With regard to the winter crossing at the Riverhurst ferry site, can you tell me whether the cost of maintaining that winter crossing was above average, below average, and what average is in the current year and if that had factored into the supplementary estimates?

**Hon. Mr. Lautermilch:** — Mr. Chairman, I can tell you that that is not part of the vote that we are debating this evening. This evening's debate is winter snow and ice control. And obviously I would want to ensure that we have up-to-date costs. I would assume that the winter crossing costs have not yet run their course as we still have, I would assume, those costs ongoing into the spring. But I'm more than willing to again facilitate that as part of the discussion if Mr. Hermanson would so choose.

**Mr. Hermanson:** — Well actually that, Mr. Chair, that assumption is incorrect because the season is concluded now. Given the extremely warm weather over the past week, the crossing I believe is closed. But that really is, I mean, snow removal is probably the major cost in keeping that open. I mean basically it is snow and ice. And I would wonder if perhaps you could check with your officials to see if there wasn't some component of the supplementary estimates involved with the winter crossing. I would think winter crossings also in the North would be impacted by the amount of snow that occurs and costs would vary significantly from year to year.

**Hon. Mr. Lautermilch:** — Okay. Mr. Chairman, I will ask Mr. Law to attempt to bring Mr. Hermanson up to speed as much as he can.

**Mr. Law:** — I thought we might have a number for you, Mr. Hermanson, in terms of the component that you're asking about. We'll see if we can find it before the end of the discussion today, but we will undertake to send it to you if we're not able to come up with it today. There is a component that is directly related to these estimates in that part of the expenditure, and we will break that out. I believe we do it, you know, for the ferries overall. We'd have to get down and see if we can get the number specifically for Riverhurst for you.

**Mr. Hermanson:** — That would be much appreciated because it is quite a sight when you see a number of trucks out there on that ice crossing, pushing snow. It's actually quite a wide area of ice that is managed to keep an ice crossing open. A lot of people might think that it's just a narrow trail, but it is rather a

major operation from what I've seen.

And while you're reviewing that, and I'm not expecting an answer today because this probably wouldn't be, definitely wouldn't be part of the supplementary estimates. But there's a lot of scuttlebutt about the, you know, the cost of keeping that ice road open versus keeping the ferry running longer or even some suggest throughout the entire winter season if that's possible.

So at some point when we . . . perhaps when we have this meeting if we could determine what those costs are and what the additional costs of keeping the season longer are for a year. I don't know if those studies have been undertaken. That would be useful for me when I have to deal with my constituents.

The other concern I have is . . . and I'm not sure this falls under the supplementaries or not. I'm thinking, given your comments it may not but you know the winter conditions — and you know do you monitor that? — have an impact on the roads in the spring when the road bans go on. That's an issue in particularly in my area.

My understanding is that Cavendish Farms have been given a permit — and correct me if I'm wrong — a permit to haul seed potatoes out of their area when the bans are on. Is this a cost that's determined during the winter months as you look at the road conditions? Also you know, if you could just let me know what costs are involved in determining when you put the road bans on the highways and how you determine who might have the permits, what times those decisions are made? You could correct me if I'm wrong, whether Cavendish does or doesn't have a permit — I understand they do — and whether those permits are made available to other producers in the area.

**Hon. Mr. Lautermilch:** — Mr. Chairman, I'm going to ask Mr. Stamatinos to respond to Mr. Hermanson.

**Mr. Stamatinos:** — Mr. Chairman, thank you. Thank you, Mr. Hermanson. We do issue permits to the potato seed growers on an annual basis, really to accommodate their need to get their product to their market in around May. It's a very small window as you're probably aware.

We've initiated a couple technology pieces, you might say, that have helped us to I guess predict the frost accumulation in our municipal roads and provincial highways during that period of time. It's thermistic technology is what it's called. And we have, gosh, it must be close to 15 or 20 locations across the province that we monitor. And as part of our agri-value transportation program that we have that we designed specifically to accommodate the needs of the value-added agricultural sector we do in fact issue a permit. This is a little different than what we do with our other trucking . . . [inaudible] . . . It's unique and it was brought in about two years ago to accommodate the industry. And what we do is, it's correct, we do monitor the frost accumulation with this technology and we're able to predict whether or not it's safe to allow the movement of potatoes over a TMS, thin membrane service roads.

Another unique aspect of that program is that, unlike our other trucking program, we're very sensitive to the needs of that

particular industry. And we try to accommodate and extend that window as long as possible. The permits, we often will provide authorizations to participants of the program to self-issue permits. So it cuts down the administration. Also it cuts down some of the costs that are related, related to that program.

Certainly in a winter like the one we just experienced, I think it would be fairly safe to say if the thaw or the warm weather continues, we may have a bit of an issue. We're hoping that not to be the case because of course it thaws from the top down, and we're hoping that maybe another little stint of cold weather will allow us to issue those permits that are so important to the industry.

**Mr. Hermanson:** — So, Mr. Chair, how expensive is this process that you go through the winter months? Is that a variable cost? You know, if you have a cold winter, do you do less testing? Does that reduce the budget of the department? If it's a milder winter, say with more snow cover, then is more testing required? And could you just then tell me how that impacts my part of Saskatchewan and what's happening this spring.

**Mr. Stamatinos:** — I think maybe the best way to answer that question is again, these thermistors are permanently located in the roadway. And I believe we take readings just about every day, don't we, Terry? Right. They're actually online, so we can gather information in real time. And we have a process in place that will allow us to gauge, you know, just the competency of that road at any, on a day-to-day basis in fact.

So what we'd do is we'll extrapolate between locations. So to capture some of the roads in your constituency, we'd be able to gather that type of information. And then of course, I guess, it would be safe to say that as our winter maintenance expenditures increase, would be a signal of course that we have had a fairly significant accumulation of snow and ice which would lead of course to us to come to the conclusion that those roads are fairly significantly frozen. And that would show up in the information that we gather from the thermistor data.

**Mr. Hermanson:** — So are you allowed to just give me a little update of what's going to happen this spring as far as the permits are concerned?

**Mr. Stamatinos:** — And that's a very good question, Mr. Hermanson. Because of the recent thaw, if this continues on, I suspect we may have some difficulty — and only because we all want to preserve those roads.

But I can't recall just more recently whether or not we've actually denied permits. I think we've been pretty successful in allowing the industry to operate so . . .

**Mr. Hermanson:** — I was approached by an industry person a few weeks ago who said they were rejected last year during that critical marketing period. And they said that if that occurred this year, they would have to withdraw their business from Saskatchewan, that they would cease to operate in the province. So it is a very critical issue for an industry that is well suited to the area, except the transportation infrastructure is not there when they need it. So that is a real concern.

And if you could provide me with information following this committee meeting, I don't want to veer way off topic, but it is a crucial issue. And I would appreciate communication at your earliest convenience on just what the situation is at the current time.

My last question is with regard to the highway depots that are the satellite ones, that there are a lot of controversy over whether they are going to stay open. How much of this additional funding in the supplementary estimates were used in those satellite depots for the Highway department for snow removal this last winter?

**Mr. Law:** — To the member, what we might have in terms of the level of granularity in terms of the breakdown — we would do it by region and by area — of the component that actually has been dedicated in the supplementary estimate, if that is your question, I'm not sure that we have the data by satellite office. We'll check and see what detail we have with respect to the breakdown.

We might be able to do something on a regional or area basis for you but we wouldn't necessarily . . . Like I can't commit today that we have it at the level of detail that we would be able to talk to you in terms of the satellites versus the other offices. But we'll see what we have, and we'll make that available.

**Mr. Hermanson:** — Okay thank you. Mr. Chair, that concludes my questioning. But I just would comment that given the controversy around whether or not there's an ulterior or a secret plan to close these satellite depots, it would be, I think, useful if that information were available so that when these community meetings are held and the debates are held with Highway officials in communities over whether or not the necessary services are provided, there's actual data as to how much is spent on snow removal and how that compares . . . you know, what percentage of snow removal costs are handled at the satellite level versus the larger depots. So thank you very much and I'll turn over the questioning to my colleague.

**The Chair:** — Mr. Minister.

**Hon. Mr. Lautermilch:** — Mr. Chairman, not to be argumentative, but I must correct the member's statement. There are no plans to close maintenance depots in the Department of Highways and Transportation. It is the policy of this government that we will maintain their operations. And so I'm hoping that I have clarified that. I've heard this statement from members of the opposition on a number of occasions. And so I'm hoping they will take the opportunity to review *Hansard*, read my words. That is the policy of this department; it is the policy of this government. Thank you.

**The Chair:** — Mr. Hermanson.

**Mr. Hermanson:** — Mr. Chair, I wasn't going to say anything more, but I appreciate the minister's comments, and I will forward them on to the communities where the satellite depots are located. Thank you.

**The Chair:** — Mr. Morgan.

**Mr. Morgan:** — Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. My

questions . . . And given the minister's narrowness sort of limits the information I would like to get for my constituents, but I do have some that deal specifically with snow and ice.

You had indicated or one of your officials had indicated that the different highways were prioritized in a different fashion, and as to what time they received the snow removal service. And I'm wondering about Highway 219 south of Saskatoon to White Cap, at what level that highway is between Saskatoon and White Cap.

**Hon. Mr. Lautermilch:** — Mr. Chairman, the officials are not clear on what the ranking is on that specific highway but they will get back to you on it.

**Mr. Morgan:** — I would have thought they would have had that here. But in any event, dealing with that highway somewhat further, the highway is slated for major rebuilding in the next year or fairly short period of time at least as far as White Cap. Part of the work has already commenced, and there is an area where I think a correction line had gone through, and there's a road straightening that's done, so there's probably a half to three-quarters of a mile that has been redone already.

I've had a number of complaints about the new surface of that roadway, that it's exceptionally icy. And I went out and travelled on it myself. The new portion doesn't appear to have as much of a crown. It's significantly wider than the old portion, and the pavement is very smooth. And when it's icy or wet, it's inordinately slippery. The day that I went out to it, there was a vehicle in the ditch that had slid off, so I guess my question is, is that the surface that's to be done on the entire length of 219 as it's rebuilt? And is there anything that can be done to deal with the . . . Or maybe it's because it's new pavement, and it will become a little rougher in texture, but it's certainly a problem the way it is now. So my caution would be, going forward, allowing more highway construction.

**Mr. Law:** — Thank you for the question. To the member, he's correct that in staging our work, we have ended up in a situation where we essentially have two sections of TMS that are bordering the particular section that he's referring to and where we've actually established a structured pavement. And this may not be helpful in the short term, but the treatment that we would normally accord that section of road will be upgraded to reflect the protocols we talked about earlier here today when it's all completed at a paved standard.

We do our best under the circumstances but recognize that what we're trying to do in the interim is to advance the reconstruction of the road on a priority basis. And so there is some of the work that we're doing this winter that is intended to try and advance our ability to complete that section of the road by the end of the next construction season.

As to the surface itself, will the surface be similar to that surface? The answer is, yes it will be. Terry may have more to say about whether or not there will be a difference in its sensitivity to icing up versus the TMS right now. I don't know about the technicalities of that. But our treatments of it and how we will manage that will be much more consistent, and we'll be able to manage that in a more aggressive way once we've actually completed the entire section, work that's currently



under construction.

**Mr. Morgan:** — I guess I'd like to invite the department to monitor carefully or maybe look at what the accident numbers have been at that spot. It was a dangerous spot prior to the widening. And I appreciate some of the work has to be done over a period of time, but if the nature of that surface is going to be problematic for snow and ice, it'll certainly be a significant cost factor going forward if we have to do more salting or more aggressive work to keep it clear because that one stretch now — even though it's had the widening done — it's probably more dangerous than the portion of the highway that has not yet been widened or restructured. So I share that with you as somebody that just travels on it periodically.

My next question deals with Highway No. 11 which would be in your, I presume, highest priority highways. That's the highway between Saskatoon and Regina. And I have on that roadway a number of acreages and access roads that come on to it. And I had asked at an earlier estimate meeting whether there was a likelihood of having turn lanes or additional signage put in. I now have the additional problem of snow and ice on those areas because the traffic, as they travel on Highway 11 and on the approach roads, are having a difficult time stopping.

The other morning, travelling to Regina, the road was icy, and somebody came out or approached, was coming to the 11 on one of . . . the approach was on Baker Road. The vehicle that was on 11 nearly lost control on the ice, so there's no place to go to. As it was, the vehicle that was approaching stopped. The snow and ice wasn't there. So I am wondering whether it's possible to get some extra attention put on with snow and ice near where those access roads come on? And how much additional money has been spent trying to deal with that type of a situation where there's traffic on and off of Highway 11?

**Hon. Mr. Lautermilch:** — Mr. Chairman, if I just could, I think you have identified obviously a road that is subject to drifting. I mean that's the nature of our weather in the winter, ice buildup which is what this \$4.4 million is to aid and support.

One of the reasons that we have made the commitment to complete the twinning of Highway 11 is the amount of traffic — the growing of the economy in our area, tourism growing, northern Saskatchewan opening up in a fairly dramatic way which is why the twinning commitment is there. Obviously the engineering department attempts to design to standards that are used across North America in terms of traffic flow and speed of traffic.

I think it's fair to say that our winter conditions give us some special circumstances on occasion. And so obviously we're cognizant of that. And I can say to you that the department will, in its design and in its building out of the twinning, ensure that the highest of standards are used in the engineering and in the design. If you can identify some specific deficiencies, I am sure that the department would be more than pleased to hear from you.

**Mr. Morgan:** — Well I appreciate the twinning initiative. The part of the highway that I'm talking to has been twinned for several decades, so twinning isn't the issue anymore. Twinning certainly is an issue north of Saskatoon on this highway

between Saskatoon and Prince Albert, but this is between Saskatoon and Regina which is twinned all the way, with the exception of the portion that goes through Chamberlain. And the areas specifically that are problematic are two or three miles south of Saskatoon where the Baker Road and some of the acreage accesses onto the highway.

And there's a similar situation closer to Regina where the Regina Beach traffic comes on. They come on near Lumsden, and the problem is sometimes compounded by the snow removal system because the Lumsden area is often . . . The hill coming up often receives a lot of salt and melting agent. Then that is tracked up onto the area, so by the time the traffic comes on from Regina Beach, it's just at about a point where it's starting to get sticky and refreeze because it hasn't been applied all the way to Regina.

I'm not advocating applying it, but I think when you've got the traffic coming off and on . . . My question is, is there a way we can avoid some of the snow and ice issues by having turning lanes and better signage as the traffic enters and exits No. 11, which is probably, I'm guessing, the busiest highway in the province?

**Mr. Schmidt:** — Mr. Chair, I can speak to some of our practices along the Highway 11 corridor. As you mentioned, it is one of the major international routes, connector routes in the province, and a level 1 highway. And one of the first priorities for crews heading out of Saskatoon would be Highway 11 south.

And their first priority is going to be, of course, the Highway 11 roadway itself, getting it into good winter driving condition as quickly as they can — whether that is snow removal, whether that is salting, or whether it's sanding.

And as well they do look at major intersections along those routes as well. And that is one of the first priority too, is to sand those intersections or salt those intersections, depending on the conditions, whichever is the most appropriate for the conditions.

And as you mentioned too, at Lumsden, we are stationed right in Lumsden to address the hills as a first priority. And then when those are addressed, they will continue up the road with either ice treatment or snow removal. So major intersections are part of the normal winter maintenance operation.

I think the one thing we do try to do though is, together with our winter maintenance practices, is our communications to the general public that despite our best efforts, there are times where there are going to be slippery sections, especially at intersections and locations like that. And we would just ask for extra special attention at those times to work together with our crews to ensure that the roads are safe and the drivers can use the roadway safely.

**Mr. Morgan:** — The supplementary estimates, do they include any pavement repair as a result of frost heaves or pavement breaks?

**Mr. Law:** — No they don't.

**Mr. Morgan:** — I would have thought with supplementary estimates, they might have because they're already starting and they're incredible. I would have thought that, as part of the supplementary estimates, they would have come forward with that because some of the highways in this province right now, they're as rough and lumpy as the NDP's [New Democratic Party] political path through the Murdoch Carriere situation.

But anyway I leave that for another day, and want to wish the Highways workers well. I appreciate the work that they do as they're out there. I'm an early morning traveller on those roads, and I know what they're up against. Thank you.

**The Chair:** — Mr. Kirsch.

**Mr. Kirsch:** — Thank you, and I'm looking at . . . I travel Highway 27, the Prud'homme, Vonda, Aberdeen stretch, and I notice they had this big, self-propelled four-by-four snow blower out there. Is that owned and operated by the Department of Highways, or is that a custom one, custom job?

**Mr. Schmidt:** — I'm not sure which one. We do have what we call the four-wheel drive — I'm trying to think of the name — but they're a four-wheel drive New Holland tractor, I believe, a yellow tractor, that we do have some snow blowers on as part of our fleet to supplement the trucks and the graders where needed.

**Mr. Kirsch:** — Okay, now what are those worth an hour? I see you've got a lot of custom crews going out there for that giant blower. What are you paying custom crews for something like that? I'm curious what the dollar value per hour?

**Mr. Schmidt:** — For a private one? I don't have those numbers with me. These are part of our fleet, that we operate as part of our fleet.

**Mr. Kirsch:** — Okay, where were these . . . if we own these big blowers, why were they not used during the winter for snow removal in these difficult locations? I haven't seen them until spring now. Why were they not out all winter?

**Mr. Schmidt:** — They would only be used in special circumstances. Typically they are not used on the road surface because it's more efficient to use our trucks or our graders on the road surface.

Where they would be used in is instances after we've cleared the road. There's some locations especially on highways like Highway 27, which has narrow ditches and some high cuts and fills, where the snowplows would leave ridges on the side of the road that would easily blow in. So once the road is cleared, then we would come with these snow blowers, and we would actually blow into the ditches or the ridges to remove them, so that the next time it blows, the road won't blow in as quickly.

The other place that they're used is more in spring now. One of the members referred to opening up culverts and things like that. We will sometimes use them in the ditches as well to open up drainage runs and things like that in spring to help alleviate flooding. And the other area that you may see them used is, we use them quite extensively in the North to operate some of our northern airports to help blow the snow further away.

So they're typically not used as the first operation for clearing the roadway because, as I mentioned, much more efficient with trucks and graders. They're specially used in circumstances like clearing drifts and things like that.

**Mr. Kirsch:** — I've been a snow blower operation myself. We used to clear 28 miles of bus routes. And the areas that I'm referring to, Prud'homme on to Aberdeen where these banks have been made, you'd have been ahead to have them banks removed a lot sooner than wait until spring because each storm they filled in the banks higher. And the banks after the first storm were five, six feet high and if you add these big blowers that are huge, big things you need to watch. It would have been nice to see them out there a lot sooner.

**Mr. Schmidt:** — I can look into more of the specifics. We don't have them located in every section though, so what we do is we move them around the province where they're needed so to use them efficiently that way and get the most hours out of them. So they may have been brought in from other areas and being used in other areas before there was an opportunity to bring them there, but I will relay your comments to the crews.

**Mr. Kirsch:** — Thank you. My next question is on Highway 20 and Highway 41. I saw bobcats with snow blowers on. I believe they were privately owned, not the Highways ones. What do those cost an hour?

**Hon. Mr. Lautermilch:** — I would think you would ask the owner what they would charge. I don't know. The department obviously within their operations will have the ability to determine what the costs of operations are with their equipment, and I don't know if we have the specific numbers for you now, but we can endeavour to find out what our estimated costs of a rotary blower of that size would be. And we'll undertake to get that for you.

**Mr. Kirsch:** — I couldn't ask the owners because I would not know who the owners are, being you were the one that hired them. I was curious what we were paying for the output on those blowers.

**Hon. Mr. Lautermilch:** — We could attempt to find for you what the contract would be. I would assume it's done under tender and it would be a competitive bid. Then we can attempt to do that.

**Mr. Kirsch:** — My next question pertains to Highway No. 2, north of Cudworth. And I don't know if the minister drives that one from P.A. [Prince Albert] to Regina, but that particular spot has gone into a frost heave now that has reached the danger point where vehicles coming fast are just about lifting off, if they aren't lifting off. Is there something going . . . And I don't know if there is anything that can be done, but that's a wicked, wicked frost heave there.

**Mr. Law:** — Thank you for the question. There are two components that I wanted to reference in terms of your suggestion around what we might be able to do in order . . . what our typical protocol calls for.

The overall repair is something that would clearly be in the category of what we would include in our spring repair and

maintenance practice where we see heaving like that. The reason that we can't get at it when it's frozen is that we can't affect a repair and consequently what we attempt to do, as you may know, we have our crews out on the roads trying to identify trouble areas like this. And one of the practices that follows from that — and I don't know the answer to this — is that we typically try and sign them to provide some advance warning to motorists where circumstances like this may come up. And periodically we do find more dramatic ones which, I assume, is like the one you're describing.

So we would have this identified as one of the kinds of repairs we would do as soon in spring as we can get a repair to it that will address it. But while it's frozen, there's very little that we're able to do in the short term in that regard. And so consequently our first response is typically to try and sign it. We'll undertake to check and see, unless you can tell us if you know. It may not be signed now, I don't know that.

**Mr. Kirsch:** — That area is about six miles — I'm just guessing on the distance — from Cudworth, and there's a large dip that goes on to a swampy area where Ducks Unlimited has nests and everything is set up. And it's always heaving, and there's a permanent sign there. But that exact spot — now this one that's really bad — is not marked. That one should be specially marked and it is, I mean when you're coming from the other side and you see cars hit that the headlights are just . . . It is a dangerous spot, and it is in a zone where people should be slowing down. But it might be good to have that one specially marked. Thank you for your time.

**The Chair:** — Mr. Weekes.

**Mr. Weekes:** — Thank you, Mr. Chair. Mr. Minister, what is the total Highways budget now with the additional monies announced last summer? And with this supplementary money, where are we standing?

**Hon. Mr. Lautermilch:** — Mr. Chairman, I am told by the officials, with the additional money that we've put in this year, we are at \$404.4 million which is by far and away the largest amount that any government has ever committed to the Department of Highways and Transportation in the history of this province.

**Mr. Weekes:** — Thank you. Mr. Minister, on the supplementary estimates, is there any . . . Well how should I put it? There's evidence that there was roadwork being done in the Warman area on Highway 11. Could you describe what was being done there and what was spent there?

**Hon. Mr. Lautermilch:** — Mr. Chairman, I'm going to remind the member again that the estimates and in . . . You know, historically the debate is broad and wide-ranging and supersedes the year in question when we're doing estimates for the Department of Highways and Transportation. These are not Highways and Transportation estimates. They are supplementary estimates. And the officials come prepared to deal with the supplementary estimate that's before the House, which in this case is \$4.4 million for winter snow and ice removal and/or control, over and above the 22.05 million that was budgeted. And so the department is asking this legislature to approve a supplementary amount in the name of \$4.4 million.

It hasn't been historical that in supplementary estimates we have used the kind of discussion that Mr. Weekes is attempting to embark upon. The officials come here prepared to deal with the specific budget item and not prepared to deal with a broad, wide-ranging line of questioning that is allowed and welcomed during estimates. And I would, you know, ask you to keep that in mind as we go through this discussion.

**The Chair:** — Yes. I'd just like to remind all the members of the committee that what we're dealing with here this afternoon is the supplementary estimates, March 2007, as part of the 2006-2007 Saskatchewan provincial budget. The item of business before the committee is vote 16, Highways and Transportation, the operation of the transportation systems (HI10) which can be found in the Supplementary Estimates book on page 9. So if we could restrain our questioning to the subject matter at hand, I think it would be much appreciated by all the members of the committee. Mr. Weekes.

**Mr. Weekes:** — Thank you, Mr. Chair. Yes, thank you. My question was concerning the supplementary estimates because there's work to be done in February and March in the Warman area on Highway 11. I'm just making the assumption that it must be part of the supplementary estimates and I'm asking what work was being done there and how much of the \$4.4 million of the supplementary estimates is being spent in that area?

**Hon. Mr. Lautermilch:** — I'm told by the officials that there's no money spent out of this estimate, out of the supplementary estimate in the road that the member refers to.

**Mr. Weekes:** — So just to get into that a little deeper, so are you confirming that there was work being done in the Warman area but it's part of the general budget, not the supplementary estimates?

**Hon. Mr. Lautermilch:** — Mr. Chairman, the member's correct.

**Mr. Weekes:** — Mr. Minister, so any snow removal or earth moving in the Warman area in February and March was not part of the supplementary estimates. And I'm just wondering, how do you distinguish between what is in and what's out when there's snow removal in one area and snow removal in another? I understood that the supplementary estimates was for basically cost overruns because of the additional snow that we've experienced this winter. So could you give me an understanding of the priorities of how the budget is arrived at, given that there's basically the same work being done in one area as the other but some is considered in supplementary and some isn't?

**Mr. Law:** — The member's correct that there will be work that goes on over the course of the winter that will not be related necessarily to supplementary estimates or to our winter snow and ice program. In the case of the work at Warman, that would be part of our winter tender schedule that we put out. The details of the work that we would be doing, which may include some work over the winter months, will be identified. It's on our website so there'll be an inventory of projects.

The winter snow and ice program that we are here to ask for supplementary estimates on deals specifically with

public-safety-related issues not unlike fire control where, depending on the circumstances or the weather conditions, we sometimes are required to request funding to look after those conditions to try and maintain public safety.

So the distinction, if I can draw it out, is between the public safety work that we do in terms of the maintenance of the system around snow removal and ice conditions, and as compared to construction work or maintenance work of a regular nature.

**Mr. Weekes:** — Thank you. Just to go a little further on that area. It was interesting to note that this work in the Warman area was taking place during the by-election, and it ended actually, I believe, the day or the day before of the by-election date. So it was just of some interest to know why . . . the interesting timing of the work being done, and how that related to the supplementary estimates.

**Hon. Mr. Lautermilch:** — Mr. Chairman, I can tell the member that the department doesn't shut down operations because politicians have elections, whether it be general elections or by-elections. Part of the mandate of this department is public safety, and part of the mandate of this department is to ensure that we have safe infrastructure. And that's what this department will do.

**Mr. Weekes:** — Well it's just interesting to note that the timing of the work being done in the Warman area concerning when it was work being done during the by-election, and ended abruptly a day or two before the actual by-election date. And then I understand there's no more work being done there.

I'd like to move on to another area. Is there anything in the supplementary budget to take a look at, well to basically do an analysis of highways where there's been a breakdown of the repairs that have taken place across the province, given that because of moisture concerns your department have talked about, there's been additional spending in the past or a quicker breakdown of highways and repairs which create potholes? Is part of this supplementary budget, is it to do work on analysis of highways that are going to need repair in the summer?

**Hon. Mr. Lautermilch:** — Well obviously the department is working on a program for the spring. That will, of course, require the approval of this Legislative Assembly in order that we will have some funds to be able to allocate to those capital projects. Road repairs, maintenance will be part of that, as will be winter snow and ice control.

That budget will be brought down in this House, as I understand it, on March 22. So we're short ways away from that. And I think it's fair to say that it will be received well by the general public. Having said that, we're going to again attempt to ensure that we have an adequate amount in that budget for winter snow removal and for ice control. And in the event that we don't, we would be back here as we are today asking for discussion on incremental dollars for winter snow and ice control and that will be the process as it is every year.

**Mr. Weekes:** — Thank you, Mr. Minister. I guess my question is relating to the supplementary estimates. Is there an analysis being done on Highway 35 concerning that situation that's

developed there?

**Hon. Mr. Lautermilch:** — Mr. Chairman, the money will go to the pool of money allowed for winter snow and ice control. It's been estimated that we require an additional \$4.4 million, and weather will in no small way determine winter snow removal and ice control programs because that's what this part of our budget does. When it snows we have an obligation to remove the snow. When there's ice control required, we have the equipment and a process where we send our employees out to attempt to ensure the safest quality of roads that we can. And this \$4.4 million would obviously go to areas of our province where that kind of activity is required based on weather.

**Mr. Weekes:** — Thank you. I'd like to move on to another situation that has come to light. I sent letters, I believe, to the minister and to the Minister Responsible for SGI [Saskatchewan Government Insurance]. But I'd just like to ask the question. Just to go back and give you some of the background, this lady, her name is Mrs. Trottier, was involved in a single-vehicle accident on the night of January 24, 2007 on a stretch of Highway 51 near Ruthilda.

Now she says:

While on her way home from work, Mrs. Trottier hit a patch of road that caused her to lose control of her vehicle and roll. This patch was marked with a 'bump' sign, which is red and hard to see at night, and does not do the condition of the road justice. Highway 51 has a reputation . . . [to be] one of the worst in the province and the condition is worsening with no maintenance taking place for some time.

Now there's a question about SGI and insurance that's a . . . I know that we're not going to discuss that today. But in a situation in Highway 55 where there is a severe problem which actually caused a rollover, when the department . . . I assume that the department looks at those types of situations in the winter and tries to address that situation which causes accidents. And I understand there's been a number of accidents in that one particular stretch of road.

There's two issues here, I guess. Is there any funding from the supplementary estimates that go towards areas like Highway 51? That has a very bad stretch of road concerning bumps, concerning ice and snow buildup, concerning holes in the pavement in the winter. And could you just address that situation or generally those situations?

**Hon. Mr. Lautermilch:** — Mr. Chairman, I am told that this is money that's allocated for winter snow and ice control throughout the province. And we will put it where weather conditions require that we put it, whether it's Highway 55 or 32 or Highway 20 or 27. It'll go where it's required to go. It's for ensuring that we . . . [inaudible] . . . remove snow and controlling icy conditions on roads. And if that condition manifests itself in Highway 55, whether 55 on the east side of the province or the west side of the province, that's where we'll put it.

**Mr. Weekes:** — Thank you. It's Highway 51 near Ruthilda. So was there any work done on that stretch of highway?

**Hon. Mr. Lautermilch:** — Again I would remind the member that we are not in general estimates. We're here debating the 4.4 million requested for winter snow and ice control. And it hasn't historical been that we've asked officials to prepare to do broad-ranging estimates. They come here prepared to defend their request for \$4.4 million today for snow and ice removal, and that's what they're asking for and that's what we're prepared to discuss. And I would ask you to ask the member to contain his discussion to the issue that's before the legislature. This isn't the Department of Health. It's not the Department of Education. It's a very specific request by the Department of Highways and Transportation for snow control and ice control.

**The Chair:** — Mr. Member, and I'll once again remind all the members of the committee to try to tie your questions to the supplementary estimates that are before us in regards to Highways and Transportation, vote no. 16.

**Mr. Weekes:** — Thank you. I thought I was. I was referring to supplementary estimates spending concerning this strip of highway, Highway 51 near Ruthilda. Was there any of this money going towards that particular stretch where there has been a number of accidents? And the date of this accident was January 24. So that's my question is concerning that particular incident related to snow and ice removal.

**Mr. Law:** — Mr. Weekes, what we can attempt to do with respect to the expenditures on the section of Highway 51 that you're interested in is see if we can — similar to the question that Mr. Hermanson asked earlier — we can attempt to do a breakdown and see what level of granularity we might be able to get to and then give you the allocation as best we understand it for that particular section. Beyond that, I'm not sure we'd be in a position to talk more about the supplementary estimates specifically to that section of road.

**Mr. Weekes:** — Thank you. Another issue around Asquith, and it's concerning snow and ice and flooding, so I'm assuming this is within the bounds of the supplementary estimates. And this is an ongoing situation through a number of years. And again with the amount of snow built up . . . And I'm assuming, you know, when the snow is moved, it's put into the ditches. The ditches are going to be melting soon. Some of them already, some of the snow is already melted.

I'm wondering has there been any spending or will there be any spending from the supplementary estimates concerning the situation in and around the town of Asquith? They have been experienced flooding. The access road has been submerged in the past and certainly will be this year. The culverts are not draining the excessive water properly, and the concern is, with the added amount of snow this year there's going to be a problem that's going to be magnified. And the residents in Asquith are concerned about flooding.

In the past, this has seemed to be going from the town to the RM [rural municipality] to the Highways department, and it seems to go in a circle. But at the end of the day, people's basements are getting flooded. Has there been any spending from the supplementary estimates concerning the flooding possibilities near the town of Asquith and in the town of Asquith?

**Hon. Mr. Lautermilch:** — Again, Mr. Chairman, this budget does not and is not speaking to spring runoff or flooding. This deals with winter snow and ice control on our highways.

Having said that, we will continue to work with the town of Asquith and RMs as we do every spring in terms of maintaining a safe and effective highway system for Saskatchewan residents. I think it's fair to say that we are putting a much greater focus on co-operation with community. The highways program that we announced just short days ago very much has that as part of the focus, and I believe that will result in the success of the program. But having said that, this \$4.4 million deals specifically with winter snow and ice control.

**Mr. Weekes:** — Thank you, Mr. Minister. My question is concerning moving snow and ice off of Highway No. 14 near Asquith. The snow and ice is put . . . is into the ditches. There's an issue there.

So my question is, does the department look into the repercussions of moving snow and ice off the highways into the ditches which ultimately end up running into farms and into this community of Asquith? And my question is just concerning this situation with Asquith, which is going to become an issue depending on the weather, but very shortly. And so my question is to this specific issue in Asquith. But is part of this money, is any of the money for snow and ice removal put towards planning or trying to address the flooding issues that are going to take place because of the actions of the Highways department moving ice and snow?

**Hon. Mr. Lautermilch:** — Mr. Chairman, you know, I think the point the member raises is that the amount of snow and the amount of moisture in this province, in particular north of Saskatoon, is incredible. And are we going to have challenges this spring? Of course we will.

We're going to have conditions where we've got culverts washed out and where we've got culverts flooded or culverts blocked with ice. And there are going to be some of these that belong to municipalities, and there are going to be some of them that belong to the Department of Highways and Transportation. And we're going to have to work with towns and villages and we're going to have to work with RMs, not only on winter snow and ice control on our highways, but we're going to have to work with other parts that are allocated within this budget to clear culverts and to have water flow to wherever water will go, so that we don't in any way endanger unnecessarily people's homes and people's farms.

Are there times when it's not possible to do that without damage? And that's not a fault of the Department of Highways and Transportation. Sometimes it's just something that nature brings along for us, which is what nature brings when it snows. We've got unusually high water tables in some areas of the province that is going to require some unusual attention by department officials, and they will do that. Will they catch everything every time? Probably not. Just as you can make an argument that they haven't been out sanding and that they haven't been out removing snow quickly enough when we have a winter storm. And those are . . .

It's very easy, very simple to armchair quarterback and to point

fingers, but what we have done today is brought forward a special supplement to ensure that we do what we can as a department, public safety on our roads system, the road system that my deputy and his staff are responsible for.

We recognized that we needed more than originally budgeted, which was part of the process because this is how we manage this particular budget. It's done and topped up by special warrant. That's been done in the past and it'll in all likelihood be done in the future, unless a decision in public policy is made somewhere else. But the department requires, to maintain safe roads, another \$4.4 million.

Will we work with communities? Absolutely. I think this department has a very good record of doing that. We've got a very good record of working together with other levels of government. And this spring will be the same and probably will be even required more, based on the amount of snow that's around and the high water table.

And I might add, by the way, the high water table is going to raise some other issues from members of the Saskatchewan Party because we're going to have roads break up. There's a high level of moisture. We're going to have frost come out. That's going to happen and we're going to have holes in the TMS roads and it's going to create some problems as it does every spring, but we will take the record amount of money that's been allocated to this department and we will put it to the best use that the professionals in this department can.

Will we consult? Absolutely. The member has raised the community of Asquith, and if he has any specifics I would be more than willing to meet with him or any other member of opposition to ensure that I have the most up-to-date briefing that we can have and to ensure that I work with the department to do what we can to alleviate a problem, if there's a special problem arising. And obviously this is part of why we all have offices in this building. We're not 20 miles away from each other, and if there's a specific item, just come upstairs or downstairs, whatever it happens to be, and let's sit down and act in the interests of the people of Saskatchewan and we'll deal with it.

We do casework in here on a regular basis when the opposition does general estimates. And they'll go from one corner of their riding to the other and they'll bring specific cases up, and that's fine. I would far prefer to be able to deal with some of these on a one-on-one but that doesn't seem to happen, so fair and fine. And we'll do that again when we do the general estimates of the department this spring but right now I can only commit to you and to members of this committee that the department and I will work closely with communities and we will put this \$4.4 million that we're requesting to good use on behalf of public safety on Saskatchewan's highways.

**Mr. Weekes:** — Thank you, Mr. Minister. So what I got out of your comments is that the part of the \$4.4 million in the supplementary estimates does go towards cleaning culverts out. And I'm referring to a situation in Asquith. I have sent you a letter dated March 2 concerning this issue in Asquith. I almost get the impression you think that we are in the opposition blaming the department for the record snow level. I'm not blaming the department but I am representing my constituents

in the town of Asquith who are going to experience flooding and they want something to be done.

And the letter I have sent to all the local governments as well as your department, Mr. Minister, and on the constituents' behalf I'm asking this question because it may be just a matter of a day or two or a week before the water's going to be flowing and they're going to have their basements flooded. So my question is going to . . . So I gather that part of this supplementary estimates spending is going towards cleaning out culverts. What would be the process of an individual, of a citizen like this one I'm referring to? Where do they go to bring up their concern and get their concerns about flooding addressed?

**Hon. Mr. Lautermilch:** — I need to clarify. What I said was that this estimate is not culvert, ice removal for culverts. It's for winter snow removal off of our highways and it's for ice control.

And the member asks, where should he go? Phone my office and we'll sit down with you and we'll talk and if you want to bring in the local community politicians, the mayor or whatever, fair enough. But I need to be able to bring the people from the department who understand the local circumstance and who probably have been already working with the mayor and the reeves in that area on a plan. But I would say to you, give me a call and we'll sit down and make sure that that has happened. If it hasn't happened, we can make sure that it does happen.

I mean, I can't give you a blueprint of where the water's going to go this spring, nor how much, as you well know. But I can tell you that I will never shy away from a meeting where public safety and people's property are at risk. And I'm more than willing to meet with you.

The department officials are here. They're here to represent all of us. I mean, this isn't a government operation in terms of people in the Department of Highways and Transportation. They work for all of the people in Saskatchewan. And so obviously if you've got a concern, bring it here. Bring it to my office and we can deal with it. Maybe we can find a solution; maybe we can't. But I mean obviously we're willing to work with you.

**Mr. Weekes:** — Thank you, Mr. Minister. I will take you up on that. As I mentioned, I had written you a letter on March 2, so you've just recently received this letter. And I certainly will be waiting for a reply to the letter. And we certainly can get together and go over it in person.

The issue is of course that this isn't a one-time thing. This has been a situation that has gone on for a number of years. Last year there was some flooding and it wasn't addressed. And I'm not pointing fingers at whose fault it is, but the problem is that it runs through basically three jurisdictions. And at the end of the day, this lady isn't concerned about who's to blame. She just doesn't want her basement flooded.

So I will take you up on that, Mr. Minister. And I will wait for the reply to my letter. And hopefully, hopefully this gets resolved because obviously it's springtime and the snow is melting. So I'd like to turn it over to my colleague, June.

**The Chair:** — Members, I'd just like to bring to the attention to the committee members that we have approximately 30 minutes left in the time allotted. So if you have any special uses for that time, I just remind you we have 30 minutes left. Ms. Draude.

**Ms. Draude:** — Thank you, Mr. Chair, and to the minister. Mr. Minister, you'd indicated that there is \$404.4 million projected to be spent this year by your department. Can you tell me how much of that is for snow removal? Is there any of the original budget that was projected to be part of the snow and ice removal?

**Hon. Mr. Lautermilch:** — If in fact we have more snow and ice conditions to the end of the year — which we probably will — the estimate is that the department would spend out what was budgeted, which is \$22.05 million, now supplemented by \$4.4 million, which gives a grand total of \$26.05 million for winter snow and ice control.

**Ms. Draude:** — Actually, Mr. Minister, it's 26.45 million, but how much of that . . . [inaudible interjection] . . . yes, that's what I said. How much of that have you spent so far?

**Mr. Law:** — To the member, our tracking of our actual expenditures is done on a monthly basis, so our last actual expenditure number that we've reconciled to that would be for purposes of public accounts and that sort thing, would have been to the end of February.

Our best estimate for today, adding in what would be a pretty best-guess estimate of what we've expended in the last couple of weeks or almost two weeks to take us to this point, is in the neighbourhood of a little bit more than \$24 million.

**Ms. Draude:** — So I would anticipate, as the minister had indicated a few minutes ago, that there probably will be some more work done this year. But if it does not go up to the 26.45 million, where does the rest go?

**Mr. Law:** — Our commitment around the expenditure, one of two things happens. Either the funds will lapse, or we will dedicate the funds directly to refilling, you know, our salt and sand and other materials acquisitions. We will do things directly related to the work, but our estimates, our best estimates — I can't give you the exact date when we put it in, but not that long ago — was that we would fully expend this total amount of funding by the end of the fiscal year.

**Ms. Draude:** — The minister had indicated a few moments ago . . . and we're all aware that the budget is going to be March 22 which is again before there's another amount that's actually audited, I think you had said, by your department. So I guess we won't know, even on budget day, if the money has all been spent or if there'll be more money to go in or not to go in. Is that correct?

**Mr. Law:** — We could probably provide an estimate or try and get the best information. I'll have to check with the rest of my staff here on what we could do by way of tracking for an interim date. But I'm guessing there would be some estimating involved until we actually get the accounts accumulated for the different regions and areas and offices across the province and then tabulate those and make the available.

We do have a requirement to provide monthly expenditure forecasts, and so we comply with that. If there's an ability for us to provide something on an interim basis, for a particular date, we could see what we might be able to do. I'm simply not aware, of how reliable our data would be. We may have to do a phone around or something like that to get current data.

**Ms. Draude:** — Is the normal work of your department to spend the money on salt or some kind of a material or inventory build-up if you have extra money at the end of your budget year?

**Mr. Law:** — As I say, one of two things would happen. If we happen to have overestimated, there is always the option for the funds to lapse. But typically the commitment would require that we would ensure the monies were spent on something specific to the winter snow and ice program.

**Ms. Draude:** — The amount of money that's been spent this year on snow removal, snow and ice removal, is that considerably higher than in the past?

**Mr. Law:** — We can provide you with the actual numbers for the last few years. Our number, I believe, is about \$1 million less than the four-year average for the last period of time in terms of our actual levels of expenditure going back in the previous three fiscal years. So it's very close to our historical average, but we'll be within about \$1 million.

**Ms. Draude:** — Thank you. When the estimate is determined on the amount of money that'll be used for snow removal, is it looked at globally, or is there a realization that there are some areas of the province, some of them — or one of them which I live in — is going to require considerably more work this year than under normal circumstances?

**Mr. Law:** — You're correct that we would do a specific estimation of existing circumstances in the current year.

**Ms. Draude:** — Can you tell me, is the snow removal from the airports in the North, is this part of this budget?

**Mr. Law:** — I can confirm for the member that the allocation for the northern airports is included as part of our winter snow and ice program, but I don't have the detail with me today to tell you whether any of this particular supplementary estimate is dedicated to that.

We would go back and see if we can . . . Again it's similar to my earlier responses on how we gather the information by area. So if there was a requirement, for example, this year for some of the \$4.4 million to have been spent on the northern airports, it would have been rolled into the number that would have come for that northern region. As to whether or not any of the 4.4 actually is dedicated to that, I would have to get more information to be able to answer your question. I don't have it with us.

**Ms. Draude:** — So for clarification then, we can't ask questions on all snow and ice removal. We can only ask it on the additional part — the 4.4 — that came after you made your budget. And yet we don't know where the money was spent.

**Hon. Mr. Lautermilch:** — Let me respond to that, Mr. Chairman. I think what we have said is that the \$22.05 million that was budgeted is done by and the number is arrived at based on regional estimates within the department in terms of what their historical needs are.

Obviously I can't judge weather, nor can you. It may be that we don't have a snowstorm between now and the year end. That could very well happen. And it could be that we have two weeks of bad weather. But none of us here have the insight to be able to deal with that.

So the departments, as a matter of their budgeting process, put together an estimate. It's been historic that we come back to this legislature for supplementary estimates just because of the fact that there is no set pattern. And you can't set a contract out for snow. You can't contract how much snow you're going to get. You can contract how much roadwork you're going to get, and you will know by kilometre how much that's going to cost.

But this is one of those budgets that are variable. Departments use the best estimates that they can. And when we do estimates on the Department of Highways and Transportation, members of this legislature — both on the government side and the opposition side — have all measure of opportunity to question how those estimates were arrived at, what has happened historically, and what has happened, what they suspect will happen going forward. And today what we've offered to you is a historical expenditure within this vote and how much that has been. And I think that's a reasoned approach to take.

**Ms. Draude:** — And for clarification, Mr. Minister, I can ask any questions on snow and ice removal because I was asking if it had to be based on the last 4.4 million, or is it any of the snow and ice removal?

**Hon. Mr. Lautermilch:** — You know, I think the latitude that we've allowed on this estimate today has been quite reasonable. I mean, goodness' sakes, we have gone beyond answering questions on snow and ice removal. We've talked about flooding. We've talked about a number of different roads that members have raised: 219, Highway 11, Highway 27, Highway 20, Highway 41. We talked about rotary snow blowers. And so I think we've been accommodating a fair range of questions.

But the reason that I'm asking you to keep within the subvote is because officials want to come to this House prepared with as much information and detail as required in order to serve the needs of the legislature. And you've been here a number of years — as I've been here a number of years — and on subvotes, in special warrants, the latitude is considerably narrower than it is when you're talking about Department of Highways and Transportation estimates.

As a matter of fact, I can recall when I first came here that the government of the day, led by Grant Devine, would not discuss estimates outside of the year before the legislature. You've never had that challenge because we've always allowed a pretty broad-ranging discussion from a number of years. And we've allowed to go back even . . . And officials have come to the point where they've said, okay we'll bring more information, if you want to go back two years and you want to rehash what happened then, fine, we'll try and make sure that we have that

information.

But I'm only saying that it's only fair that when the officials are asked to present an argument, a case for a request of this legislature for \$4.4 million, for winter snow and ice control special warrants, that the discussion doesn't need to go into a general whole Department of Highways and Transportation kind of questions because there's a forum for that, and it's called estimates, and we'll be going into it again for next year's expenditure.

So I think it's been good dialogue today. Members have had the opportunity to ask questions on the \$4.4 million expenditures, along with others, and we've answered questions on the 22 million that was budgeted last year. And we've indicated that now it's a 26.45 global expense, if this is approved by this legislature in supplements. We've indicated that we spent \$24 million roughly to this point on this vote in the province.

Members have been asked if they spent how much on this road, and they didn't have those details in terms of how much on maintenance. They've been asked how much they spent on an ice crossing by the Riverhurst Ferry, and some of those questions will be answered subsequent to these deliberations because those answers aren't here, but you will have all of those answers. And I think members of the committee should be satisfied, and I'm hoping that they are, with respect to this incremental request for \$4.4 million to serve the needs of public safety on our roads and transportation system.

**Ms. Draude:** — Thank you, Mr. Minister. I must indicate I really don't care how much or what Grant Devine and his government said. Neither do the people in my constituency or the people in the North that I'm trying to get some answers for. What I wanted to know, and I think I've heard it said in your little lecture, that you would answer any questions on the \$26.45 million that was going to be used for snow and ice removal.

And if that's the case, then I would like to . . . You said you'd get back to me on how much money was spent on clearing airports in the North, which is important. I also want to know, can you tell me if this government has any money spent on the building or construction of ice roads?

**Hon. Mr. Lautermilch:** — Mr. Chairman, on the question of money expended to the northern airports, we'd be pleased to put those answers together for the member. And what was the other question I'm supposed . . .

**Ms. Draude:** — On the ice roads.

**Hon. Mr. Lautermilch:** — We can, we can, we can bring answers to the amount of money that's spent on ice roads; that's not a problem. We can bring those forward for the committee. And the officials have taken note of all of your requests, and we will be responding.

**Ms. Draude:** — Thank you to the minister. My first question was — and I asked it innocently because I wasn't sure if all the ice roads are constructed by government — if they are all a responsibility of the government. Are they?



**Mr. Law:** — Most all of our ice road construction is contracted with folks in the North who do the work directly. The only one that our department would do directly is the Riverhurst ice road. But we would be able to provide you with some of the numbers on the costs associated with the construction work that goes on there even though we don't, you know, we don't deliver that work directly ourselves.

**Ms. Draude:** — Thank you. If it's a contract and the government is still responsible for the work.

**Mr. Law:** — Right.

**Ms. Draude:** — Thank you. The snow removal from an ice road — which does sound a little funny but I'm sure it has to be done, removing snow from an ice road — is that done under the same time frame that I heard the minister talk to members about when it came to questions of roads further south?

**Mr. Law:** — That's a very good question. I don't know the answer off the top of my head. I'll have to bring it back to you. The standards that we talked about in terms of our protocol and the review that we've done, I'm not sure if we actually have a category or a subcategory that actually is explicit for the ice roads. I know that we've been fairly much more weather dependent in terms of our ability to get onto those roads and to be . . . There's a different set of protocols that are used in terms of when it makes sense to leave snow and when it makes sense to take it off and how much. And I'll have to get those details to you to be comfortable in terms of the accuracy that we have. My sense is that it's probably a different standard than what we would normally apply, but I'm not sure about that.

**Ms. Draude:** — Thank you. Thank you very much. Because the roads were constructed by a contract, does that lead me to believe then that maintenance is also contracted on those roads?

**Mr. Law:** — Yes.

**Ms. Draude:** — So then there . . . Because of that, then of course you may or you may not have the definite time frames on it and that type of thing. So did the costs of it vary a lot this year? And I guess I'm asking this question because, is this ice work, is this part of this budget or is that part of the construction budget?

**Mr. Schmidt:** — Ice roads are a bit of a unique creature, and that's why we rely on the contractors in the North who have expertise in that. And it varies. Like last year, for example, was a very mild year in the North. We did not get the ice roads until later, and we didn't get the thickness on them to even get the weights in that we would normally like to see every year to get the supplies in.

This year we've been fortunate. There was that nice cold snap in the North. Fortunate or not, that allowed the contractors to get out early and to get some good ice thicknesses on the roads over to Wollaston and over to Fond-du-Lac, and they're still working on Uranium City. It's got lighter loads on it. So the contractors have been working on that.

As far as the service levels, they are kind of unique too because we have that extra safety factor there for the thickness of ice,

and you have to have certain widths cleared to allow for the frost to penetrate into the ice. You don't just plow 12 feet wide. It's several hundred or up to 100 feet wide to allow the ice thickness and the frost to penetrate better. So there's a little bit different standard.

So safety's the first thing. The first thing they monitor is the ice thickness, and they do that on a regular basis. And from that they can use engineering to determine the amount of weight that can be allowed on the ice. So that is one of the levels of service that we monitor, is the thickness and the condition of the ice. And then they do also plow and maintain it. And as well they need to monitor that safely too, to ensure that the equipment they have on there can safely operate.

So as the deputy said, we will get back on some more specifics and some more standards. But the cost can vary significantly because last year the contractor was not able to get out until later in the year and it was a much shorter season to operate, so of course your costs are going to be down.

This year we were able to get the road open. And despite the warm temperatures we've been having in the South, they have been able to maintain the ice roads in the North. It has been colder in the Far North. And so we are hoping for a longer season and then the costs will be higher this year than we saw last year.

**Ms. Draude:** — Thank you. I would be remiss if I didn't mention that earlier on when the minister was talking about some of the history, that I didn't mention that I have extreme faith in the officials and the professional work that they've done. And that wasn't brought into question at all. I also wanted to mention that I've been on an ice road a number of times, and it wasn't the best experience of my life — not because the ice road wasn't but because I was scared of it. I was on the day after it opened.

So I'm wanting to know, if this . . . And I asked the question but maybe I didn't hear the answer. Is the construction of ice roads part of this budget or is it part of the actual construction budget?

**Mr. Schmidt:** — The construction and maintenance of the ice roads and the overland components of them — there are some overland components too — it is part of this winter snow and ice control budget.

**Ms. Draude:** — Thank you very much.

**The Chair:** — Mr. Hermanson.

**Mr. Hermanson:** — Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chair. And I have just a few minutes to touch one more subject. There was a work stoppage and, as you know, a strike by SGEU [Saskatchewan Government and General Employees' Union] that occurred during the winter months. And a lot of attention was focused on whether or not the highways would be kept open during that period of the work stoppage and during holidays. In fact the Highway department workers were very diligent. I believe there was a period of time when labour was withdrawn from servicing the highways. I just wondered if you could tell me how that affected this request for additional funds for snow removal.

Obviously if you get behind when you're removing snow, it's much more difficult to remove the snow once it piles up a little deeper than it should have. Can you relate to me the person hours lost due to the strike? And then perhaps we can go on with some other questions after that.

**Mr. Law:** — Our best estimate is that the costs were very close to what would have otherwise been the case for us in terms of the numbers of staff that we ended up deploying from our management group, as compared to what would have been deployed had we had our full contingent available to us during that time, a part of the reason being that we didn't have a major event during the few days that we were directly affected.

We had one relatively significant bit of snow at the very beginning of that time frame. And by virtue of not having the full staff complement to deploy, our best estimate — and this is a real estimate — is that we may be as much as \$100,000 less than what it would have otherwise cost us had we had a full contingent of staff available during the time, again that being very specific to the nature of the weather conditions that we had to deal with during that time and the deployment.

And so what we've tried to do is a similar calculation to I think where your question was coming from. We've looked at the number of person hours that were dedicated through our out-of-scope employees who were servicing the equipment. And in some instances what ended up happening is if we didn't have as many people — we obviously didn't have as many people available to us — but then we ended up committing some additional hours to the work. And so it came out to be very close in that very short period of time.

That would have been a different circumstance had it extended for much longer or had we have had much more, you know, there was a much more significant weather event that arrived shortly after we able to get agreement to have our full staff come back to operate the equipment. But had that not been the case, then it probably would have been . . . we would have had some greater variance there.

**Mr. Hermanson:** — Thank you. My recollection is that the weather wasn't totally insignificant during that period. In fact there was some pretty severe weather. Are you saying in that answer then that management staff, while it took them longer, were able to do the snow removal to a point that by the time the regular highway workers were back on the job the situation was normal? Is that sort of what you were saying?

**Mr. Law:** — That's correct. That early event that you're referring to that took place, we actually were able to report back internally as to the level of service that we had been aiming for as having, you know, gotten to all of the areas that we had attempted to get to, albeit over an extended period of time by virtue of the number of employees that we had deployed. It was very . . . by the time we got there, we had in essence caught up pretty closely to where we would have been.

**Mr. Hermanson:** — How many regular highway workers would you have assigned to snow removal in this kind of a situation, and how many management personnel actually were involved in snow removal during this situation?

**Mr. Law:** — I can only give you a partial answer to this question because I would have to go back and we'd have to do a little bit of historical analysis in terms of the specific nature of that weather condition.

What I can tell you is that we had available to us about 100 out-of-scope staff who were available to be deployed. And it wasn't a full deployment. At that time, we were moving people around to different locations and concentrating some of our resources in some areas and not other areas of the province at that time. So that compares to a full staff complement that would have been about four times the size. But again, whether they would have been fully deployed or not in that circumstance is the part of the question that I can't be precise upon.

**Mr. Hermanson:** — Hopefully you'll have those statistics should we ask for that somewhere down the road. Did the out-of-scope staff receive extra remuneration overtime as a result of extra duties?

**Mr. Law:** — If it's acceptable, I'd commit to provide some of the numbers that we do have. Interpreting them at this juncture, I can tell you that we believe we spent \$75,000 in overtime for our out-of-scope staff during that period of time in terms of the hours that were allocated. The difference between what would have been allocated for overtime for in-scope staff and some of the differentials, we have some broad estimates. But if it's acceptable, I would prefer to try and be more precise and give you a written response as a follow-up.

**Mr. Hermanson:** — All right, thank you, Mr. Chairman. I understand my time has gone — and the deliberation cost me my last question — but I do appreciate the fact that you have committed to respond with several answers for us, and that's on *Hansard*, so we no doubt know that that will occur.

We will assume — and I'll be corrected, I guess, if this assumption is wrong — but in closing, we would assume then that the work stoppage and any extra cost, and you said there might not be any, but this overtime and that may have come out of this special warrant, these supplementary estimates. We're assuming that might have happened. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, for letting me go about one minute over, I believe.

**The Chair:** — Seeing no further questions before the committee and the agreed upon time has now elapsed and seeing that it's after 5 o'clock, the committee will now stand adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 17:38.]