



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 30th Legislature
Second Session

Standing Committee
on
Resource Stewardship

Ministry of Transportation
Consideration of Main Estimates

Monday, March 8, 2021
7 p.m.

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Standing Committee on Resource Stewardship

Hanson, David B., Bonnyville-Cold Lake-St. Paul (UC), Chair
Ceci, Joe, Calgary-Buffalo (NDP), Deputy Chair
Feehan, Richard, Edmonton-Rutherford (NDP), Acting Deputy Chair
Dach, Lorne, Edmonton-McClung (NDP)
Ganley, Kathleen T., Calgary-Mountain View (NDP)
Getson, Shane C., Lac Ste. Anne-Parkland (UC)
Guthrie, Peter F., Airdrie-Cochrane (UC)
Issik, Whitney, Calgary-Glenmore (UC)
Loewen, Todd, Central Peace-Notley (UC)
Singh, Peter, Calgary-East (UC)
Turton, Searle, Spruce Grove-Stony Plain (UC)
Yaseen, Muhammad, Calgary-North (UC)

Also in Attendance

Carson, Jonathon, Edmonton-West Henday (NDP)

Support Staff

Shannon Dean, QC	Clerk
Teri Cherkewich	Law Clerk
Trafton Koenig	Senior Parliamentary Counsel
Philip Massolin	Clerk Assistant and Director of House Services
Sarah Amato	Research Officer
Melanie Niemi-Bohun	Research Officer
Nancy Robert	Clerk of <i>Journals</i> and Research Officer
Warren Huffman	Committee Clerk
Jody Rempel	Committee Clerk
Aaron Roth	Committee Clerk
Rhonda Sorensen	Manager of Corporate Communications
Jeanette Dotimas	Communications Consultant
Tracey Sales	Communications Consultant
Janet Schwegel	Director of Parliamentary Programs
Amanda LeBlanc	Deputy Editor of <i>Alberta Hansard</i>

Standing Committee on Resource Stewardship

Participant

Ministry of Transportation
Hon. Ric McIver, Minister

7 p.m.

Monday, March 8, 2021

[Mr. Hanson in the chair]

**Ministry of Transportation
Consideration of Main Estimates**

The Chair: Okay. Thank you. I would like to call the meeting to order and welcome everyone. The committee has under consideration the estimates of the Ministry of Transportation for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2022.

I'd ask that we go around the table and have members introduce themselves for the record. I am David Hanson, the MLA for Bonnyville-Cold Lake-St. Paul and chair of the committee. We will begin to my right.

Mr. Feehan: I'm Richard Feehan, the MLA for Edmonton-Rutherford.

Ms Issik: Hello. I'm Whitney Issik, MLA for Calgary-Glenmore.

Mr. Turton: Evening, everyone. I'm Searle Turton, MLA for Spruce Grove-Stony Plain.

Mr. Guthrie: Peter Guthrie, Airdrie-Cochrane.

Mr. Singh: Good evening, everyone. Peter Singh, MLA, Calgary-East.

Mr. Loewen: Todd Loewen, MLA, Central Peace-Notley.

Mr. Carson: Good evening. Jon Carson, MLA, Edmonton-West Henday.

Mr. Dach: Lorne Dach, MLA, Edmonton-McClung.

Mr. Huffman: Good evening. Warren Huffman, committee clerk.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll now go to the members participating virtually. When I call your name, please introduce yourself for the record. I see Mr. Getson.

Mr. Getson: Yup. Shane Getson, MLA, Lac Ste. Anne-Parkland.

Mr. Yaseen: Muhammad Yaseen, MLA, Calgary-North.

The Chair: Thank you very much, everyone.

Due to the current landscape we are in, all ministry staff will be participating in the estimates debate virtually. Minister, please introduce yourself and any officials who are joining you that may be speaking on the record.

Mr. McIver: Thanks, Chair. I'm Ric McIver, MLA for Calgary-Hays. With me is my deputy minister, Rae-Ann Lajeunesse; assistant deputy minister Tom Loo; our director of finance, Dale Fung; Crystal Damer, assistant deputy minister; Ranjit Tharmalingam, assistant deputy minister; and Wendy Doyle, executive director of SafeRoads. Those are the officials in the room with me, Chair.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

I'd like to note the following substitutions for the record: Mr. Richard Feehan as deputy chair.

Before we begin, I would note that in accordance with the recommendations from the chief medical officer of health attendees

at today's meeting are advised to leave the appropriate distance between themselves and other meeting participants.

In addition, as indicated in the February 25, 2021, memo from the hon. Speaker Cooper, I would remind everyone of the committee room protocols in line with health guidelines, which require members to wear masks in committee rooms and while seated except when speaking, at which time they may choose not to wear a face covering.

A few housekeeping items to address before we turn to the business at hand. Please note that the microphones are operated by *Hansard* staff. Committee proceedings are being live streamed on the Internet and broadcast on Alberta Assembly TV. The audio- and videostream and transcripts of meetings can be accessed via the Legislative Assembly website. Those participating virtually are asked to please turn on their camera while speaking and mute their microphones when not speaking. Members participating virtually who wish to be placed on a speakers list are asked to e-mail or send a message in the group chat to the committee clerk, and members in the room are asked to please signal to the chair. Please set your cellphones and other devices to silent for the duration of the meeting.

Speaking rotation and time limits. Hon. members, the standing orders set out the process for consideration of the main estimates. A total of two hours has been scheduled for consideration of the estimates for the Ministry of Transportation. Standing Order 59.01(7) establishes the speaking rotation and speaking times. In brief, the minister or a member of Executive Council acting on the minister's behalf will have 10 minutes to address the committee. At the conclusion of his comments a 50-minute speaking block for the Official Opposition begins, followed by a 20-minute speaking block for the independent member, if any, and then a 20-minute speaking block for the government caucus.

Individuals may only speak for up to 10 minutes at a time, but time may be combined between the member and minister. The rotation of speaking time will then follow the same rotation of the Official Opposition, independent members, and the government caucus, with individual speaking times set to five minutes for both the member and the ministry. These times may be combined into a 10-minute block. One final note. Please remember that discussion should flow through the chair at all times regardless of whether or not speaking times are combined. If members have any questions regarding speaking times or the rotation, please feel free to send an e-mail or message to the committee clerk about the process.

Ministry officials, at the direction of the minister, may address the committee. Ministry officials are asked to please introduce themselves for the record prior to commenting. Space permitting, opposition caucus staff may sit appropriately distanced at the table to assist their members; however, members have priority to sit at the table at all times.

If debate is exhausted prior to two hours, the ministry's estimates are deemed to have been considered for the time allotted in the schedule, and the committee will adjourn. Points of order will be dealt with as they arise; however, the speaking block time and the overall two-hour clock will continue to run.

Any written material provided in response to questions raised during the main estimates should be tabled by the ministry in the Assembly for the benefit of all members.

The vote on the estimates and any amendments will occur in the Committee of Supply on March 17, 2021. Amendments must be in writing and approved by Parliamentary Counsel prior to the meeting at which they are to be moved. The original amendment is to be deposited with the committee clerk, and as a courtesy an

electronic version of the signed original should be provided to the committee clerk for distribution to committee members.

I now invite the Minister of Transportation to begin with his opening remarks. You have 10 minutes, sir.

Mr. McIver: Thanks, Chair. Good evening. I am pleased to present Alberta Transportation's 2021-22 estimates. With me at the table from Alberta Transportation are Rae-Ann Lajeunesse, my deputy minister; Tom Loo, assistant deputy minister, construction and maintenance; and Dale Fung, executive director, finance. We also have a number of other department officials in attendance.

Protecting lives and livelihoods is the theme of Budget 2021. That theme, of course, refers not only to our work to protect Albertans from COVID-19 but also to protecting the livelihoods of working Albertans. It's also a theme that sums up the very mandate of Alberta Transportation. Our number one priority is protecting the lives of Albertans by providing a safe, reliable, and efficient transportation system. We also protect livelihoods by funding capital infrastructure projects that create much-needed jobs today. The highway infrastructure is needed to move people, goods, and services across our province from High Level to Cardston, Jasper to Lloydminster, and all points in between.

Alberta's highway network is extensive, with more than 31,000 kilometres of highway, or the equivalent of 64,000 lane kilometres, and it includes nearly 4,600 bridge structures. Almost 28,000 kilometres of our highway network is paved, and 2,500 kilometres are four- and six-lane divided highways. That's the highest paved kilometres per capita as compared to other jurisdictions in Canada. For example, both Ontario and Saskatchewan have fewer than 16,000 paved kilometres of road to maintain.

Also, Alberta's current maintenance budget is already the lowest expenditure per paved kilometre compared to Saskatchewan, British Columbia, Ontario, and Quebec. Maintaining the existing network on a comparatively small budget is a big job, and it is the current top priority for my department. That's something we cannot ignore. Albertans have been loud and clear that they expect our highways to be properly maintained. I've heard about it, and I know all of you have also heard from your constituents that highway maintenance is a core and vital service. I know this because I've heard from you.

When we took office two years ago, we commissioned the MacKinnon report, and that report clearly showed that we are at a crossroads with our highway network. Do we continue to build new highway infrastructure, or do we shift our focus to maintain, preserve, and enhance the existing network? The importance of our highway network was highlighted last year when the pandemic hit. We had to make sure the network was in good shape so commercial carriers could keep the store shelves full.

A network this large requires a lot of work and a lot of money to maintain. Investing in maintenance and rehabilitation now extends the lifespan of the network, which in turn reduces the need for full reconstruction in the future. Rehabilitation of the pavement can extend the lifespan of a highway approximately 20 years, and many of our assets are in need of upgrading and updating right now. Investing in maintenance and rehabilitation now not only extends the lifespan of roads and bridges, but these projects create good-paying jobs at a time when Alberta needs those jobs the most.

While we are focusing on maintaining the existing infrastructure, it is important to note that we continue to invest in critical economic corridors such as the completion of the Calgary ring road, twinning highway 15 near Fort Saskatchewan, the Deerfoot Trail improvements in Calgary. The LRT growth in Edmonton and Calgary will continue. We recognize the importance of LRT development not only for moving people where they need to go but

for the jobs that LRT construction creates. The province's funding for both Edmonton and Calgary will remain at \$3 billion, with \$1.47 billion for Edmonton and \$1.5 billion for Calgary over the next seven years. In Budget 2021 funding to Edmonton and Calgary for their LRT projects is \$2.2 billion in provincial and federal funding combined over the next three years.

7:10

Last year as part of the Alberta recovery plan we advanced several economic stimulus capital projects to help kick-start the economy and get people back to work. Some of those projects include twinning for highway 3 between Taber and Burdett, twinning of highway 11 from Red Deer west to Rocky Mountain House, the Bow River bridge on southeast Stoney Trail, and highway 40 widening between Hinton and Grande Cache. These projects are still very much on the books, and this year early work such as utility relocation and land acquisition will take place. As with all projects, timelines are continually being evaluated to achieve successful completion, taking into account cost-effectiveness.

We are always open to new ideas and creative ways to get things done, and in the past year two capital projects were advanced thanks to that creative thinking. We have partnered with the municipal district of Greenview and the county of Grande Prairie to cost share the twinning of highway 40 south of Grande Prairie. Last year industry and municipal leaders in northwest Calgary have advocated for a toll to construct a new highway 697 bridge, including letters of support.

My department proceeded with an engagement in August 2020 to inform development of the Financing Alberta's Strategic Transportation Act, also known as FAST, which was passed in December 2020. The engagement included gathering perspectives from local, municipal, and industry sector stakeholders such as forestry, agriculture, trucking, and construction. The La Crête Chamber of Commerce and indigenous communities were also consulted through in-person and online workshops. The legislation allows for the implementation of tolls to finance new infrastructure projects for the first time.

This legislation only allows a toll highway to be designated if, for new or expanding infrastructure, that would increase capacity and after stakeholder engagement has taken place and if a non-toll alternative route is available or stakeholder engagement supports proceeding without a non-toll alternative route. The first project under the act will be the construction of a bridge over the Peace River on highway 697 to replace the aging La Crête ferry. Both of these projects would not have proceeded without this kind of innovative thinking.

Budget 2021 invests \$7 billion over three years in the capital plan, which includes \$2.4 billion for planning, design, and construction of roads and bridges; \$1.5 billion in capital maintenance and renewal for highway and bridge rehabilitation and replacement projects, an increase from last budget; \$311 million for water management and flood mitigation; and \$2.8 billion for capital grants to municipalities.

With continuous funding for the Springbank off-stream reservoir, also known as SR 1, in Budget 2021, our government is demonstrating its commitment to protecting the city of Calgary and all of southern Alberta from future flooding so that we do not see a repeat of the tragic events from 2013. We continue to work through the regulatory process for SR 1 and are approaching conclusion with both the federal and provincial regulators. It is anticipated that approvals from both regulators could be received by summer 2021.

In mid-2020 the Alberta recovery plan included \$200 million in capital grants for water infrastructure projects and the strategic

transportation infrastructure program, also known as STIP. We are extending funding of an additional \$25 million for STIP to support municipalities in improving critical local transportation infrastructure.

As part of the ongoing commitment to ensure all Albertans have reliable, clean drinking water and effective waste-water services, we will continue in the upcoming years to deliver the remaining water grant stimulus funding, that started in 2021, from the Alberta recovery plan. These water grants are being provided to municipalities through the department's Alberta municipal water/waste-water partnership, the water for life program, and the First Nations water tie-in program.

This budget maintains our commitment to provide grants on approved municipal transit projects under the green transit incentives program, also known as GreenTRIP.

We are building and repairing water management infrastructure, providing irrigation to the agriculture sector and flood mitigation protection for communities across the province.

While we keep safety front and centre, we also have to make sure anyone using our highways is doing so in a safe, responsible manner. The Alberta government remains committed to ensuring that all road users have proper training. We are making real headway in providing fast and convenient access to road tests for all Albertans. In fact, by privatizing class 4, 5, and 6 road tests in January, we have significantly increased the availability for these high-demand licence classes and reduced wait times for Albertans. The successful transition has delivered on this government's commitment to improve this service.

We're fully committed to the mandatory entry-level training, or MELT, for commercial drivers. The previous government introduced MELT and had no implementation plan. In contrast, we are fixing this problem by actively implementing solutions to improve the safety for commercial carriers.

Another major safety initiative came into effect last December to initially address impaired driving. This initiative will be expanding its scope in the upcoming year to include other traffic offences under the Traffic Safety Act. The Provincial Administrative Penalties Act updates and strengthens impaired driving laws in Alberta, also known as SafeRoads Alberta. Under these new rules there are significant penalties: fines up to \$2,000, vehicle seizures up to 30 days, and mandatory ignition interlock for repeat offenders. These changes make impaired driving laws in Alberta among the toughest in Canada.

Aside from that, maintaining and upgrading our highway network protects lives and livelihoods and keeps Albertans moving safely on a highway system they can rely on. Folks, a lot of work has been done, and there's a lot of work left to do.

Today I would like to thank you for your time. I am pleased to be here, and I look forward to answering any questions, Mr. Chair, as they may arise.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

For the next 15 minutes that follow, members of the Official Opposition and the minister may speak. The timer will be set for 20-minute intervals so you are aware of the time. Would you like to combine your time with the minister's, go back and forth?

Mr. Dach: That would be my preference, please.

The Chair: Thank you. You're in agreement, Mr. Minister?

Mr. McIver: At your service, Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Dach, I believe you have the floor.

Mr. Dach: Thank you very much, Mr. Hanson, as chair. I appreciate your time and the time of all the officials who have spent so much time preparing today – it's much appreciated – and the minister I see this evening.

I'd like to get started off with probably the largest topic on your plate right now, Mr. Minister, and that's the green line project in Calgary, that you're intimately familiar with. You've been a champion of LRT in Calgary since the days of your tenure as a councillor there. You've professed through your budget to be putting money forward to commit to the construction of the green line, yet even though this green line project in Calgary will be the province's largest infrastructure bill, with a final price tag of about \$5 billion, and three levels of government, municipal, provincial, and federal, in 2019 agreed to a funding formula, each sharing about a third of the cost – the province and the feds are committed to about \$1.53 billion each – we don't really see any evidence that you're prepared to move forward as a province and fund this project.

It seems as though the province is looking to put roadblocks up in front of this project and either halt it or really severely drag it out and prevent it from going forward. The city of Calgary is concerned about it and wondering why the province has not given the green light to the green line. It'll produce about 20,000 desperately needed, well-paying jobs for Calgarians. The line will be a significant economic driver to reviving the economic viability of Calgary's downtown. All Calgarians and indeed all Albertans wonder why you're blocking this project from getting under way.

The Premier said in an October 2020 article that he expected the, quote, clear and objective provincial review of the green line project to be released later that month. So far no one has seen that report. The province has failed to release the results of the review to anyone, not to the public, not to the green line board, not to the city of Calgary, yet you claim the contents of the report raise concerns about procurement practices of the project that you need to iron out with the city of Calgary. Are you therefore withholding funding of the project from the province? Will you commit today to tabling the provincial review of the project with this committee?

Mr. McIver: Thanks, Chair. I think the question is asked now, so I'll jump in. Thank you. I would say to the hon. member that as opposed to the characterization that he is making in his question, we're actually enabling the green line project to go forward. In fact, people are keen from Alberta Transportation – I'm getting terrible feedback here. I don't know why. I'll just carry on. In fact, our people are working very co-operatively with the city people, and let me compliment the city of Calgary's people, who I'm told are working very co-operatively with us. Our goal, of course, is to get the project built, to make it something that not only will make sense now from a risk-managed and financially sustainable format but also something that Calgarians and all Albertans can be proud of for the next hundred years.

I support the goals of the LRT construction in Calgary, and let me say this: the project has undergone multiple changes in design and scope, and there are some complicated pieces of it that we're working together with the city on. We want to make sure that – as the member said, after the latest design the government launched a review of the green line to ensure the project was technically and financially sound. Again, we're working with the city, and again, as far as timing goes, I don't want to box myself into a date, but let me say this – and I've said it publicly many times – sooner is better than later, hon. member. We're hoping that we can come to a place where we agree with the city and they agree with us, and I think we're headed for that place where we can go forward together . . .

7:20

Mr. Dach: I agree with that, Minister. Thank you. If I may interrupt, I do agree with you that sooner is better than later, and the citizens of Calgary certainly agree with that. For the life of me, sir, it seems as though your track record would lend one to believe that that really is your intent, to get shovels in the ground.

But there really does seem to be an intent, with all due respect, on the part of the province to put a wall up to the start of this project to the extent that the city doesn't feel comfortable going ahead. They've stopped procurement on phase 1, and they've done so because of the questions that the report that you've commissioned has raised. The city is at a loss to know exactly what that report is saying to you that would cause you to say that we need to iron some things out. The city of Calgary has been demanding that that report be released to them at least, not to publicly release it, because there are some commercial sensitivities, but to release it to them.

You haven't been willing to do that, and that seems to be the holdup. There seems to be some information in that report that's giving you a reason to hold up this hugely important project to Calgary, 20,000 jobs that Calgary is waiting to take advantage of, and I think the city of Calgary and all the citizens of Calgary deserve an answer that really is something that's believable when you say that you're wanting this project to go forward. What is actually in that report that is giving you such concern that you won't release the provincial funds and get shovels in the ground?

I know that the city wants to see the report. I know that even the green line board would like to see the report. This committee, I think, deserves to see the report, so why won't you at least make it available to bodies in confidence such as the green line board or this committee, sir?

Mr. McIver: Well, let me say that our commitment to the green line is there. We expressed that by putting it into legislation, the funding schedule for the green line. We are working with the project. About the piece of the green line that the city has started the procurement process on, actually it starts in the southeast part of the city, which is fine, and it ends, frankly, in Inglewood, which is a beautiful community, so I don't want to knock Inglewood – it's a great place to be – but it doesn't actually connect to the rest of the LRT line. So we're working actively together, our people with the city, to get through the technical challenges, to get from Inglewood to the rest of the LRT line. Again I'll say it out loud because it's important to know. The city is working very co-operatively with us. I think they understand exactly what's needed. We're hoping that together we can get to that place where the people in southeast Calgary that get on the LRT will be connected to every other LRT station in the system and not only to the new line.

Mr. Dach: I understand what you're saying, but the terminus of the line at Inglewood you've described as nowhere, a line to nowhere, and of course that's the type of discourse that the city really didn't appreciate very much, and it poisoned the atmosphere. Unfortunately, the city characterizes the relationship a little differently than you do as far as being co-operative and harmonious with respect to this green line.

Mr. Loewen: Point of order.

The Chair: Point of order noted. Go ahead, Mr. Loewen.

Mr. Loewen: Yes. I'll quote 23(b) and (c); (b), "speaks to matters other than the question under discussion." He's talking about a relationship between another municipality that has nothing to do with the topic at hand, which is the estimates for Transportation.

Then, of course, he's persisting in needless repetition. I think we find that it's a point of order under both of those counts.

The Chair: Thank you.

Are there any other members wishing to comment? Go ahead, Mr. Feehan.

Mr. Feehan: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I don't believe that this is a point of order. Clearly, the minister himself raised the relationship between himself and the city of Calgary on two occasions, so the pickup of that by this particular member would seem to be quite reasonable and logical. Certainly, feeling that you have not got an answer to a question would require you to ask a question yet again. That will happen throughout estimates on a regular basis, so simply stopping people because they've asked a question once is inappropriate if they have not got a satisfactory answer.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Is there anybody else? Any other members wishing to comment? Go ahead, Mr. Loewen. You had something further?

Mr. Loewen: Yeah. I think this is a point of order. When we look at – he's been talking and asking about this report, and the report is not in this document.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Loewen. You actually spoke to the matter. I just thought you had something specific to add there. I will caution you.

I don't think this is a point of order myself. I will just remind members to, you know, be cautious of language. The minister is under no obligation. You may not like the answer that he gives you; you may not think it's fulsome enough. That's his prerogative. Let's continue on with the questions. There's a lot of area to cover, and we've got two hours.

Please continue.

Mr. Dach: Thank you very much. I don't want to spend my whole time on green line, but it's such an important topic, Mr. Chair, that is worthy of spending a chunk of time to really ensure that the minister is clear with Calgarians and all Albertans about the timeline whereby he intends to green-light this project. Is he talking weeks, is he talking months until this delay in provincial funding is going to be cleared and the project can go ahead? That's what we're waiting for.

I mean, it has been intimated that the province wanted to pay last, where in these triple government payment projects, where you get municipal and provincial and federal government contributions, typically – not typically, but basically because of the fiscal arrangements of this country the federal government's contribution comes last. Yet it has been implied by the province that they wanted to bring forward their contribution last in this particular case, and that's another complicating factor. You're trying to change the financial, fiscal arrangements of this type of shared-cost project financing in mid-flight here. I'm not understanding why that has come up as a bit of a red herring.

Basically, Mr. Minister, can you give us an idea? Is it going to be delayed till next summer, like 2022-23? Will the project perhaps never happen?

Mr. McIver: Well, I'll remind the hon. member. I told him before, but since he's asked again, I'll tell him again. The timing of the expenditures we put right in legislation, so that's not really debatable. The government committed to it in legislation, the timing. I also will repeat the answer because he asked again. The

line as it's currently constituted ends in Inglewood. It doesn't connect to the rest of the system. The people in southeast Calgary would be very unhappy if their piece of the LRT didn't connect to the whole system as everybody else's piece of the LRT does, so we're working co-operatively with the city. They're working co-operatively with us to find a way to get it connected to the rest of the city.

I don't know, hon. member. Actually, the work that we're doing could speed it up, could slow it down, I suppose, but I stand by what I said: sooner is better than later. The instructions that – our staff have worked towards solutions co-operatively with the city. That's what I believe is happening, and I think Albertans can feel good about the fact that their government is working hand in hand with the city of Calgary to get a very important project advanced, which I think everybody wants.

Mr. Dach: Mr. Minister, I'll stop you there and just continue with a couple of comments about it. I'm just wondering, with respect to the report that you've commissioned on the LRT, the Calgary green line project, the analysis that you wanted to look at before deciding to fund: why won't you release it, at least in confidence, to either this committee or the chair, the board of the green line? I'm not necessarily asking you to release it publicly, but what's the problem with releasing it to either the green line board or this committee?

Mr. McIver: Well, Mr. Chair, the report is not part of this budget, but I will say this: because we are in contact with the city virtually every day and they're well aware of how we're trying to help them, there is a very co-operative relationship between our people and the city people. My people tell me that we're making progress. The hon. member, frankly, I think wants to introduce something that might slow the process down. I think it's better, rather than politicizing this, to let the technical people solve the technical problems, which is what I've said that we're doing, and I give the city credit for doing that. They've also decided to let the technical people solve the technical problems rather than making a political football out of such an important project. I think that's the most advisable and best path forward . . .

7:30

Mr. Dach: Thank you very much, Mr. Minister.

Mr. McIver: . . . and it's the path that I intend to stay on because I think that's, at the end of the day, where we'll get the results that are most wanted by Albertans.

Mr. Dach: Thank you, Mr. Minister. I've heard you talk about a political football, and I will leave it to the citizens of Calgary to decide who has made it into a political football.

But let's move on. We've got lots of other transportation issues to deal with. All right. I wanted to move on to the question of the Transportation Safety Board if I may. On page 205 of the estimates, line 4, there's a grant to the Alberta Transportation Safety Board. Funding in 2021-22 is reduced to zero, and there are no FTEs, which begs, of course, the simple question – Albertans are pretty concerned, as you well know, about keeping unsafe drivers off the road. What's going on? Who will do the work of the Alberta Transportation Safety Board? Are you planning to privatize the whole function of the ATSB, or where do its functions move to?

Mr. McIver: Well, I think the hon. member in my introductions may have heard me introduce Wendy Doyle, who will be the head of SafeRoads Alberta, which will be the – once the Alberta Transportation Safety Board winds down, that work will transfer to

SafeRoads Alberta. I don't know if Ms Doyle wants to expand further on that.

Hon. member, would you like to hear from the leader of the Transportation Safety Board?

Mr. Dach: Well, suffice it to say that we're worried about whether the funding has been reduced and to what degree and whether or not the work is actually going to be done. Will we see a diminished level of safety in terms of protecting Albertans and keeping unsafe drivers off the road as a result of this shift?

Mr. McIver: I think I was quite clear. The work will be transferred to SafeRoads Alberta, which will take up the work of the previous body, the Transportation Safety Board, and will also include the work that was put in place that I made reference to in my opening remarks about impaired driving. We are, frankly, largely copying a very successful legislation that exists today in British Columbia and Manitoba that reduces impaired driving by large amounts by making immediate consequences. Let me just say this. Although some critics of it have tried to say that it actually lets people off easy, I can tell you that Mothers Against Drunk Driving is very much in favour of this change because they've seen what's happened in B.C. and Manitoba . . .

Mr. Dach: Let me do a follow-up, Mr. Minister.

Mr. McIver: . . . in reduction of impaired driving, making the roads more safe.

Mr. Dach: Let me follow up if I may, Mr. Minister, on driver safety because it appears to be undergoing a major reorganization in your department. Now, driver safety and SafeRoads Alberta have a forecast spend of \$22.6 million for 2021. For Budget 2021, driver safety initiatives, \$5.6 million, and SafeRoads Alberta, \$8.7 million, are combined to \$14.3 million, or a cut of \$8.3 million, a whopping 37 per cent. Is this \$8.3 million cut being directed to commercial driver grants to offset MELT training costs, and if so, why are you comfortable with this reduction to driver safety initiatives?

Mr. McIver: Good question. I can assure you that everything we do is focused on making the roads and driving in Alberta more safe than less safe. I'm just looking to grab the page here. Is this the driver examiner change? Okay. Good. It's the driver examiner change, where we – if you remember, hon. member, your government nationalized driver training back a couple of years ago, and at that point we went from about 150-some driver examiners down to 77 and fell way far behind. Really, Albertans have not been happy since. We worked very hard. Rather than driver examiners being government employees for class 4, 5, and 6 licences, we have privatized those. They'll be delivered through the registry agents. In fact, if there are fewer government employees getting paid out of the public purse that require . . .

Mr. Dach: If I may, I wanted to continue on the theme that you just mentioned.

Mr. McIver: No, I'm just – that requires less money in the budget, which largely explains the question that you asked.

Mr. Dach: Mr. Minister, I'm trying to keep my questions short. I'd prefer we kept our answers succinct as well. Let's try to do that back and forth.

The Chair: Through the chair if you would.

Mr. Dach: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'll try to keep my questions short, Mr. Minister, so that we can have a good back-and-forth exchange here.

You were talking about safe roads, and I certainly want to talk about one in particular that I used to drive regularly. I'm talking about highway 628. Particularly, a piece of it is mentioned in the projects for 2021, but it's only a piece between highway 14 and highway 21, a paving project between east of 14 and 21. There's no mention of a project to redevelop highway 628 from Winterburn Road on Edmonton's western outskirts all the way through to Spruce Grove and Stony Plain to make it a regional economic development driver and a congestion-reducing and much safer commuter corridor for travellers, many hundreds of travellers and drivers daily.

Now, that used to be my commute, Mr. Minister, from my acreage property off of Sand Hills Road south of 628 into west Edmonton to my real estate office, and I did that 25 years ago every day, sometimes more than once a day. That road was unsafe then, and it's even worse now. There have been deaths attributed to it. I'm sure you're familiar with this piece of road.

There are very good public safety and economic development arguments to upgrading this section of highway 628, and I really am curious as to why it's not on the priority list. What roadblocks are holding this project back? Is it because part of it is on the northern boundary of the Enoch reserve? Are there complicating factors there? Is the interchange crossing highway 60 a problem? I know the roadbed is horrifically soft, and it was not constructed right. But it's such a welcome project for so many people in Stony Plain, Spruce Grove from an economic development standpoint and a safety and decongestion standpoint that it would seem a natural to be higher up and be actually on the construction list.

Mr. McIver: Well, let me say this. We look at every road every year in Alberta and consider what's best and what has the best value with the limited dollars that we have to spend on them. Highway 628 is not in the budget for rebuilding this year. We consider it and every road that we get requests on every year. I understand that it needs some care and attention from time to time, and our people look at it on a regular basis. Let me say this. I'm grateful when people complain about it, whether they're your constituents or somebody else's, because while we look anyway – we don't wait for people to complain to look at them, but when people do, we go and look again to make sure that the roads are safe. At this point it's not in the budget. I understand that that probably disappoints you, hon. member, but we consider it every single year, and it is not in this budget.

Mr. Dach: I see that. I appreciate that. I just wanted to definitely highlight it because of my familiarity with it, sir. I can vouch for the fact that it is unsafe. I mean, your own members who represent Stony Plain and Spruce Grove will probably be vouching for the same thing as an economic development driver. Especially at this time, when we need the jobs and the economic development, I don't know why it fell through the cracks and didn't make the grade. We'll move on, but that is something I certainly have an interest in, that particular project.

I want to talk a little bit about the southwest Henday, Mr. Chair, if I may move on to another small stretch of the highway. The Henday has a little bit of money attributed to it in the budget for upgrading some pavement. I don't know if it's this stretch of highway, which was an experimental stretch of concrete slab highway, about 14 kilometres of concrete slab highway, that was constructed 15 years ago and is failing prematurely. Remediation of joints between the slabs are required to fix the road waviness.

It is so bad that commercial vehicles will avoid it entirely. They go all the way the other way around the Henday to avoid that 14-kilometre section of road to get to highway 2 because it's really not in good condition and it affects their ability to keep their load on the road.

I'm just wondering. You know, the added cost that the transportation carriers are having to go through is really a burden. Now, is this approximately 14 kilometres of concrete road surface part of the pavement rehabilitation project mentioned on page 18 of the provincial construction program?

Mr. McIver: Thank you. Let me say, hon. member, that we believe all our roads are safe in Alberta. In Budget 2021 we have allocated \$35.8 million to continue our commitment to expand the southwest Anthony Henday in Edmonton. We're widening it from four to six lanes as well as rehabilitating the existing lanes, presumably the ones that you're making remarks about. The project will add a lane in each direction at Calgary Trail and Whitemud Drive.

Mr. Dach: To be precise, Mr. Minister, we are talking about a similar piece of road, but I want to know if this concrete slab section is actually part of the budget process that is considered for rehabilitation in this budget year.

7:40

Mr. McIver: If the concrete slab section is between Whitemud Drive and Calgary Trail, the answer is yes.

Mr. Dach: This was construction under a P3 arrangement, as both the ring roads in Edmonton and Calgary were, and given that, I'm wondering. It was an experimental concrete slab project that I don't believe was replicated elsewhere in the province partly because of this problem with it. First of all, I want to know: to your knowledge is there any other example of this concrete slab type of construction in the province that is deteriorating in the same way, 15 years premature, and if so, if it's built under a P3 project, who's actually paying for the remediation? Will it be the province or the P3 contractor? Given these special circumstances, it's kind of a question in my mind as to who would be responsible.

Mr. McIver: Two of my staff members have each handed me a note that makes it clear this is not a P3, this section of road, and I've also made it clear to you that what we're doing is widening that section of road and doing repairs on what exists now. The contractor got mobilized and got under way in November of 2019. It should be open to traffic in the fall of 2022, including the new lanes and the repair on the old lanes. The Anthony Henday, the whole ring road, was always designed for future expansion as the traffic builds up, which means the wide outside shoulders will be converted to new lanes in each direction, and the project cost is about \$100 million, so I think that answers your questions.

Mr. Dach: Mr. Chair, one final follow-up with respect to this small piece. Is there any noise remediation involved in this project as well, at the same time with the widening? There was some discussion with a former minister about remediation using berms and/or noise barrier walls there. I know that the issue has come up both in Edmonton and Calgary ring roads about noise as a result of heavier volumes of traffic, and it's an expense that the province is being surprised with. I don't know if you have undertaken to follow through to remediate noise where problems have continually surfaced at certain sections of the ring roads either in Calgary or Edmonton. Particularly this one in Edmonton, southwest Henday, there's been a history of 15 to 20 years of complaints about the noise abatement not getting built.

Mr. McIver: Well, let me say this. Alberta Transportation did complete a noise assessment as part of the design for the expansion that we're talking about on the Henday. This is on top of three noise studies that were complete in 2016 and '17. Two studies were for the full southwest Anthony Henday and one specifically for the community of Wedgewood. The majority of the results of the studies found that the noise levels were below the current threshold for noise attenuation. However, two noise walls are being constructed with the southwest widening project at the communities of Blackburne and Glastonbury, so we don't anticipate that noise levels will increase to the threshold for more attenuation when the project is finished. However, we will do sound studies from time to time to see, so I think that answers your question as you posed it.

Mr. Dach: For that, Minister, be prepared for continued commentary from citizens living adjacent to the ring roads in Edmonton and Calgary over noise abatement because it certainly is an issue in my constituency, which borders the ring road. It comes up continuously, so I'm sure that you'll hear about it.

Mr. McIver: From Albertans.

Mr. Dach: Absolutely. Absolutely.

Now, I'm wondering about something that is of big concern to rural Albertans, Mr. Minister, and it has to do with your ministry. I don't know where precisely in the budget to point to it. As we all know, in western Canada Greyhound no longer operates with the exception of one line between Seattle and Vancouver. In the interim since Greyhound ceased operations, I believe in 2018, there have been a sort of hodgepodge of carriers who have cropped up to try to serve rural Alberta with private bus service and/or freight service, but it really is an inadequate service. I know that the federal government has been called upon to try to assist because it is an interprovincial issue. From the standpoint of the province, what undertakings have you made in your ministry and your department to facilitate the creation of a workable and economic and viable and efficient intercommunity bus transportation service in the province? What is your department doing? What are we working on? What money have you got allocated to it?

Mr. McIver: Well, as you rightly point out, the intermunicipal bus transportation has been the domain of the private sector. Our government has heard from some of the private bus operators that COVID-19 has knocked the stuffing out of their ridership, not only the number of people they get paid to carry but also the amount of freight. I can tell you that there are a number of federal assistance programs that are available to bus operators in Alberta, and our government defers the collection of corporate tax, education property tax, as well as deferring WCB premiums and utility payments. There are also targeted programs such as the Canada emergency business account and the Canada emergency rent subsidy.

It's expected that intercity bus services will continue to probably suffer until business rebounds and adjusts from COVID-19, like the rest of Alberta's economy. We'll continue to monitor that. I can tell you that I along with other provincial and territorial Finance ministers lobbied the federal government for more support for intermunicipal bus service. It's an issue that has gotten worse due to COVID. We will continue to keep track of it, and again we'll keep pushing for more support for it, but the real answer is to get people back to work and the economy more open so people have another reason to buy a bus ticket and send freight on the bus.

Mr. Dach: With all due respect, sir, it's not only that; it's a public safety issue as well for not only employment reasons. Relying upon

the federal government to provide dollars so that you can pass it along isn't necessarily the plan that folks in rural Alberta are looking for. They are really wanting to make sure that they have, even now in time of COVID, the ability to get on a bus that takes them to a medical appointment or to dialysis in another community. It's a medical – I'm sure you've heard from people writing in to your ministry. There are serious concerns about the life necessities of travelling for medical reasons as well as appointments and also just travelling back and forth. Many people can't fly. People have health conditions. They relied on the bus, and then, bingo, it was gone in 2018, and it hasn't been replaced.

It's too much of a hodgepodge to rely on it just settling and sorting itself out, Mr. Minister. I think the province has a real role to play in seeing that rural Alberta doesn't suffer. You just said that people will continue to suffer till COVID-19 relents. That's certainly one of the elements, but I believe that there's a much bigger role to play for the province in co-ordinating the resurrection of a viable bus service for rural Alberta. I think that you have been in receipt of the same letter that every MLA was from the association representing the current operators of rural coach services in Alberta asking the province for assistance.

Mr. McIver: Yeah. I would say to you that it's a difficult problem. Greyhound, who was in the bus business, couldn't make a go of it.

I can tell you that a rural transportation pilot project in 2018 was begun to test improving transportation on buses in rural areas. It's focused on transportation between Alberta's mid-sized urban centres and the surrounding communities. The pilot project initially targeted communities within 50 kilometres of Medicine Hat, Lethbridge, Red Deer, Camrose, Grande Prairie, and Athabasca that don't have other transit services. It provided targeted municipalities with operating funds. The pilot is complete on March 31, 2021. Our department will evaluate the effectiveness of it, and we don't know what we're going to do with it after that.

It occurs to me – and I'm going to look for my staff to confirm this in case I'm wrong – that some of the people in the pilot project couldn't spend all the money because of the reduced ridership program, and we've allowed them to continue longer. Am I seeing nods? Yes. Okay. I did get that right, without the paper. We've allowed those to extend the pilot program to spend the money in it as opposed to forcing them to spend it running empty buses around during COVID. We will take a look at that and decide if there's a permanent role for the government of Alberta to play in that area.

7:50

Mr. Dach: Thank you, Minister. Through the chair, I know that it is a difficult issue because you have sparse populations. But, I mean, your own business plan suggests that you're very interested in economic development and providing a transportation network that supports economic development, and the rural communities absolutely depend upon the so-called Greyhounds of the world to get them connected to the outside world. Somehow this has to be solved. I think that rural Albertans are looking to you as minister and the provincial government to come up with more than a pilot project and say: well, this didn't work. It has to be solved.

I would suggest perhaps a round-table of some kind, getting together with the current operators and the federal government and really focusing attention on it because rural Alberta depends upon that transportation network, and we have an opportunity to maybe come up with a more modern model that works better than what Greyhound did. That's a challenge that is in front of us, and let's take it as an opportunity and make a platform available for all the parties to actually come together and make a transportation network

that serves everybody for the future. We can't just let it ride. In any case ...

Mr. McIver: No. I would say to you that it's legitimately – and you might even agree with this – somewhat of a chicken-and-egg issue, where if you don't have the ridership, it's hard to put the bus on, and if you don't have the bus on, it's hard to get the ridership. As I said to you, we will continue to consider this to see what happens, but the real thing that'll make this more viable is to have more people back to work, to get vaccines in people's arms to get people back to work, and that will give us our best look at what would make sense or what does or does not make sense in the future. I agree with you. It's an issue that isn't resolved or solved yet, and we will keep looking at it. I'm sure I'll hear more from you about it as time goes on.

Mr. Dach: You shall. One little bit more, Mr. Chair, on it, and that is that as with many transportation issues with respect to networks across the country, whether it be air, rail, marine, or roadways, our public transportation networks are quite often utilizing cross-subsidization in their networks, and that may be something that has to be looked at here so that we end up with the viability of the rural networks underpinned by the more heavily used transportation lines. We'll leave that to a later, longer discussion.

What I wanted to talk to you about briefly was something that is, I think, extremely important – it's a health issue, but it's also a human rights issue – and that is water tie-ins to indigenous communities. Now, the previous government budgeted \$100 million, which, to your credit, you've continued with, and you've spent up to that \$100 million. But you've literally offered no more money beyond that, and I'm wondering why you were not going to budget more money for these water tie-ins until the job is done. These are Alberta communities with every right to have clean, pure, potable water available to them at any time. Right now there are some communities who are left out, indigenous communities who aren't getting those water tie-ins because you won't provide or allocate any more funding to that program. Why not?

Mr. McIver: Well, we are operating the \$100 million pilot program that the previous government started. If I'm correct, I think there's \$37 million existing in the program, which we intend to spend on First Nations water tie-ins. Stimulus funding of \$13 million over the next two years for one project, the extension of a regional water pipeline from Ponoka to Ermineskin by the North Red Deer River Water Services Commission: \$7.4 million budgeted in '21-22 and \$5.6 million in '22-23. We're still operating that program. I guess at the end of that we'll decide whether it ought to be extended or not, but I would say that it's a good program, which is why we're still operating it, and we are still trying to wisely spend the budget dollars remaining in the program. As I've tried to describe to you right now, I think we've got some good projects coming up.

Mr. Dach: All right. Thank you for that. But I really am concerned about the way you characterized what will happen at the end of this expenditure, once \$100 million is up: you're going to do an assessment to see if it needs to be carried on. What is there to question? This is water going to Alberta communities, potable, clean, safe drinking water tie-ins. The need to carry on is there. I mean, the money has to be put out. Why would you not commit right now to say, "Yes, we're going to make sure every community in this province has these water tie-ins; if we have to budget more, we're going to spend more"?

Mr. McIver: Remember the part about this is about this year's budget? I'm telling you that it's continuing in this year's budget.

Next year I'm sure you can ask the question again, but in this year it carries on.

Mr. Dach: All right. Well, let's continue on.

The Chair: You have about 10 minutes left.

Mr. Dach: All right. Sounds good. Much appreciate that, Mr. Chair. There are all kinds of road projects that I wanted to potentially talk about. One of them was a piece between Nisku and Devon, highway 19 in particular. I know that two, I think, the eastern and western extremities, were projects that were first budgeted for. I believe there's still design work going on for the eastern extremity, but I wanted to know about the completion of that project, in particular the middle portion, because if we're looking at that highway 19, it's not to be completed yet this year. Where are we at with that project, I guess?

Mr. McIver: Okay. Well, let me say this. It was \$66 million dollars for the west segment of the three-phase highway 19 project in 2020. The east segment, 2.4 kilometres between the QE II and range road 253, was complete in September 2019. The twinning of the west segment, between range road 261 and highway 60, has now been tendered, and it's currently in the award process. Construction will commence in summer of 2021, and it's scheduled for completion in 2022.

We understand how important this project is. I guess it's fairly complicated, or it would have been done a long time ago, but we have, like I said, resources in this year's budget. After that, phase 3, the middle segment, could proceed when design is complete and the required lands are secured and the utilities are relocated and the environmental permits obtained and provincial funding becomes available. It's the middle segment that, after we get the end that's in the budget this year done, remains. I'm sure that we won't forget about it because you and a bunch of other Albertans will remind us on a regular basis, as they have as long as I've been around here.

Mr. Dach: Thank you, sir. Something else that I want to remind us all about is the concerns that Albertans have over toll roads, toll projects. The La Crête bridge, the replacement of the La Crête Ferry, is one that is, I think, an example that will be brought up over and over again. It concerns a matter of ethics, in part, where you have a community that wishes to, in this case, have a ferry replaced by a bridge, and the green light is being given to the project because the community is willing to toll the project. Therefore, they get it built way ahead of the time frame where the traffic volumes might have allowed it to be approved in a normal process.

I'm wondering, sir. With all due respect the population of the province is looking at that and saying: what in the world is going on here? You've got a community that has low traffic. Some estimates show as little as 40 vehicles a day going across that ferry. How in the world are they ever going to be able to finance that bridge cost over time, and what happens if that doesn't happen? What happens if the traffic volume in this or another toll project isn't enough to make the project viable? Who's left holding the bag? It's the province, isn't it, who's going to end up having to pay for that bridge, that's really going to be totally underutilized for perhaps even the life of the bridge? Is that not the case, that a toll project that ends up not being viable becomes the province's responsibility?

8:00

Mr. McIver: Well, I guess I'm a little amazed that you started off, it seems to me, complaining that the province wasn't going to pay for it, and then you finished your question by complaining that the

province might pay for it, so I guess you can't be made happy on this.

I will say that you called it unethical, and I couldn't disagree more. It's very ethical to say "yes" to Albertans at how they spend their money. You may not want to allow Albertans to spend their own money the way they want to, but I actually think they're quite capable of making spending decisions on their own. We went up there to announce that their aging ferry that's providing less-than-stellar service was going to be replaced, you know, paid for by the taxpayers of Alberta, with a new ferry, and they were quite forceful about saying: "No. Don't you dare. Don't you dare put in a new ferry. We want a bridge."

We worked through it with them. We went through the numbers with them and worked out about what it would cost for a toll for a truck and a vehicle, a passenger vehicle, and they said a resounding yes. They said: start today. Well, of course, engineering being what it is and environmental approvals being what they are, we couldn't start that day, but they have held strong on their desire. Our government is sensitive to what Albertans want and are listening to them, as we always do, and this time they gave us a resounding, "We want the bridge, and we'll pay for it, and you'd better do it," so we said yes. You can call that unethical if you want . . .

Mr. Dach: I understand, sir. Through the chair, I understand that's the decision you made.

Mr. McIver: . . . but I think part of our job in government is to listen to Albertans, who are our bosses . . .

Mr. Dach: You did that.

Mr. McIver: . . . and do what we did to accommodate them.

Mr. Dach: Let me interject here and say that you did that and listened to the folks in La Crête on this particular project and greenlighted a toll, but you also have a responsibility to the larger citizenry of the province, all the taxpayers of the province, to make sure that you're not undertaking projects that are going to end up being your responsibility rather than those of the population that agreed to undertake the toll to get it built.

Mr. McIver: Let the record show that you complained about us not paying for it, and then you complained about us paying for it in the same sentence.

Mr. Dach: That's not what I'm getting at. No, no, no.

The Chair: Gentlemen, please. Through the chair. Through the chair. You were doing so well.

Mr. McIver: You're mad no matter what we do.

Mr. Dach: I think you know what I'm getting at, Mr. McIver. We're talking about . . .

Mr. McIver: Yeah. You're trying to make us wrong no matter what we do. That's what you're trying to do, and nice try.

Mr. Dach: I think that you're absolutely wrong in this particular project because there's a risk there. Mr. Chair, the risk is that the province will be left holding the bag. What I'm trying to get to is that there doesn't seem to be adequate assessment criteria that the province is requiring the toll bridge people to go through. You have to do a needs assessment, do you not? You're holding up a project in Calgary, the Calgary green line, because you think the city is not doing its job, its due diligence, something they don't agree with . . .

Mr. McIver: We're assisting with the green line.

Mr. Dach: . . . but here in La Crête you're saying: go ahead; build a bridge for 40 cars, and we'll be holding the bag if it goes under.

Mr. McIver: We're assisting with the green line, as we established earlier when we were talking, and we are accommodating the fervent desires of the people of La Crête and area. In both cases we're trying to help the citizens of this province achieve their ambitions and their goals, and I think that's what our government is here for.

Mr. Dach: Do you think if an indigenous community decided they would allow a toll to get their water tie-in that they'd get it earlier?

Mr. McIver: I think that there is an indigenous community at one end of the bridge, and we went and talked to them, too.

Mr. Dach: Would their water tie-in be associated with the toll?

Mr. McIver: I think all Albertans can spend their money the way they choose without their government telling them, and that includes indigenous people, that are every bit as capable at making those good decisions as nonindigenous people. You might disagree with that, but we feel strongly that they're equal and equally capable of making decisions.

Mr. Dach: Well, you're responsible for Alberta tax money.

The Chair: Thank you, Member. You've got about two minutes left, and there's plenty of material without, you know, building on hypotheticals.

Mr. Dach: Sure. Absolutely. I can tell that the minister and myself are going to enjoy the debate over transportation issues over the next year and a half here, and I look forward to more exchanges but always keeping in mind that the goal, of course, is to look at spending tax money wisely and definitely doing things such as approving projects that are in place, like the green line, that would be creating 20,000 jobs, to get them under way without unnecessary impediments. I hope that that happens pretty doggone soon.

What I wanted to end on, I guess, is a couple of other projects that we could ask about as far as the infrastructure bill goes for the next couple of years. There's a number of concerns that people have expressed about the roadway between Edmonton and Calgary, of course, the QE II. There's a long-term maintenance project on it, but what about plans afoot to triple the lanes on that roadway? Are there studies that you've gotten under way? Are you looking at doing some interim work or some initial work to plan to widen the QE II to three lanes each way? That would involve a massive undertaking, and we're talking about the overpasses and so forth being rejigged. Is that on your radar at all?

Mr. McIver: Well, first of all, I worry about you. You said you're only going to be here a year and a half. Where are you going, hon. member? I was hoping you'd be around longer than that.

Mr. Dach: You'll be switching seats with me. Anyway, what about the QE II expansion? Is that on your radar? Is there anything that . . .

The Chair: That concludes the first portion of questions for the Official Opposition.

We'll now move to the government caucus for 20 minutes of questions from the members. Would you like to combine your time with the minister if the minister is willing?

Mr. Turton: Yes, please.

The Chair: Minister, you're okay with that?

Mr. McIver: Yes, Chair.

The Chair: We'll go with Mr. Turton.

Mr. Turton: Awesome. Well, thank you so much, Mr. Chair, and thank you very much, Minister, for coming out here today along with the rest of your staff. I have a number of questions and comments I want to talk about because, obviously, this is one of my favourite ministries. Please don't tell the other ministers that I said that, but obviously transportation affects many – well, everyone here in the province and especially in my riding of Spruce Grove-Stony Plain.

I guess just to kind of kick-start – and I appreciate the member opposite talking a little bit about the areas outside of my riding; it saves me asking a couple of those questions – I, first of all, just want to commend the minister. I know in the budget there's a significant portion given over to municipal infrastructure rehabilitation, and as the member opposite talked about 628, even though it's not located in my actual riding – it's actually located in the riding of Drayton Valley-Devon – it's still of a significant concern to the 500 residents that use that stretch of road every single day as they go into Edmonton. As the hon. member across the table would notice, there's been significant improvements to that road, especially over the last year or two. I know, Minister, you've been very receptive to the concerns of the MLAs that are affected by that stretch of road.

One of the key reasons I know why so much of the traffic has been actually diverted from 628 onto 16A and Yellowhead just north of there is actually because of transit. That's kind of where I'm going to start off with the first couple of my questions because in my prior life as a city councillor I was very involved with the transit file with the EMRB, working with councillors from all over the capital region on helping build a comprehensive transit plan that will be able to benefit all the 1.2 million residents of the entire greater Edmonton capital region. I guess to kind of kick-start us off, I know on the revenue side, first of all, on page 105 of the business plan, it talks about the public transit infrastructure fund having dropped. Now, I guess my question and concern – and, Minister, you can perhaps answer this to kick-start us off – is: with this drop, how is the ministry going to continue to support public transit? Are there any issues with the long-term sustainability of this needed program?

Spruce Grove has one of the most active transit programs in the entire capital region, being the fourth largest, only behind Edmonton, Strathcona county, St. Albert, and then, obviously, Spruce Grove. This is, obviously, a grave concern moving forward. I mean, long-term sustainability, I know, is something that all municipal partners are always looking for, but when it comes to transit, we're talking about livelihoods. For many residents this is the only way they can get to the store. This is the only way they can attend postsecondary school in Edmonton, for example. I just wanted to run that past you, first of all, Minister, to see: are there any issues with the drop in the fund about how the long-term sustainability of this program will continue?

8:10

Mr. McIver: Well, let me just say this. The department continues to work with the federal government to look at and advocate for funding for transit projects. The drop in funding that you make reference to on page 105 of the ministry business plan actually signifies the federal government and the province wrapping up the program as the majority of the projects will be completed by March

21, 2021. As I discussed with the member opposite a few minutes ago, we don't know what we're going to do after this. We'll have to evaluate what worked and what didn't. Some of that program will live a bit past March 31 simply because several of the participants in the pilot project couldn't spend the money during COVID. They lowered the frequency of their service because of the reduced ridership and the reduced freight, so rather than have them run six buses down the road every day with four of them empty, we've allowed them to reduce the intensity of what they're doing.

We're continuing our commitment to support municipal transit projects by providing \$47.9 million over three years through the green transit incentives program, the GreenTRIP. Of course, we're committed to the LRT growth in Calgary and Edmonton, as I talked about with the member opposite. That's where we're at with that. Honestly, intermunicipal transit largely has always been a private-sector function. We're hoping the private sector will rise again. It had started to rise with some links carried on by private-sector operators before COVID. I don't know which or how many or whether all or none of them will continue after that. We will have to take a look at that and evaluate what the next steps will be.

Mr. Turton: Thank you very much for that, Minister. I guess on the same topic but on the expense side I see that there have been some significant increases regarding transportation grants and municipal transit granting programs. From what I was saying before about the importance of this valuable program and service to many people that live in urban areas – and I realize it's just not Spruce Grove and Stony Plain or even, you know, larger municipalities like Edmonton or Calgary. It's a critical service. I mean, many people can't exist and operate on a daily basis and provide for their families without this program. I see there is an increase there. It would behoove me to not mention or at least ask the question: can you kind of talk about some of the philosophies that your ministry has had that would help lead to these types of increases? From an I don't want to say philosophical perspective, where do you see transit is in terms of importance pertaining to your portfolio?

I'm thinking specifically of a couple of conversations I had with some city of Edmonton councillors that I served with for many years, Councillor Walters and Councillor Knack, both fantastic representatives on the transit front. I know these are the types of questions that they've asked me, that we've talked about in terms of long-term sustainability. I'm just wondering perhaps if you can talk on the expense side about the importance of transit to your ministry.

Mr. McIver: Well, let me say this. Transit is largely a municipal function, and that was true when I was a municipal alderman for nine years from 2001 to 2010. The province provides capital support when they can from place to place and time to time. I see it in the future as being a combination of a municipal program and a private-sector program. You know, if you're asking, "Do we plan upon the province of Alberta replacing Greyhound?" I think the answer is a straight-out no. We'll continue to work with our partners in the private sector in municipalities as well as the federal government to look at where we can support public transit. Again, we stay in touch with municipalities. Outside of the Calgary and Edmonton projects we find places where we can support regional transportation. I know that the municipalities around the capital region have started a transit commission. We gave them a little bit of a hand to get going, but at the end of the day we don't see ourselves as leading this parade. We see the municipalities, the private sectors as leading this parade. When some opportunities come up to help out, I could see that happening in the future. But I

don't see this as being a provincial government operating unit, intermunicipal transportation.

Mr. Turton: Excellent. Mr. Chair, how much time do I have left remaining?

The Chair: You've got 11 minutes and 30 seconds.

Mr. Turton: Perfect. I guess my next question, to kind of take a break from transit, is that again I want to talk a little bit about water, both on the revenue and the expense side. I know, for example, in the same business plan on page 105 it talks about the clean water waste-water fund having dropped substantially. I guess, again, back to long-term sustainability, I mean, with the substantial drop, how is the ministry supporting plans to promote clean water in our province?

Again, in my prior life, having served on the Parkland water commission for many years and being responsible for setting water rates and making sure that residents out west of Edmonton received clean drinking water as well as helping participate in the ability to clean that water after it has been used, I guess I just wanted to get your thoughts on the drop on the revenue side when it came to the waste-water fund and, again, just to really put my own mind at ease, that this was going to be sustainable or not going to affect the long-term sustainability of this program.

Mr. McIver: Well, I think what you're not – you're seeing a drop, but what you're really seeing is the hangover for a big increase. What happened is that the federal government announced total funding to Alberta of \$196.7 million in 2016-17 under its clean water waste-water fund to provide municipalities through the Department of Transportation for projects that contribute to various water treatment and distribution infrastructure. The decrease in funding that you referred to on page 105 of the ministry business plan actually signifies that this program between Alberta and the federal government is wrapping up. In other words, the funding is complete. The federal government funds up to 50 per cent of a project, with the provincial government funding up to 40 per cent from the water for life program. On top of that, provincially \$150 million in stimulus funding over multiple years was provided in 2020-2021 under the Alberta recovery plan for water projects.

Actually, hon. member, I want you to know that it's not so much that we quit on it. We actually chewed up a lot of the backlog with the stimulus spending last year, and some of that hangs over to this year and maybe even a little bit next year because the water, waste-water, and water support programs are always oversubscribed eight to 10 years out, ahead, so we did substantial catch-up.

What you characterized as a reduction – and if you're only looking at the numbers, I suppose you could legitimately say that. But if you're actually looking at the results, the fact is that we've spent – the federal government gave some money, which we pushed out into the world to help municipalities and others connect their water systems, and last year \$150 million in provincial stimulus went out. So what we've done is that we've caught up on a lot of the backlog. I'm not diminishing how important fresh water and well-treated waste water is to Albertans, but what you're seeing now are the after-effects, I suppose, of a lot of spending being advanced over the last few years. I think at this point you'll see more of what I would call a normalization of the amount of money that will be spent in future years. Because of this advance from the federal government and our own stimulus, I'm hopeful, at least, that the amount that we're behind in approving grants to people with these projects will be – we'll be less far behind than we used to be because of the stimulus both federally and provincially that went into the water and waste-water system.

Mr. Turton: Well, thank you very much for that, Minister. I appreciate you talking about the backlog that existed because, as anyone that was involved in that in prior years knows, it was just tough to get those funds to be able to catch up, per se. I appreciate and applaud your efforts to make significant headway in that regard, especially over the last two years.

I guess when you talk about backlog – and I realize that especially municipalities will always say that they're never completely caught up. But when you look at more of a long-term approach, I guess, kind of if you can just elaborate on that one component a little bit, about how we're making progress as a government to make sure that those water and waste-water projects are being looked after and enhanced around the province.

I know, for example, one industrial development that happened west of Edmonton ate up almost 10 years' worth of reserved water supply with just one simple industrial plant, Champion Petfoods in Acheson. When you talk about, "We have to plan for years in advance," it is one hundred per cent correct. I guess I just want to get your take on where you see the ministry in terms of taking care of that backlog and how you're catching up, per se, from past years where maybe there wasn't the right amount of attention given to this valuable project.

8:20

Mr. McIver: I would say to you that it's about more than just money. I'd like you to know that I have encouraged municipalities that have applied for and even received provincial grants for their water and waste-water projects that if they don't have a capital replacement project in their rate structure, to put one in. Frankly, we haven't forced it on municipalities, per se, but I would say that if somebody has a waste-water system and it's been in place for 40 years, and they come to us and say, "Will you replace it for us?", the first question out of my mouth is: "How much have you saved? How much have you put in your rate structure to contribute towards the replacing of it?"

If the answer is zero, I usually complain to them. That's a polite way to put it, complaining to them. I know how important it is, and every time you pay for a second waste-water treatment system for one municipality, it's the second one that doesn't get their first waste-water treatment system. Or, you know, if we put in a second water treatment system for a municipality that's had one, then another municipality doesn't get their first water treatment system. So we're trying to keep up with the grants and stuff, but we're trying to encourage responsible behaviour by municipalities and our partners to do this.

Also, the other thing is, too, on technologies. I know that you and I are former municipally elected people. I know that the city of Calgary at one point added I can't remember how many years or decades to their water supply by insisting upon low-flow toilets and insisting upon water metering. There was no incentive for people, before meters were on their homes, to fix leaks. But once the meters went on, by golly, those leaks got fixed because people could see the leak on their monthly bill.

I think you're right to encourage us to keep the support for the water and waste-water treatments going forward, but I would also say to you to encourage ourselves and our partners to responsibly use that water, to, you know, use it in the most efficient way so we waste less of it, so that less has to come out of the rivers. Also, to return it to the rivers in as good or better condition than we took it out so that when it goes back into the river, those downstream don't suffer ill effects. All of this is not an either/or; it's a both. It's all of the above that I think we have to work on.

Mr. Turton: Excellent. I'm glad you recognize that, Minister.

The last question I have is actually on page 205 of the government estimates. It really talks about the substantial increase to the commercial driver grants program that was put in place. Obviously, this is a growing sector right across the entire province. I mean, Albertan companies have to move goods and services from one end of the province to the other. I guess my question is: why was this substantial increase put in place? I know that sector and many of the businesses that depend upon transportation of goods are obviously going to be happy. I guess if I can get a little bit more of a perspective about how this affects the unemployment levels in this important sector. Was this an attempt to boost this sector and make it grow, or was there some other underlying philosophy that perhaps the ministry was using about why they wanted to support this one industry when there are so many other needs right around the entire province?

Mr. McIver: Well, let's face it, trucking is an essential service. There are so many services that are essential, but this is one, in particular, that was made obvious during COVID because what were people worried about when they were told to stay home? They were worried about if there was going to be food in the grocery store and if there was going to be medicine in the drugstore. They were worried about other things, too, but, let's face it, we all remember the toilet paper shortages because somehow people got the idea there wouldn't be that anymore. But the same thing would've happened if they'd believed there weren't going to be fresh vegetables or fresh meat or canned goods.

We're committed to the mandatory entry-level training program to increase the standards for truck drivers, but that is expensive and it's harder for people to do. So we're busy trying to make it less expensive and more attainable for people and more equally attainable across Alberta. Some people in areas outside of Calgary and Edmonton, for example, find it harder to get to where they can get training and get access to a truck to do their training in and one thing and another. One of the things that the increase is from – and I'm going to look for my staff to nod here. We passed the hat here a little bit with the other ministries, yes? Yeah. Labour contributed some, the labour ministry, and CSS because there's a big, big shortage of truck drivers. It's expensive. We were trying to bring the cost of training down. So that's where some of that extra funding in there goes. We are still working.

Again, the easy answer to a problem is to spend more money. But the harder answer, which we're also trying to do, is trying to make the training less expensive. For example, we're considering delivering some of it online, looking for ways to use apps or simulators to do the training. We're going to put in place a driver's licence – actually, interesting enough, some people find it easier to rent or borrow an automatic-transmission truck, so we're going to offer an automatic-transmission-only licence. So if you take your test in an automatic, that's the only thing you can drive. But some people say that that's all they ever will drive with who they want to work for. We're looking for ways to consider the years of experience with a class 3 licence to count towards the hours needed for your class 1.

We've got a whole bunch of efforts coming forward, not just throwing money at the problem but actually trying to make the problem easier to solve outside of just throwing money at it. In the meantime, with some help, we've got some more money to help with the training, but really the longer term solution is to also push to make the program easier to deliver in a more cost-effective way so that people that want to drive a truck for a living can do so and have that dignity of being self-reliant with a full-time job.

Mr. Turton: Excellent. Well, thank you so much for answering my questions, Minister.

The Chair: Thank you very much, everyone. The government members' first block of questions has now ended.

Now we'll move to the next round, which consists of five minutes of questions from the members, followed by five minutes of response from the minister. As mentioned, members can ask to advise the chair at the beginning of their rotation if they wish to combine their time with the minister's time, for a combined total of 10 minutes.

Mr. Dach: Combine the time, please.

The Chair: Absolutely. You can go ahead, Mr. Dach.

Mr. Dach: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. Pleased to resume questioning once again, Mr. Minister. I wanted to touch on a question that I'm sure you're familiar with from your civic days as well as now with the Transportation ministry, and that is the supply of aggregate in this province. I know that part of the objective in the strategic plan was to prioritize infrastructure projects and get them built, and one of the major components in any infrastructure project is aggregate; in other words, sand and gravel. The deposits of sand and gravel that are proximate to major centres, where it's being consumed for the most part, are more and more scarce, but also there are difficulties where the deposits exist, of course, in mining those deposits because of the public's desire not to have a gravel pit next to their acreage properties. There's a lot of NIMBYism there, and it's a problem that has to be respected.

I know that the Alberta Sand and Gravel Association, the Alberta concrete producers, the Alberta Roadbuilders & Heavy Construction Association, indeed the whole construction industry, is concerned about this as a long-term issue. I know that my father, having been involved in the construction industry as well as a superintendent, had this as a concern, getting concrete for projects. You have to go further and further away from major centres to get aggregate. It adds to the cost. By the same token, the stuff that's closer in is usually surrounded by acreage properties, and it confounds the development of those aggregate deposits.

I'm wondering what long-term strategy you might have for maybe looking at land-use regulations or some other way of mitigating the acrimony that takes place over developing aggregate deposits that are efficient, that are more accessible and affordable and economic, that are closer in to the major centres that would accommodate the need to respect landowners as well as the requirement that we have an adequate, affordable supply of aggregate for industry.

Mr. McIver: Well, that's a good question. Let's face it, everybody wants a house with a concrete foundation, but they don't want the cement to come from close to where they live, and they don't want the gravel in the cement and in the concrete to come from close to where they live either. What you call NIMBYism, I would say, is probably well expressed. At the heart of it it's a bit of a land-use issue that you might want to pose again when you get to Alberta Environment and Parks.

8:30

But I will say this. One of the things that we need to do is that also – and you talked about several industry groups: ASGA, road builders, the cement and concrete groups – I think we need to encourage them to find technologies that seem less imposing upon people when you're extracting gravel, whether it's crushing in a place or in a way that's quieter, reducing dust, reducing noise, all the usual irritants. Also, I think probably for the public we need to continue to do some education on just how important gravel and

concrete are to the quality of life that we all have and the entire economy.

If there's a perfect answer, hon. member, I'd be grateful if you would tell me what it is. I've got a hunch that you're going to say that you need to keep working on it, which we are and we will. I would agree with you on that. Having government-owned pits sometimes reduces the issue for municipalities, but nonetheless we still have to pass the Alberta Environment standards, too, and we get the same complaints as non government-owned gravel pits do. You've pointed to a perfect problem with no ready solution, so congratulations.

Mr. Dach: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'm just wondering, though: with respect to this issue, Mr. Minister, do you not see at least a mediating role for your ministry in conjunction with Environment because this is such an essential ingredient for economic development in this province, the aggregate, to solve the issue in a way that allows the affordable extraction of gravel deposits even in populated areas? There are some solutions you suggested, but what role does the ministry have, in your view, to facilitate this discussion and move towards solutions?

The Chair: Member, I think you've just drifted a little bit off the intent of this meeting. I'll allow the minister to answer the question, but I think we need to kind of stick to the business plan and the budget documents.

Mr. Dach: Certainly. Thank you, Chair.

Mr. McIver: It's not an extra-big budget discussion, but I will say to the hon. member that we try to help where we can. I know that a letter came across my desk today from a gravel company. They want us to try to mediate with the local municipality, and we'll try to do that. When we're asked to, we're always happy to try. I agree with the hon. member that that's a partial solution, but we need to look at other ways to mitigate the NIMBYism as well and also lessen the actual I guess what people would call irritants if there are technological ways to do that.

Mr. Dach: Thank you, Minister. In the budget you talked about – I believe it's in your recovery plan. There's \$2 million, looking at rail transport, that's mentioned there, in the fiscal portion of it. I believe this is for Alberta Transportation. What are those dollars spent on? Is it to look at the Alaska railway project? What in the world is the Alberta Transportation rail portion, the \$2 million in the recovery plan, being spent on?

Mr. McIver: Do you mind me asking which page in our budget?

Mr. Dach: It's in the recovery plan. I don't have the exact page right now in front of me. I'll tell you what. You can get back to me in writing on that.

While I'm on the topic, I know that there was some discussion about the Alaska railway project. It seems to have gone off the rails. Is it still a thing?

Mr. McIver: Oh, yeah. Let me just say this. I can only answer questions on the budget. If the other one is from something other than the budget, you may have to wait to get that somewhere else. But we are working together collaboratively with the Alberta to Alaska rail folks. It could be really exciting. I don't know yet where the money is going to come from to build it. Of course, there are a lot of things produced in Alberta that could get to market if that ever came to fruition: agriculture, forestry, energy products, and even manufactured goods going to and coming from Asia and other parts

of the world. It's a project that I think has tremendous potential. It even has a presidential permit that both the old President in the U.S. and the new President seem to agree on, that that presidential permit is a good idea.

So I would say we're going to continue working along with the proponents and helping where we can. We've been in contact with the Northwest Territories and Yukon governments and indigenous people along the way to try to assist where we can. The big question that remains unanswered for me is exactly how it's going to be paid for, but we will help along as best as we can because I, for one, believe it could benefit Alberta a great deal over a long number of years if it ever comes to fruition.

Mr. Dach: In this budget are you spending money on feasibility studies at all with respect to that particular project or not?

Mr. McIver: Mostly we're providing, I suppose, some technical help, some advice, helping make connections between the railroad and indigenous people along the way, trying to assist that way, but we don't have a financial stake in it.

Correct me if I'm wrong. I got the headshake no. So we don't have a financial stake in it.

Mr. Dach: All right. I wanted to ask a question, through the chair, about the cost of vehicle inspections. Now, I know in Alberta that the price an individual must pay to have another province's vehicle inspected is not regulated. It's not regulated in other provinces as well, but the price can vary quite a bit. I've got before me a letter from a constituent saying that he got quotes from 100 to 300 bucks. The ministry's website indicates that it's just basically buyer beware: go find your private provider, pick the best one, and make sure they satisfy your needs. But I'm wondering, sir, if we shouldn't be looking at what the parameters are for a supplier to provide to satisfy the other province's vehicle inspection requirements at a cost that isn't so widely variant. I think a 300 per cent variance seems unusual and unnecessary. Should we be relying upon buyer beware and letting the market decide the cost of the service that the province has mandated must be bought by the public who want to bring a car to the province?

Mr. McIver: Well, I think it's incumbent upon people who are buying something to shop around. Buyer beware is a legitimate thing. There's . . .

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. I hesitate to interrupt, but we will move on to the rotation with government caucus.

Are you wishing to go back and forth with the minister for a full 10 minutes, and who is your speaker? Mr. Getson, are you on the line? Go ahead.

Mr. Getson: Yeah. I sure am. Let's hope this is working.

Minister, thank you very much. It was very interesting to hear some of the opposition members talking about rail projects. I've obviously a one-track mind in a lot of regards, so that was exciting to hear, but others are picking up on that.

But if I could pivot back to outcome 3.3 on page 104 of the ministry business plan, it says:

Investigate opportunities to enhance market access and mobility for transportation user mobility for transportation users, and support routes connecting major industrial, manufacturing and high-load corridors and hubs.

Given that, what are some of the key transportation investments that the government has made or will make to support this outcome?

Mr. McIver: Thank you, hon. member. Last year we announced a series of strategic stimulus projects, including twinning of highway

3 from Taber to Burdett and the construction of the 65th Avenue bridge from the Edmonton International Airport to Leduc, which I think will be important. We also announced the twinning of highway 15 from and through Alberta's Industrial Heartland. The project supports two multibillion-dollar petrochemical facilities planned in Sturgeon and Strathcona counties. It enhances the high-load corridor and alleviates congestion on the highway 15 bridge. High-load corridor development, of course, enhances our market access.

Several projects on the current construction program on critical trade are the replacement of, interestingly enough, two wooden plank truss bridges on highway 88 at Wabasca River with much more substantial bridges that will be important for economic development; designing for the highway 15 grade widening project between the towns of Lamont and highway 834; the construction of the Tofield bypass on highway 834 to reduce congestion and delays while separating industrial and other large vehicle traffic from local vehicle and pedestrian traffic. It's never-ending. You could probably look at that list I gave you and just say, "That's only a tenth or twentieth of what you should be doing," and I would agree with you on that, but we've got to live within our budgets and what we can get through Treasury Board and what it's reasonable to ask the taxpayers to finance. You're right in your emphasis on these things because that's where the future jobs and economic development of our province lies.

8:40

Mr. Getson: I appreciate that.

A quick follow-up, Minister, with highway 60: is it still on the books or being contemplated?

Mr. McIver: Highway 60 is still on the books and contemplated, and when someone hands me a piece of paper, I'm going to try to give you a little bit more precise – there we go. Highway 60 is committed to move forward with other major improvements west of Edmonton. It includes twinning 60 between 16 and 16A and construction of an overpass over the Canadian National Railway tracks and realignment of the interchange at highway 16A. Let me say this. We are going to do this, but some of the prep work is taking a little while, getting the utilities lined up and moved and getting agreements with the railroads and making plans to deal with the traffic congestion during construction. I don't think I have to tell you – it's in your riding – how busy that area is. But it's also a safety issue because separating the CNR rail tracks from highway 60 is going to be a big safety boost.

The project is currently in the design and land purchasing phase. The land purchasing phase can go really fast if we say to somebody, "Do you want to sell us your land?" and they say "Yes" and we agree on a price. If we don't agree on the price or they don't want to sell us their land and we have to expropriate, then that can take longer. So all that is under way. The land acquisition for two major properties is outstanding on highway 60, but I can tell you that preconstruction activities such as the utility locations will have a start date in 2021. We still have to negotiate some utility crossing agreements – that's under discussion – and some adjustments in relocations of utilities.

The timeline is a bit inexact, I'm sorry to say, but it's under way. Construction is now anticipated to begin – it could be as early as 2024 and as late as 2026. You say that two years is a big difference, but the two years is utility moves, land acquisition, all that kind of stuff. I think that part of the reason it wasn't done before now isn't so much that everyone didn't agree it had to be done; it's just a complex project. We do a lot of stuff where you've got to do this,

but this has more examples of utilities to be moved and rail to work around and all that stuff. You'd probably be a lot . . .

Mr. Getson: I appreciate the response.

I'll turn it over to MLA Loewen from Central Peace-Notley now.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Loewen.

Mr. Loewen: Okay. Thank you very much. Minister, I appreciate your comments tonight. It's been good to hear the focus that you have on safety. In that regard we've seen information coming out regarding the commercial safety rest areas project, and I think this would fall under line 5.4, other infrastructure maintenance, on page 202 of government estimates. It may also fall under section 3, traffic safety programs. I just wanted to know if you could provide information on the decision-making process of these rest areas, where they'll go, and what the criteria is on those.

Mr. McIver: Okay. Well, the decision-making process: we've talked to the Alberta Motor Transport Association – right? – and got their input on where they think we need more safety rest areas. We don't have enough of them in Alberta, and some of the ones we have we think need to be better. By better I mean that having a place for truck driver to pull off and crawl into the cab behind in their truck and get a nap or a sleep is good but not nearly as good as having a bathroom and a restaurant and a convenience store so that they can meet their other human needs while they're on the road. We've heard from the trucking industry and, interestingly enough, just from car drivers, too, because we're not all created equally and some members of the motoring public can go longer between bathroom breaks than others can. That's polite, right, what I just said?

They spoke up and legitimately, so we're trying to meet those needs. We're looking to do that. We're looking for potential sites where we can have highway rest areas where they're needed, there's land available, or where we can make an agreement to purchase land, and not only for a parking lot but for some commercial development. We recently engaged some municipalities on some of their concerns. Some municipalities have said, "Build one here," and others have said, "Don't build one here," because they don't want business taken away from their downtown or their business section. We understand all of that, so we're trying to not interfere with that and yet have services for truck drivers. If you're driving a 55-foot, you know, trailer around and there's heavyweight stuff in it, they don't necessarily want to go into downtown, small-town Alberta. Not that it's not a beautiful place; it's just not the easiest place to tool around with your 55-foot trailer on your truck.

What we're trying to do is actually create places to provide what the industry has told us they need: a restaurant, even if it's a quick-serve restaurant; a bathroom; a convenience store; and a gas station where the basic services can be had on the side of the road and where people won't try to drive another 10 kilometres or 20 kilometres when they're falling asleep because they have to. The industry has told us that it's a real safety issue that we need to take seriously.

Mr. Loewen: Okay. Thanks, Minister. You've kind of touched on my next question already, talking about how, you know, I've had some communities in my constituency that expressed concerns regarding the effects of these on already struggling rural businesses and communities. How can the ministry ensure that these commercial safety rest areas will not have negative impacts on rural businesses and rural communities?

Mr. McIver: Well, hopefully by providing the basic services that are needed and in most cases not overdeveloping them. I guess we don't want to put shopping malls on the side of a highway, but a hamburger stand or a quick-service restaurant, a convenience store, a gas station, which might contain a convenience store, that kind of stuff: I would say we're going to try to make that a minimum. I appreciate that if you're in the small town next door and you run a hamburger stand, that might offend you. On the other hand, we can't have the person with the 55-foot trailer go through your drive-through out there.

Hon. member, it's probably not perfect, but we're trying to bridge those gaps. Where we get advice from MLAs or from municipalities, we will try to listen and make the adjustments we can, keeping in mind that the industry still says they need those basic services: a bite, a bathroom, a gas station, and a convenience store for personal needs, that different people also might need.

Mr. Loewen: Thank you very much, Minister. I appreciate that, obviously, that consultation going forward will be very important, and I appreciate your remarks.

The Chair: I'm sorry to interrupt, members.

We'll now move on to the opposition for five minutes and combine with the minister for a total of 10. Go ahead, Mr. Dach.

Mr. Dach: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Continuing on, Mr. Minister, I had some discussions with industry members in the construction industry, highway in particular, road builders, and one of the messages I got from that was that, given that we have a highway system that basically is a \$70 billion asset, their message was that they are seeing it managed on a quarterly basis, which is really not the way you should handle such a large investment.

I've been told that Treasury Board directives bind or allow Transportation to tender up to 75 per cent of the anticipated budget based on the third quarter. They were looking for more flexibility so that they can tender beyond the current year. Is that something that you're having discussions with Treasury Board about so that the contractors can tender beyond the current year and have a greater amount of stability and predictability in what the contracts that might be available to them are so that they can decide whether or not they're going to keep an asphalt plant here in Alberta or move it elsewhere if it's not going to be used? These are the types of major infrastructure decisions within their businesses that they have to make, and it's really difficult for them to do so on the short-term directives that Treasury Board has on the tendering process right now.

Mr. McIver: I would say yes, kind of. What I mean by that is we, of course – is it 70 or 75? I'm not arguing with the hon. member. It is 75 per cent. Okay. That's true, and that's part of how we're trying to help with that, with letting the industry know as early as possible what kind of work will be coming up the following year.

More than that, we're also trying to get on a bit more of a regular program. You've probably heard me say in question period and other places, not that you'd follow me around and listen much, that my emphasis as long as I'm here is fixing the current network. I'm trying to get us to a more consistent annual amount of maintenance and repair work so that those contractors that do that for us know, they have it in their minds. They tell me that if we're going to use about 3 million tonnes of asphalt in a year, they can plan ahead based on that. That's sort of what you're saying; not exactly. But what they've told me is that if they can depend on that, they can kind of plan for buying equipment and hiring people and training people and when to resell and when to get new or used equipment for the upcoming years and all that kind of stuff. We're trying to

stay in touch with the industry to meet their needs that way because we don't do our own roadwork; we have it done for us. If we don't have a healthy industry, we're kind of dead in the water for fixing our roads and bridges, so we are truly in regular communication with the industry.

8:50

Mr. Dach: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you, Minister. Let's follow up in further discussions about that issue. I'm glad that you're on to it, and I think there's some more detailed discussion to be had about that process between yourself and Treasury Board and the ongoing construction projects that our industry members want more stability in on an annual basis.

Let me return to MELT for a moment if I might. Everybody is agreed that MELT training is a good initiative. Obviously, that's why you carried it on, carried it forward. But I want to focus and ask for an update on where you're at on MELT. You've touched on this already to a certain extent, but with respect to the following groups – general commercial drivers, for one; busing and school busing, for another; and on the agricultural sector and the extension for farmers – where are we at with respect to those groups? Start with the general commercial drivers and MELT.

Mr. McIver: I would say to you that with the regular commercial drivers – and you heard me give some of this answer before – we're trying to make the training of MELT more accessible and more affordable for them. Government has capped the training for MELT at \$10,000, but that is prohibitive for some people. You know, I guess if you compare it to a college or a university education, it's fairly inexpensive, but people tell me that they don't always have \$10,000 to invest in getting a driver's licence to get a job there. We're trying to make that affordable. We're trying to make it available through online training. We're working with other provinces to see if simulators could be used as part of it. We are working with trying to recognize somebody that's got verifiable years of experience with a class 3 licence, too, for it to count towards some of the hours in a class 1. We're making available just an automatic transmission licence. People that get that wouldn't be qualified to drive a standard on a class 1 unless they took additional qualifications. We're doing all that stuff, and we're trying to make it more affordable. We are also working with other provinces that think that they have pretty good programs and that we think have pretty good programs to see what ideas we could steal from them to bring to Alberta to make the training more affordable, more effective, and get more people in the driver's seat, because I think you might be onto the fact that we actually are going to need more drivers' licences in the future.

Moving on to busing, we're trying to work with bus companies to allow school boards, for example, to do their own in-house training for MELT, classroom style – schools are obviously, probably, pretty good at doing classroom-style training – so that they can get the school bus drivers in place before September comes each year. That's under way.

Now, here's the other thing, too. Other provinces and territories are not moving as fast on the class 2, on the bus drivers, as we are. We're committed to MELT, and we're going to stay with it. We're a little afraid of getting too far ahead of the country in case they decide to go and take a left or right on the way and decide they all want their programs a lot different than ours after we have a huge investment, so we're trying to bring the other provinces and territories along with us.

Mr. Dach: With respect to that point, Mr. Chair, I wish to ask you about your co-ordination with the North American system with

respect to MELT because I know that there's some work in your department to try to ensure that you're co-ordinating with the American system as well and the requirements there.

Mr. McIver: I mean, MELT came to us from the United States. They're the ones that said: your drivers are not going to be able to cross the border into the U.S. unless they have a MELT designation. So we did what we thought was a fairly well-planned-out, two-year transition. Then the U.S. turned around and said: yeah; we're putting it off for a year.

I suppose we could have put it off for a year, but we said no. We're into this thing. We believe it's a higher standard of training. We're not backing away from it, so we're going to work harder on making it more affordable and more accessible for people. We think that's the right thing to do. I think Albertans want better trained drivers of these huge vehicles. We feel good about that, but we kind of feel like we got taken for a bit of a ride by the U.S. demanding it and then backing off themselves. Let's face it. They are our biggest customer, so we need to respect that.

Mr. Dach: Through the chair, Mr. Minister, on the final piece, the agricultural sector and the extension for farmers with respect to MELT, where are we at with that?

Mr. McIver: Well, we have said that we won't extend that any further, that those that were caught in the transition in the previous government have to have their work done by a certain date. If they don't get it done, we're going to try to make it as affordable and accessible as we can to get them trained and in the driver's seat.

We oftentimes get people asking us for a different agricultural licence for class 1 vehicles, but we think that if you're driving the same vehicle at the same speed under the same conditions on the same road, you need to have the same licence. It doesn't make everybody happy, but from the standpoint of safety we think that's a defensible position.

Mr. Dach: I want to get one final point in if I may, Mr. Chair, and that has to do with the 511 system. Of course, that's the information system on Alberta's roads and highways and the conditions, reports that travellers rely upon, either commercially or a private citizen driving, to get up-to-date road and traffic reports and road condition reports on Alberta highways. I'm wondering what performance measures are in place to ensure that that system is operating properly, that it's being utilized effectively, that it's worth while. I have got some concerns about the whole program, that it's actually doing what it's supposed to do, and I was wondering what your analysis is of it.

Mr. McIver: I like it. I use it on a regular basis, so if you're finding shortfalls, I would actually welcome you pointing that out to me, and we will investigate them. I think 511 is very important. It's an interprovincial system, if you will, something with some familiarity if somebody is travelling across the country. To dial 511 or go

online to 511 and get the information: I want that to be true here. I will welcome your input on that.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We will now move to the government caucus for the final three minutes.

Ms Issik: Can I go back and forth?

The Chair: Back and forth? Go ahead.

Ms Issik: Thank you. Mentioned on page 104 of the business plan, the Transportation ministry is investing \$904.9 million for rings roads, new construction, and expansion of provincial highways in '21-22. I'm personally very pleased with the government's commitment to improving roads for my constituents in Calgary, particularly with the expansion of Stoney Trail. Through the chair to the minister, can you please explain to us how this investment will benefit Alberta's economy and also what this investment means for job creation?

Mr. McIver: Well, I think it would make it easier for people in trucks, in particular, to make their way either quickly to the city or quickly through the city if they've got somewhere else to go. That will make that trip more affordable, more cost-effective, more profitable and will encourage people just to do more business here. When it's complete, the Calgary ring road will have over 100 kilometres of free-flow traffic in the Calgary region. The Edmonton Anthony Henday ring road has been, I think, a big boon. It's a real fun combination of helping the business community with their shipping of goods and services, and as well as that, it takes some pressure off commuter traffic. Even though the ring road is built more to accommodate commercial activity and jobs and whatnot, there are many instances where drivers just going to work in their car will find an advantage to using that different route.

The more we can convenience people, I think, the more competitive our economy will be and the more people want to come here with their jobs and businesses to create more economic activity. You never know really where the circle begins and ends, but I do think the more convenient we make it for people to live their lives and be efficient . . .

The Chair: I apologize for the interruption, Minister, but I must advise the committee that the time allotted for consideration of the ministry's estimates has concluded.

I'd like to remind the committee members that we are scheduled to meet next on March 9, 2021, at 9 a.m. – that's tomorrow morning – to consider the estimates of the Ministry of Treasury Board and Finance.

For health reasons please remember to take any drinks and other items with you as you leave.

Thank you, everyone. This meeting is adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 9 p.m.]

