

Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 31st Legislature
Second Session

Standing Committee
on
Resource Stewardship

Ministry of Transportation and Economic Corridors
Consideration of Main Estimates

Wednesday, March 11, 2026
7 p.m.

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Standing Committee on Resource Stewardship

Dyck, Nolan B., Grande Prairie (UC), Chair
Sweet, Heather, Edmonton-Manning (NDP), Deputy Chair

Al-Guneid, Nagwan, Calgary-Glenmore (NDP)
Armstrong-Homeniuk, Jackie, Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville (UC)
Calahoo Stonehouse, Jodi, Edmonton-Rutherford (NDP)
Cyr, Scott J., Bonnyville-Cold Lake-St. Paul (UC)
Ip, Nathan, Edmonton-South West (NDP)
Petrovic, Chelsae, Livingstone-Macleod (UC)
Rowswell, Garth, Vermilion-Lloydminster-Wainwright (UC)
Yao, Tany, Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo (UC)

Also in Attendance

Boparai, Parmeet Singh, Calgary-Falconridge (NDP)
Dach, Lorne, Edmonton-McClung (NDP)

Support Staff

Shannon Dean, KC	Clerk
Trafton Koenig	Law Clerk
Vani Govindarajan	Parliamentary Counsel
Philip Massolin	Clerk Assistant and Executive Director of Parliamentary Services
Nancy Robert	Clerk of *Journals* and Committees
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Rachel McGraw	Research Officer
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Jody Rempel	Committee Clerk
Aaron Roth	Committee Clerk
Rhonda Sorensen	Manager of Corporate Communications
Christina Steenbergen	Supervisor of Communications Services
Amanda LeBlanc	Managing Editor of *Alberta Hansard*

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Standing Committee on Resource Stewardship

Participant

Ministry of Transportation and Economic Corridors
Hon. Devin Dreeshen, Minister

7 p.m. Wednesday, March 11, 2026

[Mr. Dyck in the chair]

Ministry of Transportation and Economic Corridors
Consideration of Main Estimates

The Chair: Well, good evening, everyone. Welcome to the estimates. I want to call this meeting to order and welcome everyone in attendance both here at the table as well as in the gallery. The committee has under consideration the estimates for the Ministry of Transportation and Economic Corridors for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2027.

I would like us to go around the table and do introductions. Minister, when it comes to you, please introduce yourself as well as the officials at the table, and then we will carry on. My name is Nolan Dyck, and I am the MLA for Grande Prairie and chair of this committee. We will begin to my right.

Mr. Cyr: Scott Cyr, MLA for Bonnyville-Cold Lake-St. Paul.

Mrs. Petrovic: Chelsae Petrovic, MLA for Livingstone-Macleod.

Mr. Yao: Tany Yao, Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo.

Mr. Rowswell: Garth Rowswell, Vermilion-Lloydminster-Wainwright.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Jackie Armstrong-Homeniuk, Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville.

Mr. Dreeshen: Devin Dreeshen, Minister of Transportation and Economic Corridors. I have Tom Loo with me as well as Dale Fung, Paul Smith, and Leann Wagner.

Ms Sweet: Good evening. Heather Sweet, MLA for Edmonton-Manning.

Member Boparai: Parmeet Singh Boparai, MLA for Calgary-Falconridge.

Mr. Dach: Good evening. Lorne Dach, MLA for Edmonton-McClung and the shadow minister of Transportation and Economic Corridors.

The Chair: Excellent. Well, thank you, everyone, for the introductions.

I'd like to note there are no substitutions for this meeting. Well done, committee.

A few housekeeping items to address before we turn to the business at hand. Microphones are operated by *Hansard* staff. Committee proceedings are live streamed on the Internet as well as broadcast on Alberta Assembly TV. If we're lucky, we're also on YouTube tonight. The audio- and videostream and transcripts of meetings can be accessed via the Legislative Assembly website. Please set your cellphones and other devices to silent for the duration of the meeting. As per last meeting, this committee: big fines for cellphones going off in the middle of committee now. A fine to your favourite charity if it goes off during the committee meeting.

Speaking rotation and time limits. The main estimates for the Ministry of Transportation and Economic Corridors shall be considered for three hours. Standing Order 59.01 sets out the process for consideration of the main estimates in legislative policy committees. Suborder 59.01(6) sets out the speaking rotation for the meeting. This is available both online and there are hard copies if you would like one, and you can go from there. Blocks of speaking time will be either block time or back and forth, depending on if both the member and the minister agree. Should you have any questions, e-mail the clerk for further clarification.

What I would like to do now: with the agreement of the committee we will stop for five minutes about halfway through for a bathroom break; however, the three-hour clock will continue to run. Does anyone oppose having a break? Perfect. We're going to have a five-minute break about halfway through. I'll call that when I feel like that's needed or when I need it.

Ministry officials who are present may, at the direction of the minister, address the committee. Ministry officials seated in the gallery, if you go up to the mic and the podium, please make sure you introduce yourselves and then comment on the proceedings. For those in the gallery or along the edges, pages are available to deliver notes. That's why we have pages here. Please don't approach the table at all. That is the pages' job, to pass information.

Points of order will be dealt with as we go – but because we're amazing at this, I'm sure there will be none at all – and the clock will continue to run during that time.

Any written materials will be tabled by the minister in the Assembly for the benefit of all members, not just ourselves.

Finally, the committee should have the opportunity to hear both questions and answers without interruption during estimates debate. Debate flows through myself, the chair, at all times, including instances when speaking time is shared between a member and the minister.

Minister, you've got 10 minutes for opening remarks. I look forward to them and being enthralled by every word. You have 10 minutes starting now.

Mr. Dreeshen: Well, thank you very much, Chair and to everyone here tonight. I'm pleased to present the Transportation and Economic Corridors 2026-2027 estimates. I know I already introduced them, but I'll do it again with a little more vigour. Paul Smith, my deputy minister, is beside me right here. Dale Fung is the ADM of the financial services division. Tom Loo, to my extreme left, is the assistant deputy minister of the construction and maintenance division, and Leann Wagner is the chief operating officer and assistant deputy minister of capital planning, grants, and engineering services division. Other senior department officials in the room with me tonight are Mary MacDonald, the ADM of strategic and integrated service division, and Lynn Varty, the ADM of traffic and safety services division. Please don't ask me publicly which one is my favourite because they all are.

Budget 2026 is focused on, obviously, what matters. For Transportation and Economic Corridors that means building for growth, maintaining what matters, and investing in the infrastructure that drives jobs, opportunity, and our economy. Transportation and Economic Corridors, also known as TEC, plays a key role in contributing to Alberta's economic, social, and environmental vitality by providing a safe and efficient transportation system.

Our department's three-year capital plan totals $8.3 billion. Of this, more than $5.1 billion is being invested in projects in rural areas while $1.7 billion and $1.5 billion are being invested in Calgary and the Edmonton regions respectively. Our capital plan includes $2.8 billion over three years for capital investments for the planning, design, and construction of major provincial highway and bridge projects. Approximately 75 per cent of this investment is for existing or planned economic corridors.

Major projects in the province include nearly $208 million over three years to improve safety, provide better access and egress, and reduce congestion, including the following projects where

construction funding has been approved: replacement of highway 33 bridge over the Athabasca River at Fort Assiniboine; the highway 2 interchange at Cardiff Road, just north of Edmonton; highway 58 base paving; and two projects on highway 686, the highway 686 extension between Fort McMurray and Peerless Lake and base paving between highway 88 and Peerless Lake. We are continuing to invest in enhancing our economic corridors across the province, including $431 million over three years to complete projects such as highway 3 twinning between Seven Persons and Medicine Hat and highway 11 twinning between Sylvan Lake and Rocky Mountain House.

The department is also planning to address future needs to address the province's economic corridors. We've allocated $193 million over three years for more than 50 engineering and design projects across the province. Once the design is complete, the project scope is more defined, and the construction cost estimates are more certain, then TEC will be requesting construction funding in future budgets following that.

In Calgary we are continuing to invest in major improvements to Deerfoot Trail, with $265 million allocated over the next two years, when it will be completed in 2027, saving drivers about 900,000 hours of driving time.

Our capital investment also includes $180 million over three years for water management and flood mitigation. Now that the Springbank off-stream reservoir is in operation, starting just last year, to protect communities along the Elbow River from large-scale flood, we continue to advance the Ghost reservoir infrastructure project, which will be designed to help reduce the impact of flood and drought on the Bow River and nearby communities. Nearly $6 million is allocated in 2026-27 to advance engineering, design, and planning for this project for regulatory approval.

In addition to capital investments in new infrastructure, we are continuing our work to preserve and extend the life of provincial roads and bridges. We are dedicating $77 million over three years to support the replacement of low-volume and aging bridges in rural areas all across the province, helping to improve travel and support economic development.

Budget '26 includes an increase of $234 million in funding compared to Budget '25 for capital maintenance and renewal, or CMR. A total of $2 billion is being allocated over the next three years for CMR to rehabilitate key highways. Investing in paving rehabilitation can extend the lifespan of highways by about 20 years if done properly. Increasing this investment in maintaining our existing infrastructure demonstrates how we are making responsible choices in Budget '26 to ensure taxpayer dollars are spent wisely.

For highway maintenance, which includes safety-related activities such as snow removal, line painting, and pothole patching, Budget '26 provides $455 million in funding for just this year of '26-27.

The department is investing $36 million in '26-27 on traffic safety services by leading programs that improve traffic safety and reduce serious transportation injuries. The programs include driver training, education testing, compliance for drivers and commercial drivers, driver competency, regulatory compliance, and pre-entry to help new commercial carriers meet National Safety Code requirements.

7:10

The capital plan includes $3.3 billion over three years in capital grants to help municipalities build much-needed local roads, bridges, water and waste-water, and transit infrastructure. A total of $614 million in capital grants will benefit rural communities across the province, including $104 million dedicated to the strategic transportation infrastructure program that allows smaller and rural municipalities to maintain and improve local roads, bridges, resource roads, and community airports.

Budget '26 also includes $442 million in grants to municipalities for new water and waste-water systems. Funding over 10 years of federal Canada housing infrastructure fund, also known as CHIF, is not required in Budget 2026 at this time as negotiations between Alberta and the federal government to finalize this agreement are ongoing.

In other grant funding we are continuing to provide support for light rail transit projects in Edmonton and Calgary. Our total provincial commitment continues at $3 billion over multiple years, of which $1.53 billion is for the Calgary green line LRT, which I'm sure there'll be lots of questions on, and $1.47 billion is for Edmonton LRT projects. The federal government has provided matching funding under the investing in Canada infrastructure program, and Budget '26 also maintains our commitment to supporting Calgary's Blue Line LRT, the northeast extension in Calgary, with $51 million in funding being provided over the next three years. As well, Budget '26 also includes continued support with $3.9 million allocated over three years to the city of Calgary to develop a new transit solution that will connect the Calgary International Airport terminal with the Blue Line extension station.

We are also moving ahead with the first steps towards a passenger rail network for the province based on the findings of Alberta's passenger rail master plan. Budget '26 includes $15 million in operating funding over three years to support this work, and there's more to announce in the coming days. The funding will support engagement with the private sector and industry proponents and partners on their potential role in a future passenger rail network, access feasible options for connections from the Edmonton International Airport to Edmonton's existing LRT network, and support initial planning for the grand central station in downtown Calgary. This work will ensure government has the required information to make decisions on the next steps to advance passenger rail in the province, building on the strong public mass transit systems in both Calgary and Edmonton.

Budget '26 also supports future growth with our continued funding commitment to the city of Calgary to support the Calgary rivers district and events centre, which is also known as the new Saddledome. Budget '26 includes $202 million over three years to complete this project which will help revitalize downtown Calgary.

As well, we are continuing to provide support for local infrastructure capital projects in the Edmonton area with $125 million in capital grant funding over the next three years to complete the Yellowhead Trail improvements, the Terwillegar Drive expansion, and the Ray Gibbon Drive project.

In other parts of Alberta we have committed $48 million in grant funding over three years to support the Airdrie waste-water treatment plant, and in northern Alberta we've allocated $66 million over two years, starting in '27-28, to replace the Smith Bridge that was built in 1945 spanning the Athabasca River in the municipal district of Lesser Slave Lake.

Mr. Chair and to all of my colleagues, together all of our investments in Budget '26 reflect Alberta's fiscal reality while supporting our rapidly growing population and maintaining a safe and efficient transportation network to support our economy and our high quality of life that we all enjoy here in Alberta.

With that, thank you very much for your time, and I'm happy to take any questions.

The Chair: Excellent. Well, thank you, Minister, for your opening remarks.

The next block, or hour, will be for the Official Opposition here. This will be in 10-minute sections if you go block time, Minister,

or back and forth for that. No member can speak for more than 10 minutes at a time without passing it back to either the minister or to a member.

Member Dach, it looks like you're looking to start, potentially. I'll ask the question. Do you want shared time or block time? Minister, I do need some agreement or disagreement on this. Block time or shared time?

Mr. Dach: Thank you, Mr. Chair. The minister and I have had significant history in the past in estimates going back and forth. Of course, he's not a first-time minister, and he's quite capable of doing that. I think we do fulfill the public's desire for more information by going back and forth, so I'm hoping that he will engage with me back and forth once again.

Mr. Dreeshen: I'm your huckleberry.

Mr. Dach: There you go.

The Chair: All right. Well, it looks like back and forth. Member, you have the floor. You have back and forth. Your 60 minutes starts now.

Mr. Dach: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and through you. First of all, I'd like to start with a land acknowledgement. I'd like to acknowledge that we're on Treaty 6 territory, a traditional meeting grounds, gathering place, and travelling route of the Cree, Saulteaux, Blackfoot, Métis, Dene, and Nakota Sioux. We acknowledge all the many First Nations, Métis, and Inuit whose footsteps have marked these lands for centuries.

With that, also, Mr. Chair, I'd like to thank all staff members from the ministry as well as the Legislative Assembly staff for enabling this meeting to take place.

With that, let's get under way back and forth, Minister, and share some knowledge that the public would benefit from over the next three hours. Starting with highway infrastructure and maintenance questions, government estimates page 239, 11 and 11.1, highway rehabilitation, and the business plan on page 170, looking at performance measures and so forth, physical condition of provincial highway surfaces, and the rating of provincial highways chronically being 27 per cent fair and 14 per cent poor. That number hasn't really changed over the years. The questions that I have have a little bit of preamble to them, but I'll ask you to bear with me.

Now, through the chair to the minister, in government estimates, page 239, 11.1, highway rehabilitation projects, you're estimated to spend $417 million in 2026-2027. Industry standards for infrastructure maintenance historically dictate that an investment of 1 to 2 per cent of the current replacement value of the asset must be annually invested to properly maintain the asset. Alberta roadways are currently valued at about $70 billion to $90 billion. Replacement costs therefore of $700 million to $900 million per year should be reinvested in them to maintain the integrity of our roadways. The past five years, Mr. Chair, have shown $400 million to $500 million annual highway rehabilitation program expenditures. That leaves about a $200 million annual infrastructure deficit, which will take years to catch up on, so the ministry is on a trajectory to never catch up.

This chronic annual underfunding and your ministry's underspending of the highway maintenance budget has resulted in a multibillion-dollar infrastructure deficit. The business plan reports that 42 per cent of our highways are rated in fair or poor condition chronically, year after year. It's no different this year. I'm wondering, Minister, through you, Mr. Chair: how much of the $417 million budgeted in '26-27 will remain unspent in this fiscal year and therefore continue to add to our highway infrastructure deficit?

Further, I'd like to ask: as a result of the chronic annual underfunding and ministry underspending of the road rehabilitation budget, the road-building industry has shrunk 50 per cent in the last 15 years, meaning that lots of truckloads and trainloads and shiploads of big iron have been sold to American or offshore buyers because Alberta contractors were not getting the work these machines were bought to do. Good business for Michener-Allen auctioneers of heavy equipment, but terrible news for Alberta road-building contractors and the employees they had to lay off. Now, if one sells a mobile asphalt plant – I'm sure the minister will agree – it takes a very big decision corporatewise to reacquire it. Much of the heavy specialized equipment used to build roads requires highly trained operators, who are very difficult to replace once they leave the province for more employment certainty and longevity in other jurisdictions, so that may repeat.

As a result of the underfunding and ministry underspending year after year, the industry has shrunk 50 per cent in the last 15 years. That's the road-building industry in Alberta. Even if the ministry decided to spend all of its annual budget allocations for provincial highway rehabilitation, the diminished equipment and trained manpower capacity of Alberta road-building contractors caused by this government's chronic underspending in the previous years makes it impossible to catch up. That's why Albertans are stuck with 42 per cent of our highways in fair or poor condition year after year.

The end result is that we'll have compounding critical failures of our highway infrastructure that our children and great-grandchildren will have to pay for. "Why?" is my question, Mr. Chair. Why is the minister unable to convince his cabinet colleagues not to saddle our grandchildren with billions of dollars of roadway infrastructure deficit? Why has the minister failed for seven years to convince his cabinet colleagues, the Finance minister, and the Premier to supply his ministry with the funding required to properly maintain our roadway system?

7:20

Mr. Dreeshen: Thank you, Mr. Chair. There are a lot of questions in there to unpack. I think I'll start with the seven-year question on capital maintenance and renewal. I am happy to report that the capital maintenance and renewal program in Budget '26, if it is passed – and, hopefully, I can convince the member tonight to vote in favour of the budget in the Legislature. The $2 billion over three years: that number is actually the highest in the last decade. When you look at when his government was in power, the last seven years of our government in power, this capital maintenance and renewal budget is the largest it's ever been in the province of Alberta. So I think that the doom and gloom the member was trying to articulate in his question might be a little askew from reality.

If you don't take my word for it, Mr. Chair, I'll read a quote from Ron Glen. He is the CEO for the Alberta Roadbuilders & Heavy Construction Association, which is made up of roadbuilders and heavy construction companies across the province. He said, "Budget 2026 recognizes additional resources for highway rehabilitation and construction programs [that] are necessary to address the needs of [the] aging infrastructure" assets that we have here in Alberta. I think that not only are we at the highest point for capital maintenance and renewal in the last decade; we have positive industry quotes saying that this budget goes a long way in addressing the infrastructure and the aging infrastructure we have here in the province. That, to me, is a good validation of industry as well as a historic commitment to capital maintenance and renewal.

I would also mention that the 64,000 lane kilometres that we have here in Alberta and the 5,000 bridges is unprecedented in Canada. We have the most amount of road networks than in any other province, and maintaining those assets is expensive. It does take a lot of work. I'd actually commend and thank all the roadbuilders and the highway maintenance contractors that maintain this very expensive but very important infrastructure all across this province and communities all over to make sure that we all can enjoy them and get home safely.

It is a large amount, $2 billion, but it is a historic investment in the capital maintenance and renewal in this budget. Again, I hope I can convince the member to vote for that in Budget '26 in the Legislature.

Mr. Dach: Thank you, Minister. We'll continue on, as we may or may not have agreement on the position of the Alberta Roadbuilders & Heavy Construction Association. Much of the advocacy that they've been making recently happens to revolve around the infrastructure deficit caused by the chronic underfunding and underspending, and you can find that in their own documents, so I encourage you to do so.

I wanted to continue on in this vein and ask about traffic safety programs, which you'll find references to on page 171 of the business plan, funding for traffic safety programs. It's been slashed by $21.9 million. From $58.3 million to $36.4 million is a pretty drastic, 38 per cent, cut in traffic safety programs. Through the chair, Minister, further decreases of $2 million are projected for the next two years as well.

What has the ministry decided to sacrifice in terms of traffic safety to satisfy the Finance minister's needs for cash? Like, what's being cut as a result of this pretty drastic cut to the traffic safety budget? What's being replaced? How is it being replaced, if at all, and how are those measures being funded? People get pretty worried when the government decides that traffic safety is a dispensable priority, so what do you say to members of the public, Minister, who are concerned that traffic safety is a depleting priority of this ministry and your government? What are the expectations in terms of sort of backfilling this lack of public safety dollars that is now evident in your budget?

Mr. Dreeshen: As transportation minister, obviously, traffic safety is the number one priority. We want to make sure that every Albertan can move around a provincial road network and get home at the end of the day. Obviously, traffic safety is very important, but something that is unique to us in Alberta are the partnerships that we have to have with municipalities. Something that Budget '26 has is a $13 million fund that actually works with municipalities when it comes to intersection safety improvements and engineering dollars to make sure that if there is a chronic problem area even within a municipality, the province will be able to have infrastructure dollars going to that municipality to help redesign an unsafe intersection or an unsafe roadway.

The physical alignment and change to some of these unsafe areas is the best way to make sure that we can improve traffic safety on our roads. We obviously do that on our provincial road networks, look at problem areas. If there are high collisions or high accidents, we want to make sure that we can improve our provincial highway network. A lot of that does go through our capital maintenance and renewal as well as our highway widening and twinning programs to make sure that those areas are safe, but there is a dedicated . . .

Mr. Dach: May I ask . . .

Mr. Dreeshen: Sorry.

Mr. Dach: You said that it's the best way. How did you determine that that's the best way to maintain safety rather than the funding that you had in place? Now it's being devolved into a situation where you're looking at problems as they occur and then addressing them with each municipality. I mean, is that a cheaper way of doing it? Is that the only reason you did? What metrics are you using to determine that's the best way of funding it?

Mr. Dreeshen: Right. Again, our provincial highways: we look at problem areas that have high accident rates that we know have to have improvements. As I was mentioning, whether it's the highway widening and twinning program or just capital maintenance, if we know that there is an unsafe curve that needs to be changed or widened, but also with intersections within municipalities, so that is on the municipal side, we listen to municipalities when they can prioritize those unsafe intersections and then, obviously, provide this funding from the provincial government to redesign and re-engineer those intersections that the municipalities have come to us to say that they are problem areas that need that physical improvement to make sure the intersection is better. That's anything from a left-turn lane to getting rid of an obstruction to widening certain lanes to lights. There are a variety of different answers that can come, depending on the intersection and the problems that they may be having.

Mr. Dach: Does that mean that the municipalities are going to have to enter into an increasing number of shared-cost arrangements that will increase their cost to improve an intersection? For example, I'm thinking about highway 16A and 231st Street. You just mentioned left-turning lanes. If one is to go and commute west of Edmonton on highway 16A, to turn left you'll see at that intersection that the left-turning lane on the shoulder is full and then it goes on to the shoulder of the road for a long, long ways, and it's extremely dangerous. It's like Russian roulette because people are waiting to turn left at that intersection. It's been a complaint of people for a long time now, and I don't know why it's not on the provincial construction program this year.

That intersection is in the constituency of Edmonton-West Henday. Kudos to the MLA for Edmonton-West Henday for ensuring that I brought this up at estimates today. He gets complaints all the time, and I've witnessed it myself that that intersection is absolutely dangerous. Intersections such as range road 20 further along on highway 16: the government has actually committed money to improve that intersection. I don't know why this highway 231 is not on a provincial construction program right now because it is noted by constituents in the Parkland county region and anybody who's commuting from west of Edmonton to the extreme northwest of Edmonton. It's dangerous.

The ask, of course, of constituents is that this new policy change where you're looking at having municipalities bring forward projects that are of concern to them for funding – this is one of them. Would this fall under something that would be funded immediately? It's certainly not under the provincial construction program radar right now, and I'm sure the minister is aware of this particular intersection. So let's focus on 231 and 16A at the moment, okay?

7:30

Mr. Dreeshen: Sure. Thank you very much. The funding for 16A is actually in the Budget 2026 capital plan. What they're looking at is a set of lights there to make sure that intersection is a lot safer. You're absolutely right. That was one of the problematic areas on our provincial highway network. Again, working with the community around there to know what design would make that safer, and in this case lights were the best way going forward.

Like I said, that's not a municipal grant. That wouldn't fall under the $13 million that I was talking about for municipalities to be able to apply for a grant. Because 16A is on our provincial highway network, that's just something that's straight up. Yes, we would talk with the municipality, but we want to be able to fund directly, and the budget for a set of lights at that intersection on 16A is part of our provincial budget and Budget '26.

Mr. Dach: All right. Now, that's a four-way roadway. I'm not knowledgeable enough; perhaps you can get one of the staff members to help. That $13 million is not going to go very far for very many projects. It may cost that much to put lights at that intersection. How much would it cost to put lights in at 231st Street to make that intersection safer?

Mr. Dreeshen: Again, maybe Tom could go into a little more detail on what a set of lights costs these days. When it comes to the $13 million, that is for engineering dollars for municipalities. It is the design work that they would have, that the province would help to be able to fund. That is something that we thought it was just a way that we could partner with, again, municipally owned infrastructure and those grants there.

Mr. Dach: What happened to actual engineering and construction funding for those lights to actually complete the project? Is there any provincial funding that could be anticipated there, or are the municipalities kind of on their own?

Mr. Dreeshen: If we're talking about the 16A . . .

Mr. Dach: Yeah, 16A and 231.

Mr. Dreeshen: . . . it's in the ballpark of about $3 million to improve that intersection, which is in the budget if the budget is passed.

Mr. Dach: All right. Well, that's good to hear because it's certainly a dangerous intersection, and we wanted to make sure that we had you on the record today talking about it because it's a very big concern to people who are driving that route and making that left-hand turn.

Mr. Dreeshen: Well, I would hope that you would vote in favour of the budget, then, to get that intersection improved.

Mr. Dach: Well, I'll tell you what. We'll look at the whole picture and make a decision, all right? There are lots of details to go over yet.

Let's continue on, though. I did speak about traffic safety, and I wanted to continue on in that vein. One other example. You spoke about the $13 million, and you related to me that it was engineering money that you were having available in that $13 million. Last year in estimates we spoke about emergency funding, a contingency fund for emergency roadway repairs, and we spoke about the Rainbow Lake washout that happened in June, the spring of the year, and then took until December to complete. In the meantime one lane and a very desolate piece of highway around Rainbow Lake was washed out, and there was an automated light at either end of the washout where one lane of traffic could move back and forth. It took six months for that to be repaired, but it only took one week of actual work to repair that washout.

My question last year to you, and then I guess to you now again, regarding the $13 million: is that part of the contingency fund that could be used for urgent, immediate repair to damaged roadways?

Mr. Dreeshen: The $13 million, again, is a grant that would go out to municipalities for engineering. When it comes to actual construction dollars, that's a separate line item that would have to go towards any project for construction dollars. The $13 million is just dedicated for engineering projects.

Mr. Dach: Okay, so you've made no movement towards creating a contingency fund that could be accessed for emergency road repairs to avoid waiting six months to get one week's work done to open up a critical one-way highway?

Mr. Dreeshen: It's something that, again, depending on the project and the municipality of how we can partner with them to make sure that we can get – whether it's STIP funding, for example. That is something that a municipality – and I know lots of these members are quite familiar with STIP. That's strategic transportation priorities, where you can actually have a municipal road, again, not part of our provincial highway network at the 64,000 lane kilometres and the 5,000 bridges, through STIP. It's a granting program that actually goes towards the construction dollars of any municipal project that gets applied. That deadline is November 30 for the year, and then coming out not during this budget cycle, not right now. Those grants come out in, I believe, May or June of this year. So STIP, which will have construction dollars for it: those will be finalized in any municipality that's put in any other STIP grants. They will know whether they received provincial grant dollars for construction or they did not receive provincial grant dollars through STIP.

Mr. Dach: Well, thank you for clarifying, Minister.

Just one supplemental to speak about the cut in traffic safety programs once again. We're seeing very large increases in speeding incidents, with increases in excessive speeding being the primary concern expressed even by police associations in the province. Given that the ministry has cut 38 per cent from the traffic safety program's budget, has the ministry decided to specifically allocate funding immediately to address excessive speeding? Will the ministry create a significant public awareness campaign about it? If so, where will the money come from since you're cutting the traffic safety programs by 38 per cent? Are you collecting data to show exactly what demographic is most responsible for excessive speeding on Alberta roadways?

Mr. Dreeshen: Not in Budget '26, but in Budget '25 we did have an extensive public-facing antispeed campaign that went out that was on digital billboards, you name it, being able to highlight that speeding, obviously, is dangerous and that we need . . .

Mr. Dach: You don't have any money left to do it this year, I guess?

Mr. Dreeshen: Sorry. If I could, Mr. Chair. We wanted to make sure that the public knew that, obviously, speeding is dangerous and really wanted to target speeders that are going excessive amounts of speed over the speed limits. That was a campaign that I think was successful, going out and being able to target those excessive speeders. At the end of the day, the most important and most effective way to curb speeding behaviour in the province is physical enforcement. That's why we've been working with municipal police forces, the RCMP, the sheriffs to make sure that they're out on roads where they know there are chronic problems of speeding to really curb the behaviour of speeders.

A great example – I'm not sure if you travel on the ring road too extensively, but I know that the Member for Edmonton-Manning: her riding is right on the ring road, and I wouldn't imply that she speeds on the ring road. Working with the Edmonton Police Service, they actually increased their enforcement on the ring road, doing about 300 tickets a month, up to a thousand. They saw that that amount of

enforcement on the Edmonton ring roads did a really good job of curbing the type of excessive speeders that people saw on the ring roads.

That is something that is really encouraging to see, something we have yet to see happen down in Calgary. The last numbers I saw were about 200 tickets a month that they were offering even though there are more people driving around the Calgary Ring Road than Edmonton and speeding has been identified as an issue there.

I think that physical enforcement and working with law enforcement is obviously the most important way of being able to curb speeding and especially excessive speeding in Alberta.

Mr. Dach: All right. On that vein, we can speak about your pet project, photoradar, for a moment here because, of course, on page 169 of the business plan $12 million is allocated in 2026-27 and 2027-28 for the traffic safety fund in lieu of revenue lost by municipalities from photoradar fines. What's the lost revenue for municipalities from photoradar versus the amount allocated in a safety fund? My guess is that they received a whole lot more in photoradar fines than they're getting from you in the traffic safety fund of $12 million. What traffic safety measures are being lost as a result of this drop in funding?

Mr. Dreeshen: Firstly, I would say that it's a bit of a give-and-take in Budget '26. There is an increase in ticket fines in Budget '26 to obviously increase not just provincial revenue but the municipal share of the ticket revenue going forward, again if Budget '26 is passed, on photoradar. Obviously, the government's stance is to make sure that photoradar is used in the most appropriate areas – and that's in a school, construction, or playground zone – but not to be used in fishing holes or areas where it is clearly identified as an area where you could have speeders that are going down a hill or having a surprise-type of very safe intersection yet is a high cash cow revenue generation area. That is something that this government wanted to make sure that there was confidence in the use of photoradar in Alberta. The use of photoradar in school, construction, playground zones is something that we've received overwhelming support from Albertans.

I think that it is interesting to note, too, that we also have an exemption process as well. Municipalities that choose to use photoradar can actually apply for an exemption to the school, construction, playground zoning, and they can actually have photoradar in other areas as well. The city of Calgary has actually applied for three or four, I believe, exemptions that have been requested already. That's photoradar, and like I mentioned before, physical enforcement is and will always be the strongest way to deter any speeders in any jurisdiction.

7:40

Mr. Dach: Thank you. Through the chair, Minister, physical enforcement is also a much more dangerous way of enforcement. Of course, police officers will attest that one of the most dangerous things you can do is to jump in front of a speeding car to pull it over.

I didn't get a full answer from you about the question I had with respect to the amount of money that the municipalities will have lost because of the reduction in photoradar monies and the replacement by the traffic safety allotment of $13 million. You didn't answer that question. The public would like to know, and I know that the Rural Municipalities association sure feels the pain of this loss, so let's put it on the record, Minister. What is the number? How much money have municipalities lost?

Mr. Cyr: Point of order. I'd like to know exactly where this fits, 23(b). I'd like to understand exactly where he sees in the business plan, the budget, or strategic plan that finding out where are municipalities and estimating what they're doing inside of their municipalities are involved with a specific estimate.

Thank you.

Mr. Dach: Thank you, Mr. Chair. In my preamble to my question I cited the reference to the budget documents, page 169 of the business plan, where I said that $12 million is allocated for the traffic safety fund in lieu of revenue lost by municipalities from radar fines, so I'm right on target. I don't understand why the member is upset.

The Chair: Appreciate that, members.

This is a tricky one. I think there's a question there. Maybe, Member, if you can be a little bit more direct in referencing. I recognize that both you mentioned municipalities and the budget. I believe the line item mentions municipalities, but if we can keep that a little tighter to the budget here instead of speculating on municipal budgets, that would be great. I'm not going to call it a point of order this time, but I know you can ask that question potentially in a different way.

Mr. Dach: Sure. Let's move on, then. Thank you, Mr. Chair. Through you, we'll continue on to another topic which me and the minister have spoken about in years past a few times. Now it seems to be raising its head and getting more legitimacy because of the city of Edmonton reconsidering their anti-icing measures; in other words, looking at anti-icing solutions used on Alberta roadways to prevent icing of roadways before it actually happens. Of course, we know that we are susceptible to pretty difficult icing on our highways in winter conditions. I notice in the budget that if you're looking at the procurement and the business plan in regard to winter maintenance, on line 4.3 on page 240 of the estimates, Mr. Chair, the acquisition of salt, sand, and gravel is mentioned.

No mention, though, of saline brine solutions to prevent road icing in the first place. It is not included in the list of materials. I know in the past, Minister, you've been sort of dismissive of the use of saline solution sprayed on roadways to prevent icing. I know in the light of the city of Edmonton reconsidering this – and there is actually a motion before council upcoming that they do reconsider their policy, which was lost in a 7 to 6 vote a few years back, not to use sodium chloride. It did, interestingly enough, not prohibit the use of calcium chloride, but none of the solution was used by the city on their roadways. I have heard and I wish the minister would confirm if the ministry is now reconsidering their policy on the use of saline solutions, whether it be calcium chloride or sodium chloride, with proprietary additives by two companies that I know of in Alberta that do it, and making use of a huge reservoir of the brine solution that's up around Athabasca and local companies to keep Alberta roads safe.

As I said before, we can keep Alberta rat free. Why not keep our roads ice free and use that as a slogan to keep attracting people to Alberta, Minister?

Mr. Dreeshen: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I know there was a point of order called on the member's previous question, but I would just like to reference, even though it is in the Justice estimates, going forward the fine increase that, again, Budget '26 would have. It is in Justice's purview over ours, but the fine increases that I had mentioned – again, these are projections because people actually haven't sped yet in 2026 and the fines aren't in place. The projection that we have is about a 23 per cent increase in fine revenue to municipalities. That's something that's about $75 million to municipalities just with the increase in fines.

Again, photoradar, as I've said numerous times especially in public, should never be about revenue generating. You should not

be balancing a budget and you should not be setting a budget based on photoradar revenue and/or ticket revenues. If something is important, you should make sure that you balance your budgets and you allocate appropriate funds for those types of initiatives, to answer your question, even though it's in Justice's estimates. The Member for Bonnyville-Cold Lake-St. Paul I think was appropriate and the chair did a good job of calling a point of order on something that's outside of our purview when it comes to revenue projections for municipalities, but just so the member is aware, that's where that projection lies.

When it comes to winter maintenance, it is an art and a science to make sure that certain products work at certain times and certain temperatures, whether it's saline that can work at certain temperatures. I think minus 12 is the magic number of when those types of applications are effective or not. I get lots of calls in my office about even sand grittiness. Some people think we put gravel on the roads during the winter. We don't; it's sand, but there is a coarseness issue for that in that, obviously, during winter storms the wind blows. If it's too light and too fine, it does just blow straight off the road once it is put down, so having some weight to it is obviously important for extra grip on the roads to make sure they're safer.

It is an art and a science with our snowplow and our highway maintenance operators to make sure that they can best maintain our roads in the winter to make sure that everybody can drive safely on them.

Mr. Dach: All right. Through the chair once again, Minister, I am hoping that given the city's probable revisiting of the policy of using brine solution on their roadways soon and also given that on ring roads around Edmonton and Calgary some contractors use brine solutions already and many municipalities and counties in this province use brine solutions as a preventative measure to prevent ice from forming, would the minister commit to further investigating and informing himself about the effectiveness of brine solutions on Alberta highways where they are being used right now? I think there has been new information, Minister, which would refute what Mr. Loo has been saying about the effectiveness at a lower temperature. I'm hoping that there will be an open-mindedness to considering this.

We get snowfalls every year on highway 2 and other places which could potentially have been stopped from forming ice on a road had this preventative solution been applied. Why not have a pilot program that really definitively looks at Alberta as a good candidate for using brine solutions to prevent ice from forming on roadways and have an open mind about it? I believe the evidence is that it would be very, very effective.

I think over time, Minister, the data has changed, and it deserves a relook. There's evidence right here. We've got municipalities using it right now, so let's take a look at that data and find out what their experiences are.

Mr. Dreeshen: Well, like, I can commit to you that we will have an open mind when it comes to different technologies. New technologies come all the time, and working with municipalities to see what works in their applications is something we can definitely look at. Obviously, highway 2 is different than municipal streets, so there are some different changes there when it comes to winter maintenance. I have heard, and I've driven on Edmonton roads during the winter. Sometimes they're not the greatest. We've actually had lots of calls into our office saying: why is the Edmonton ring road plowed and the Edmonton city streets are not plowed? I do think there are maybe lessons learned from the provincial side and also municipal side when it comes to improving winter highway and winter road maintenance.

7:50

Mr. Dach: All right. Let's move on to another topic, Mr. Chair, and that is involving a roadway that used to be my commuter highway. I had an acreage property in Parkland county for a few years, and I commuted from the west end there using highway 628. Of course, there was an announcement between the city of Edmonton, Enoch Cree First Nation, and the province of a shared-cost build between 215th Street and 231st Street in Edmonton, with that stretch planned to become a four-lane divided section of highway. The 2026 provincial construction program indicates that highway 628 between range road 274, the western boundary of Spruce Grove, to the Edmonton corporate limits will have grade-based paving and reconstruction realignment design work done to improve connections between communities, a.k.a. Edmonton and Spruce Grove.

I'm wondering, Minister, if this design work that's now contemplated in the provincial construction program contemplates that the new road, the new 628, will be constructed as a four-lane divided highway all the way from 231st Street to range road 274. In other words, will it dovetail with the four-lane divided highway that the three-party agreement has announced that it will be up to 231st Street? Will the province's design work contemplate making sure that the extension of 628 beyond 231st Street all the way to range road 274 and the western extremity of Spruce Grove actually be a four-lane divided highway, or are we looking at two lanes and then down the road, many years from now, add additional lanes?

That is a major vital economic corridor, as the minister will know, which has been struggling to develop even without the roadway improvements. That roadbed is terrible. I've driven it for years. It's soft, and it's probably going to need major excavations to actually rebuild the roadbed to actually build out that road no matter how many lanes you put into it. I mean, it's been seven years that you've been in government, and this project, in my view, should have been expedited a long time ago. Now we're just in, you know, the planning and design stage of it. It's going to be another, like, seven to 10 years before it actually gets constructed. Perhaps you could enlighten us on the timelines for that.

It will also take pressure off 16 and 16A commuter traffic between Spruce Grove and Stony Plain. One of the questions I have, though, is, first of all: why did it take so long? Like, what obstacles prevented your ministry from getting this project expedited? I mean, I thought it should have been built already or darn near finished. Also, apart from the obstacles you may have faced in getting it under way, why is it stopping at range road 274, the western extremity of Spruce Grove? Why is it not going all the way to Stony Plain, the sister town that provides a lot of commuter traffic into Edmonton? I don't understand why it is stopping at the western extremity of 274.

I'll let you comment on those items about 628 improvement, which is a vital project.

Mr. Dreeshen: Thank you very much. I agree with you on this. Highway 628 is a very important artery going into the city of Edmonton. That's why back in 2024 we actually hired ISL engineering to do the engineering work and planning and that design work. It is under way. I know that if you have land out there and property out there, you still drive it. I can reassure you that we are working with the engineering firm to make sure that the design work is there and that it is a very important project.

When it comes to just the priorities after something is consulted, the construction dollars, obviously, get spread out once something is designed. Once that design work is completed and finished, the hope would be that we can get the construction dollars. On the west side of Edmonton, as you pointed out, is extreme amounts of

growth: the Terwillegar project that the province is chipping in for the city of Edmonton to make sure that Terwillegar Drive is getting extended out to the west side of Edmonton as well as I think it was $120 million for the widening of the ring road going around Edmonton on the west side, something that wasn't planned for a decade to come but was sped up due to the huge population growth in that area of the city and on the outskirts of the ring road. There have been a tremendous amount of Edmonton area projects and infrastructure dollars, but as I mentioned, we have to make sure the engineering dollars are committed and that the engineering gets completed and then, obviously, construction follows afterwards. But you are right that 628 is an important project.

Mr. Dach: All right. Thanks, Minister, through the chair once again.

One other highway construction project that seems to be delayed and delayed and delayed but there seems to be some money each year in the budget for some kind of planning on it but now appears as though it might actually be getting some action but it's piecemeal is a road that I drive whenever I can because it is quite scenic but it's also fairly dangerous, the curving highway 1A between, let's say, Canmore and Cochrane. That apparently has got some money dedicated to pieces of it, but I don't quite understand exactly what's going on.

In the capital fiscal plan '26-29, Mr. Chair, roads and bridges, page 106 and 114, includes $65 million for highway 1A upgrades near the Stoney First Nation for road widening and the Cochrane interchange with highway 22, but I don't understand exactly how that is divided up. What exactly is the $65 million intended to be spent on? Can we expect highway 1A to be upgraded and widened from Exshaw to Cochrane? Like, how are you prioritizing the different projects on 1A? It ultimately, I believe, will end up being a total reconstruction of highway 1A, because I think it's needed. Is it not the intent to build or rebuild 1A over time? What's the long-term plan for highway 1A between Exshaw and Canmore and then Canmore to Cochrane?

Mr. Dreeshen: Again you've identified another really important highway project and something that we as a provincial government want to prioritize. We have been working with the Stoney Nakoda First Nation in that area to make sure that this project is prioritized and gets built. The issue that we are having as well as the Stoney Nakoda First Nation is with the federal government.

I know you have a provincial NDP Party and a federal NDP Party at the same entity. I would ask that you would call upon your federal NDP colleagues to help us work with the government of Canada to be able to prioritize this project because it takes a federal order in council to be able to transfer the land for highway 1A. I do know, just as an anecdote, that the federal NDP have gone from seven to six to five MPs. It's almost like the Harper government when they reduced the GST from 7 to 6 to 5 per cent, but for the NDP that's just your shrinking caucus federally. But the fact that you do have members in Ottawa: it would be good if the NDP could help that cause. Maybe you could convince some of your federal MPs to advocate for the federal government to move on that land transfer.

Mr. Dach: We're always ready to help benefit Albertans and Canadians, Minister.

Let's continue on. One other highway construction project, through the chair, Minister: I think we talked about 231st Street and highway 16A, and we're looking at redoing that intersection possibly with lights, but let's move on to something fun; that is, LRT connections to the Calgary and Edmonton airports planning. In the reference to the business plan, page 167, outcome 1, key objectives item 1.5, facilitate growth and development of Alberta's airports, particularly the initiatives supporting key objectives, you have, I think, mentioned $1.3 billion in provincial funding and $1.1 billion in federal funding. I'm wondering how much of that funding is earmarked for the Blue Line extension or expansion up to 88th Avenue and beyond to the north?

Mr. Dreeshen: Specifically in Calgary for the Blue Line is $51 million.

It is a commitment, obviously, by this provincial government to help both Edmonton and Calgary extend their LRT network. The Capital Line south in Edmonton, actually I think it was just last year, went out to announcement with the Edmonton city councillor in that area to extend the Capital Line in Edmonton closer to the airport. Obviously, the Blue Line, when it finally ties in down in Calgary to the airport, is very important. With the passenger rail master plan and the work that we did of consulting with municipalities and Albertans on what a passenger rail network in Alberta could provide them, tying in to both Edmonton and Calgary's international airport was a key priority.

I think that the LRT networks tying in to the airports, obviously, is a natural conduit for any potential future passenger rail line to tie in to the airports as well as to both Edmonton and Calgary's LRT networks. So it is a priority. We have put in hundreds of millions of dollars of investment into connecting into the airports on both sides of highway 2, both Edmonton and Calgary. I think you'll be quite surprised to see what the passenger rail master plan looks like and how private-sector rail proponents can be able to tie in both of Alberta's two largest cities.

8:00

Mr. Dach: Could you expand on the hundreds of millions of dollars you just mentioned that have gone into the development of airport-to-downtown connectors or LRTs, because I am not sure where that investment is actually visible now for Calgary and/or Edmonton. The line, the Calgary connector line, which would join up with the extension of the Blue Line, is a figment of people's imagination right now. It's still years away. You just mentioned that there is some planning with getting the Capital Line extended closer to the airport, but there is still no real decision made yet as to how rail connection will be made from Edmonton to the Edmonton International Airport. There are still questions about whether it will be heavy rail using CP right of way and having it cross highway 2, or whether it will be LRT using an extension to the south of the Capital Line.

I'm not quite sure where you spent these hundreds of millions of dollars to extend LRTs to our major cities' airports. Could you please give us some detail on that and let us know when you spent those hundreds of millions of dollars and what they were spent on?

Mr. Dreeshen: Sure. Capital Line south extension: $365 million just from a provincial portion of extending that closer into Edmonton's International Airport, so extending that line farther south. As I mentioned, $51 million for the Blue Line extension that will eventually, with additional planning dollars, tie in to the Calgary International Airport. The planning for the Calgary International Airport is also really going to be interesting to see: the Blue Line coming in, the design work, as well as any potential passenger rail line coming in to the airport. Calgary is more advanced in getting their LRT connected into the airport, but we want to make sure, and we have been working with both Edmonton and Calgary International Airport to make sure, that any future passenger rail line stations can co-ordinate into their international airports.

Mr. Dach: Understood. But through the chair, Minister, I mean, you just mentioned that we spent hundreds of millions of dollars to

facilitate the airport-to-city LRT connections, yet what you've talked about as far as the investments for going into Edmonton was the extension of the Capital Line south. Well, that's to serve the city of Edmonton. It is not necessarily going to go to the airport. That's sort of serving Edmonton communities already. Then the $51 million in Calgary was an extension of the Blue Line, which is actually the LRT line, which may be going further north. But the actual connecting – like, the Calgary connector and the actual line that will go from south Edmonton to the airports are really not there. They're just sort of an idea right now. This idea that hundreds of millions of dollars have been spent on airport-to-city rail connections is not really accurate, in my view. Those were just dollars that were spent on the transportation lines serving the communities, which is fine.

But I want to know what's going on with the actual planning to get connections made between the airports and the city in both Calgary and Edmonton. As you say, Calgary is further advanced. I think we should be able to move at the same pace and get Edmonton up to speed so that both cities have a connection to their airport as soon as possible, either by LRT or other rail means. I would like to have some light shed on that.

Mr. Dreeshen: Sure. As I mentioned, a key point that we heard in the passenger rail master plan is to make sure that passenger rail connects in to both Edmonton and Calgary's international airports. Obviously, Calgary's airport being closer to its downtown core, the LRT getting that much closer to it, the provincial funding going into both the Blue Line as well as the Capital Line south: that parity is something that we've invested hundreds of millions of dollars into, LRT in both Edmonton and Calgary. The co-ordination that we have with both Edmonton and Calgary and the international airports when it comes to connecting a passenger rail station or an LRT station or a combination of both is something that we want to be able to plan and design. I think there's a lot of excitement from Albertans in how that will look.

The passenger rail master plan: again, I know there are some members that aren't within the highway 2, Edmonton and Calgary corridor, but 80 per cent of the population of Alberta does live within that corridor. I think that's what makes the passenger rail master plan very unique, being able to possibly connect both Edmonton and Calgary and their international airports with a stop in Red Deer. Connecting them via passenger rail is something that I think has captured the imagination of a lot of Albertans. Your point of: will it take lots of planning dollars to get there? Absolutely. It will take a lot of co-ordination with a lot of different municipalities to be able to build and plan out what a passenger rail looks like and how it connects into both the airports.

Mr. Dach: Thank you, Minister. Through the chair once again, before we leave the topic of rail to our airport from Edmonton city itself, has there been discussion that you are aware of about the different modalities it might take? There have been discussions about heavy rail, which is quite commonly the type of rail that connects the city to its airport, versus the LRT extension, which may be the simpler, less expensive route to go. Both options have been discussed for Edmonton in the past. Are both on your radar, or is the LRT extension from the Capital Line south to the airport the target that you have in mind for Edmonton's connection to the airport?

Mr. Dreeshen: LRT projects, obviously, are municipal led. We have been working with both Edmonton and Calgary; Calgary on the Blue Line, Edmonton on the Capital Line south. Edmonton hasn't put forward an official ask for tying the LRT all the way down to the Edmonton International Airport, but, again, as I mentioned, how we tie in the airports to downtown is something that is going to all be revealed in due time when it comes to the passenger rail master plan, whether that could be a possible private passenger rail line going from the airport into downtown to connect to the LRT within Edmonton, or if Edmonton LRT needs to come out to the airport. So there is still lots of planning and design work of which is the best way to go, whether it's stretching the LRT out or having the passenger rail come in.

Mr. Dach: Okay. Well, thank you, Minister, for that. Before we leave the topic altogether, it would be good to know in advance what the minister's and the department's preferences were with respect to whether it goes with heavy rail or the LRT extension because, historically, your government has shown that you are certainly not shy at all about sticking your nose into city plans that have already been established and changing routing and alignment of LRT projects . . .

Mrs. Petrovic: Point of order, Chair.

The Chair: Yeah. Point of order.

Mrs. Petrovic: Just under 23(b), there were a number of things here, but speculation on what the minister wants in terms of this. I think he's just suggested that there's going to be an announcement coming up, and I don't see a line item in the budget asking for the opinion. Also, I found it quite insulting, some of the comments that were used, and I just think that the member opposite should . . .

Mr. Cyr: Standing Order 23(h) and (i).

Mrs. Petrovic: Is it 23(h) and (i)?
. . . potentially be careful with some of the comments that are made in this room.

The Chair: The member.

Mr. Dach: Well, I don't know if sticking his nose in other municipalities' business is insulting language or not. I could perhaps have used the word "interference" instead. That might be a better choice of words in the future, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: I appreciate it. You know, Member, I'll give you a compliment here as we're talking. You've kept it on the rails pretty good over the last . . .

Mr. Dach: No pun intended.

The Chair: Yeah. Exactly. You've kept it going here pretty well. I think that the members do have a few good points here on this point of order. Here's what I would like. Because you've been doing so well, I would love for you to keep – you've been keeping it on the rails pretty good, pun intended this time, so I won't call a point of order, but I do expect continued refrain from maybe utilizing similar language in the future.

Mr. Dach: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I appreciate that leeway. Decorum is my middle name. There we go.

Moving on, Mr. Chair, I wanted to speak about a different topic, and that has to do with Red Deer's water supply.

Mr. Dreeshen: Could I just . . .

Mr. Dach: Sure. Go ahead and finish up what you wanted to say.

Mr. Dreeshen: I appreciate your excitement when it comes to LRTs. I would say that there is more engineering of how they get

tied in, and that's something that, again, we are looking at. The word I would use to describe it is actually "partnership." That's something that we do with the federal government, as a provincial government, with municipalities. It is a partnership when it comes to major mass transit funding, and it's something that we've been proud to support, LRT in both Edmonton and Calgary.

Again, I'd encourage the member that if he likes LRT and he wants to see more LRT in his city, I'd encourage that you vote in favour of Budget '26 when it hits the floor of the Legislature.

8:10

Mr. Dach: All right. Sounds good.

Let's move on and talk about Red Deer water supply, Mr. Chair. Of course, you'll share the concern of people in Red Deer that their water supply is potentially at risk because of the Red Deer River flow being lower than what one would want. Part of your key objectives in the business plan, page 169, outcome 3, key objective 3.3 is to "develop and maintain critical water management infrastructure, such as" reservoirs and "to enhance resilience from current and future hazards." That falls squarely in the purview of your ministry to perhaps go ahead and approve the Ardley reservoir scoping.

The feasibility study that's under way right now is going to be released, I think, end of this month. March 31 it's due to be released. Have you had a preliminary view of those findings in that feasibility study? Could you advise the public about the probability that the proposed Ardley reservoir will be a viable mechanism to safeguard Red Deer's water supply for long-term future growth of Alberta's largest city?

Mr. Dreeshen: Well, I appreciate the question about my own riding. The member talked a lot about priorities in his own backyard, and I appreciate talking about projects in my own personal riding. The Ardley feasibility study is still under way and the feasibility study for it. Just a little bit of geography. When it comes to Red Deer, the Ardley reservoir would be downstream of Red Deer, so obviously Red Deer being able to get its reservoir upstream, looking at the Gleniffer Lake reservoir, which we've actually had significant improvements to in past budgets to reinforce that very important reservoir near Innisfail. Obviously, that's been a huge draw and a very important infrastructure improvement to make sure that the water supply for the city of Red Deer can maintain its current population growth as well as any future growth for the city.

Mr. Dach: Minister, through the chair, I wanted to get this question in because we're going to speak again about your constituency in Red Deer. It's an issue that's quite a hot issue in Red Deer right now. I've been listening to people in public meetings there talking about it. It has to do with roadway alignment; that's highway 2, cutting through the wetlands, the Maskepetoon wetland. I heard explanations, I think from you, Minister, that you would be looking to compensate Red Deer people by giving them wetland somewhere else in lieu of cutting through this current wetland, which actually was rejuvenated once already because highway 2 cut through it.

Now again it is facing depletion because of highway dissection. People in Red Deer – it's a beloved wetland, as you well will know – are really up in arms about the fact that it's going to be dissected again by a highway restructuring. I wonder what you can tell people in Red Deer about the prospects of having that alignment altered so that it doesn't go through the Tamarack fen and the wetland in the northwest portion of Red Deer, and gain some credit for saving a valuable and very treasured wetland.

Mr. Dreeshen: Well, this feels like a local town hall instead of estimates, but, no, that's a very important project, highway 2, and something that I've spoken with the new Red Deer mayor about as well as councillors in Red Deer as well as the entire Red Deer county council.

The highway 2 expansion project that we want to have: the design is under way to make sure exactly where the best fit is for those highway improvements. If you've travelled down to Calgary and you've driven by Red Deer, that is a very unsafe crossing over the Red Deer River. So the design would be moving it farther to the east, meaning two new bridges over the Red Deer River, straightening out highway 2. That would go a long way in improving the safety in that area. In speaking with Red Deer council, about 20 per cent of the traffic in that area is actually Red Deerians that use it as a ring road going around the city of Red Deer. So there is excess traffic along highway 2 because of Red Deer folks using it. Obviously, it's a provincial road; they should be able to use it, but to be able to straighten out highway 2 with two new bridges would move it closer to the east, closer to the city.

The wetland, in addition to the river that it goes over, was actually an old gravel pit back in the day. You are right to say that it has been reclaimed beautifully. If you drive by and you look to the east crossing the Red Deer River, you will see it as a beautiful wetland. But it was a reclaimed, old gravel pit. It does look nice. This is a very important priority project for the department.

The Chair: Excellent. Well, thank you so very much, both Member Dach and also Minister, for that fascinating hour of questions and back and forth.

We are now going to move to government caucus members for the next 20 minutes. This is a time where you can share time with other members, too, as well. No member can speak for more than 10 minutes at a time though. While I understand that's not a problem for any of us, we'll see where that goes.

Minister, I'm assuming you're willing to go back and forth at this point and continue the trend?

Mr. Dreeshen: I defer to my colleagues.

The Chair: Thanks for being our huckleberry as well.

Okay. Member Rowswell, you are up.

Mr. Rowswell: Okay. Thank you very much. I'd like to talk about economic corridor investment. Alberta's prosperity depends on our ability to move goods officially to domestic and international markets. Our farmers, manufacturers, and energy producers rely on strong, reliable transportation corridors to stay competitive. I was pleased to see in the business plan on page 168 performance measure 1(a), that 75 per cent of the capital plan continues to be directed towards economic corridors. You know, our colleague Shane Getson has done a lot of work on economic corridors. If we're allocating 75 per cent to those corridors, they must be identifiable. I don't know if you can give us a thumbnail sketch of the corridors throughout Alberta. If you could expand on the capital investments that strengthen Alberta's long-term economic prosperity, particularly in terms of trade and competitiveness, private-sector covenants, future growth.

I was just up in January on a capital visit with PNWER. There's nothing holding them back to come down to the northern part of Alberta, you know, or go that direction. They're all ready to go. They just need a route defined. There's nothing holding them back. There are partnerships out there that we can work on. If you could just talk about that and then also give us a – you know, you don't need to know every road, just kind of where the major corridors that you're working on are.

Mr. Dreeshen: Well, first, I'd just like to say that I've seen you at PNWER. You have done a great job representing Alberta and

talking about the importance of economic corridors and increasing trade relationships with the Pacific Northwest as well as getting projects built across Canada. So I'd just like to thank you for all the important work that you've done.

There is a laundry list, kind of a thumbnail sketch of important highway projects. A great one close to here in Acheson, in Member Getson's riding, is highway 60 and the CN Rail grade separation. Budget '26 actually has $116 million for the construction of that project. That's obviously a major CN line rail area as well as very heavy traffic, with Acheson and the growing business community outside of Edmonton.

Just to kind of sketch it for folks listening at home as well as to the committee. The Athabasca River bridge 813 replacement project. The Vinca bridge on the other side of Edmonton compared to where Acheson is, is a major important bridge for the Industrial Heartland, where MLA Armstrong-Homeniuk has done lots of advocacy work on. Upgrades to the Calgary Ring Road have been significant. Highway 3 twinning in the southern part – looking at MLA Petrovic – of the province is obviously very important as well. Highway 11 twinning, in my world, in an ideal case to be able to build the Howse Pass essentially into British Columbia, extending out from Rocky Mountain House, would be an incredible expansion of a major economic corridor. Highway 60, as I mentioned before. Highway 63 up to Fort McMurray: there's a twinning project there as well for MLA Yao. I didn't actually have this in order of everybody. I apologize. And 881 as well in the northern part, with passing lanes there.

Chair, I think you might like this one. Highway 40 grade widening is very important as well. It's actually a little south of you at Hinton and Grande Cache, but a very, very important segment. Highway 686 is the grade, base, and paving and extension and hopefully the eventual completion of a new road, new economic corridor over 200 kilometres long, which would extend from Fort McMurray going west towards Peerless, Trout Lake and essentially connecting Grande Prairie and Fort McMurray.

8:20

Opening up the northern part of the province's resources is a huge, big priority project and something I have been very proud of, the work the department has done with the First Nations up there to be consulting with them, talking with them, engaging with them in a meaningful way where they are going out and talking to their communities and are now asking us that everybody is on board. They want to see this project come to fruition. That's been a really exciting project that we have been working on.

Highway 2, again, which we just recently talked about, the Balzac interchange replacement and highway 1, obviously, in the southern part of the province, and range road 33 interchange near Springbank: there is a significant amount of economic corridors. There are tons of economic activity going on across the province, but all these different regions do very important work, and to be able to have a highway network that can safely connect them to getting their products to market is important. That's why we want to make sure that we can do everything we can, not just to make sure people can commute to work safely, but we can make sure that products get to market safely and on time.

Mr. Rowswell: That's great news. That's a lot of work, right? A lot of work, and they all have to go through planning, design, and construction, so it takes time. That's for sure. That's great news for people along those economic corridors. I'm just wondering how you're interconnecting people that aren't along there, and if you could just sort of elaborate on communities that may not be on there: what is the strategy for them relative to feeder lines or that type of thing? If you could just give us some feel for how you view that part of it.

Mr. Dreeshen: I have always thought that a resource revenue map, something the department has actually been working on to show where – especially royalties. Whether it's oil and gas near Fort McMurray or in your world on the east side of the province and in MLA Cyr's world on highway 28, there is tremendous amounts of oil and gas and royalties that obviously feed and subsidize our provincial budget and all the services that we enjoy as Albertans. To make sure that the resources that are out in rural Alberta, that benefit all Albertans, can have a road network that, again, makes it safe as well as being able to transport their goods by road.

I think that wealth that is created out in rural areas and the benefits that all Albertans share is something that I think is the best way to connect people to: what is an economic corridor and why do I care about it? Well, it's because we can make sure that we're safely developing our oil and gas networks as well as forestry and agriculture, that we have the GDP out there and timber dues coming in from forestry, that Albertans can use that revenue to build the schools and hospitals, pay for the doctors and teachers that we need, so that we can all enjoy a high quality life. I think making that connection is something that we can try to do at Transportation and Economic Corridors, but I think it would behoove all of us as MLAs to realize that the wealth that we have here in Alberta comes from rural Alberta, and we need to make sure that we make adequate investments in rural Alberta.

Mr. Rowswell: Well, I was talking earlier to Mr. Loo. I was giving a pat on the back with regard to my constituency. You know, over the last five or six years there's been a lot of work done on bringing those highways up to snuff, and I know there are plans for the other parts of it, so I have been very satisfied in my constituency with regard to the work that's been done for us. I'm glad you're paying attention to all parts of Alberta. Thank you.

The next thing is support transportation infrastructure for Calgary. Calgary is growing. Minister, I'm asking this question on behalf of MLA Peter Singh. Calgarians continue to experience strong population and economic growth, and reliable transportation infrastructure is critical to supporting that momentum. The ministry highlights important investments that support Calgary's development, including transportation infrastructure connected to the Calgary rivers district, which you've spoke a little bit about, and an events centre project, which will help revitalize the downtown core and support new residents, businesses, and visitors.

Through the chair to the Minister. Under the business plan on page 167 I also note that $1.3 billion in provincial funding has been allocated over three years from 2026-2027 through 2028 and then 2029, along with $1.1 billion in federal funding through the investing in Canada infrastructure program. You were talking about that, partnering with all the different levels of government to support major LRT expansion projects, including the Calgary Blue Line LRT extension. In addition, $3.9 million over three years is allocated to support the Calgary airport rail connection, including the airport transit connector linking the Blue Line LRT to Calgary International Airport. Could you expand on how these investments are helping strengthen the transportation connectivity in Calgary while supporting the city's continued growth and economic development?

Mr. Dreeshen: Great question on behalf of MLA Singh and, obviously, the last question about resource royalties and the importance of rural Alberta. But Budget '26 also balances the needs in our major urban centres as well, being Edmonton and Calgary.

You are right. Our budget has $202 million for infrastructure investments in and around the new Calgary rivers district and events centre, the new Saddledome. As an Oilers fan, I'm glad the province is still investing in Calgary. That project is obviously very important to help revitalize downtown Calgary, and it's a great partnership with the city of Calgary to revitalize.

To the passenger rail master plan, engineering work is under way to make sure what that will look like from a rail and mass transit design work, to be able to tie in to that new area and a new revitalization of downtown Calgary. That's obviously very important work.

As was mentioned before with the Blue Line, getting that much closer to the airport in Calgary is very important, $51 million in this budget going towards that extension to be able to tie in and then engineering work with the Calgary International Airport to tie in an LRT station at the airport but also to leave room for a potential future passenger rail station as well.

Obviously, a tremendous amount of investment into Calgary. One of the largest Calgary infrastructure investments we did, and we completed two years ago I guess now, was the west Calgary Ring Road. Finally tying in the ring road all the way around Calgary was huge. There are so many Calgarians benefiting, especially on the west side where that road completed. We get lots of calls saying that hours of their days every week they're getting back. Being able to use Sarcee Trail and to be able to commute around Calgary has just been a godsend to so many people in the Calgary region, so that obviously was a very important project.

Also, hundreds of millions in the Deerfoot expansion in Calgary, over $700 million in new Deerfoot expansion. Now, the final segment being in the southern part of Calgary, the Ivor Strong Bridge, and Anderson, Bow Bottom on Deerfoot, to finally get the extra widened lanes as well as a twin bridge over in the southern part of Calgary and the hope to see that done in 2027. So, you know, a tremendous amount of provincial investment in Calgary.

I've had lots of people say, "Well, the Deerfoot: that's all the city of Calgary project," but it's not. It's hundreds of millions of dollars from the provincial government going to the Deerfoot. The Deerfoot is part of our provincial highway network, and we have made tremendous investments in the Deerfoot that help Calgarians be able to cut down, I think, almost a million hours of driving in rush hour a year that Calgarians collectively will be able to save. Tremendous investments in Calgary and looking forward to additional ones as well.

Mr. Rowswell: Yeah. It is great. You have to always advocate to spend money to do stuff, but there is a reason you spend money, and there is a revenue side to this that you don't get to talk about very much, but I would like to ask you: how would the improved transit connectivity to the Calgary International Airport support tourism, business travel, and Calgary's role as a major economic hub? That's part of the reason, or the reason, I guess, that we're doing this, to help that along.

Mr. Dreeshen: Yeah. Great question. The GDP growth of being able to connect Calgary in a more efficient way is tremendous. You're having people not stuck in rush hour traffic, going bumper to bumper, staring at tail lights, being able to not just move goods around but move people around in an efficient way. So the GDP growth and just the higher quality of life that results from a better transportation network is immense.

8:30

I know, talking to my colleague in tourism, that they look at the possibility of being able to improve just the Calgary connectivity, especially to the airport, as going a long way to improve Alberta's GDP and to be able to grow the economy. It is something that – yes, we do spend a lot of money in Transportation and Economic Corridors. This budget, if passed, is $3.9 billion in spending and investments in our provincial road network and grants to municipalities, but it goes a long way to adding to the new growth and potential growth for the province.

Mr. Rowswell: Okay. Good. Well, thank you.

You did mention Deerfoot Trail upgrades, so I'd like to ask a question relative to that as well. I want to ask this question on behalf of Member Peter Singh again. The government estimates on page 239, line item 9.2 show Deerfoot Trail upgrades estimated at $168 million. Deerfoot Trail is one of Alberta's most vital commuter and trade corridors, serving hundreds of thousands of vehicles daily while connecting major residential, commercial, and industrial areas. Investing in its modernization reflects a clear understanding of its importance to both the urban mobility and the provincial trade flow. Modernizing this corridor will have a ripple effect across the entire region, improving travel times and supporting economic activity. Through the chair to the minister: could you expand on how this investment will enhance safety, reduce congestion – you've mentioned a little bit about that with commuter savings and hours – and improve reliability along this critical corridor?

Mr. Dreeshen: Another great question. The Deerfoot Trail is one of the busiest roads in Alberta. There are 180,000 vehicles every day that travel on Deerfoot Trail. Budget '26, if passed, has $265 million over three years for the next stage of improvements to the Deerfoot. Just breaking that down, that's the widening of the northbound lanes on Deerfoot Trail and improvements to ramps at 64th Ave NE. That was completed back in 2023. In 2024 we improved connection at 11th Street and mainline widening from Beddington Trail to Airport Trail. Then improvements to McKnight Boulevard interchange and mainline widening from Beddington Trail to 32nd, mainline widening from 32nd Ave to Memorial Drive, and 16th Avenue ramp modifications that were completed just last year. So there have been significant projects on Deerfoot that have been completed in the past.

As I mentioned, the southern portion is well under way to be completed in 2027, and Anderson, Bow Bottom, Glenmore tying in as well as Ivor Strong Bridge to be completed in the next year, year and a half. A tremendous amount of investment in the Deerfoot to be able to expand and not just to make lives better for Calgarians but also Albertans that drive up one of the busiest roads in the province.

Mr. Rowswell: Yeah. Well, thank you very much.

Everyone really likes the finished product of a road. They don't like getting there sometimes and all the work that has to be done. On the execution side, given the complexity of upgrading a high-volume route like Deerfoot, how is your department managing procurement and traffic mitigation during construction to ensure the project remains fiscally responsible while minimizing disruption for customers and commercial carriers?

Mr. Dreeshen: First off, I would just like to thank the construction crews, the highway maintenance crews that go out every day, rain or shine, to work in some really tough conditions. As you mentioned, everybody loves the final product. They love to see black pavement. But to be able to get there is, obviously, smoke and dust and causes a big disturbance. The construction crews that do a great job: hats off to them. I think we all owe them a huge debt of gratitude for the important work that they do just to improve our quality of life.

In this specific instance Aecon is the construction contractor that's building the Deerfoot, and the department has really good relationships with Aecon to make sure that as they're building the Deerfoot, we can both collaborate to make sure that we can reduce the number of traffic impacts when it comes to construction. That's not just on Deerfoot and Aecon but with other provincial projects.

We try a lot to make sure that we can minimize the impact of construction as well as making sure that projects are done on time and on budget. I think Albertans do expect us as conservatives to make sure that we can deliver projects on time and on budget and that we respect and use taxpayers' dollars as if it were our own dollars. I think it's something that I take great pride in at all the ribbon cutting and announcements that I do, to acknowledge the work that the department and the construction companies do on these projects and to highlight the work, especially when it's done on time and on budget. A lot of it is collaboration and partnerships, as I mentioned before, and it's something that we'll continue to do to make sure that we can best deliver for Albertans.

Mr. Rowswell: Well, I tell you, every now and then we have meetings down in the McDougall building downtown. I always seem to have to leave about 4 or 4:30 or whatever, and I'm still trying to figure out the best spot on Deerfoot to be on to avoid the backup, right? I always seem to pick the wrong lane, so keep up the good work. Thank you very much.

Mr. Dreeshen: Yeah. Thank you. Really do appreciate it. Thank you very much.

The Chair: Excellent. Well, thank you so very much, Minister, for all the answers and for everyone asking these questions, too, as well.

We're going to take a quick five-minute break. We're going to keep it tight, and we will be coming back here to ask more questions.

[The committee adjourned from 8:36 p.m. to 8:42 p.m.]

The Chair: Okay. That concludes the government members' first block for questions. Now we go to the individual blocks of time. We each will receive 10 minutes. We'll go back and forth. Going forward, no member is able to speak more than five minutes at a time. If you go over that, then it just has to go back to the other person. You can't give your time away during these blocks. If you stop talking – well, I guess if you're going back and forth, it doesn't matter. But if we do block time, then that is just going over to the other side. Please remember that this discussion flows through me, the chair, all the time.

We are going to go to Member Brar, I believe. Just to confirm – I know we just came back from a break – Minister and Member Brar, you guys are good with going back and forth?

Member Boparai: Member Boparai.

The Chair: Oh, I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I apologize.

Member Boparai: That's okay.

The Chair: I'm assuming it's just back and forth for the rest of the meeting for you two as well.

Member Boparai: Sharing?

Mr. Dreeshen: Okay.

The Chair: Yep. Perfect. Okay. Go ahead, Member.

Member Boparai: Yeah. Thank you, Chair, and through you to the minister. I ask based on line item 11, provincial highway rehab, specifically 11.1, highway rehab projects, which funds pavement restoration, intersection improvements, and other safety-related activities across the provincial highway network. As we are on the topic of highways and noting that I asked the same question during last year's estimates with no visible improvement, I want to again ask the minister about the lack of safe, modern truck stops and rest areas along Alberta's major trade corridors. Commercial drivers still report long stretches with no safe, secure rest opportunities; no 24/7 clean and serviced washrooms, insufficient lighting, or winter maintenance; and inadequate parking for federally mandated rest periods.

Looking at the investment in line 9 on page 239 of the government estimates on provincial highway construction projects, including allocations for twinning, widening, expansion, and upgrades, can the minister specify whether any portion of this line item has been allocated to designing, building, or upgrading rest areas or truck stops; whether any projects within this line item include fully serviced rest areas, facilities with washrooms, potable water, lighting, and safe parking; whether the ministry has completed site selection, corridor analysis, or cost assessments to modernize Alberta's rest area network? At the end of the day, commercial drivers want assurance that their funding is actually translating into the safe, modern rest area infrastructure that Alberta has lacked for years, Minister.

Mr. Dreeshen: Thank you very much. I appreciate your consistency. I hope you're excited to see in Budget 2026 that there is actually $46.7 million over three years to complete engineering and initial construction for seven new safety rest areas along some of the very important economic corridors that we have here in the province, and then the hope would be that additional construction will be done in future out-years. So, again, I would commend you for your consistency and your advocacy. Something that previous budgets have looked at: a big province-wide safety rest area RFP that did not work, did not go ahead, but that was done in the past. Now we've learned from that. Going forward with these seven new safety rest areas is something that we think will go a long way.

Also, there have been some really strong industry advocates, whether it's the Alberta Motor Transport Association or just individual truck companies, talking about the need to have proper safety rest areas so that truckers, who do an amazing job – they're so important and vital to our economy and to our high quality of life, to be able to get goods in our grocery stores. It's important to make sure that our truckers have safety rest areas, that they, obviously, feel safe, and that we can promote the movement of goods across the province.

Member Boparai: Thank you, Minister. Moving to my next question through Mr. Chair, based on line item 3, traffic safety programs, specifically 3.1, traffic safety services, and 3.2, driver safety initiatives, which together fund commercial vehicle safety enforcement, roadside inspections, MELT oversight, creative monitoring, and the regulatory framework regarding Alberta's trucking sector, especially on the topic of commercial drivers.

I want to ask the minister about the serious and ongoing inconsistencies commercial drivers continue to face across Alberta's inspection stations. Across the province carriers and drivers report that enforcement decisions vary significantly between weighing stations, officers, and regions. These inconsistencies include conflicting interpretations of what constitutes a defect, different thresholds for axle and group weights, different responses to identical issues at different stations, and citations for minor cosmetic wear and tear, like

we see with gravel and dump trucks, that does not affect safety or operation.

Drivers also report a deeper systematic issue. Many enforcement decisions are based on book guideline interpretations that do not align with real-world operational and manufacturing realities. In some cases officers are enforcing standards that do not match how the equipment is engineered, certified, or commercially produced, meaning drivers are penalized for defects that cannot be corrected because they are not defects at all. For Alberta's hard-working commercial drivers, who keep goods moving across the province and maintain some of the most demanding schedules in the workforce, this creates an unpredictable environment that threatens their livelihoods and imposes significant financial and operational burdens.

Given that the traffic safety programs line item is explicitly intended to ensure uniform, fair, and safety-focused enforcement, can the minister clarify whether the ministry will implement a province-wide standardized defect and weight tolerance guide that reflects actual engineering and manufacturing specifications, not just theoretical guideline interpretations, how the ministry identifies and corrects outlier enforcement among officers or inspection stations?

Minister, Alberta's commercial drivers, who work long hours, travel long distances, and are foundational to our supply chains, deserve a system that is fair, predictable, and grounded in real-world practicality. Taxpayers and operators want to know that the money in traffic safety programs is producing consistent, transparent enforcement across all inspection stations.

Thank you, Minister.

Mr. Dreeshen: Thank you very much. Obviously, when it comes to vehicle inspections there is joint work that we undertake at Transportation and Economic Corridors with the public safety ministry as well. That's work that we do with Minister Ellis's team to make sure that we can have that consistency at our vehicle inspections when a truck drives in to make sure that they are being inspected in the best way possible so that Albertans, obviously, can be safe on our provincial road network.

8:50

Some additional work that we've done just to improve traffic safety, especially when it comes to commercial drivers: just in this last year we made extensive audits across the province and actually shut down five driver training schools that were fraudulent. We actually took off 13 commercial truck companies in Alberta that were operating, some under a chameleon carrier issue where they were shut down in another province and then moved to Alberta and others that just had unsafe practices. We do a lot of extensive audit and investigative work through Transportation and Economic Corridors as well as collaboration with public safety at the vehicle inspection sites as well. I'm sure everybody in this room has anecdotal stories of seeing bad truckers, and that is something that we want to do everything we can to make sure that Albertans not only are safe on the roads but have confidence in our trucking industry.

Member Boparai: Thank you, Minister. I have one more thing I would like to touch on through you, Mr. Chair. Based on line item 4, provincial highway maintenance, specifically 4.1, maintenance, which funds the structural and operational maintenance of Alberta's entire provincial highway network, including snow removal, debris clearing, drainage, lighting, vegetation management, and routine roadway servicing, I want to ask the minister about persistent service failures along Stoney Trail, especially adjacent communities like those of Homestead, Taradale, Coral Springs in Calgary.

Despite increases residents continue to report garbage piling up on the shoulders and medians, incomplete or irregular sweeping cycles, slow if any responses to maintenance complaints, and large gaps in vegetation and animal control. Can the minister explain what performance standards contractors must meet and how the ministry verifies these independently, whether the ministry has exercised financial withholds or penalties to nonperformance for these contractors on Stoney Trail, whether the minister will commit to publishing a Ring Road maintenance report on items like these and their removal?

Mr. Dreeshen: When it comes to the Stoney Trail or Ring Road around Calgary, we do have multiple highway maintenance contracts and contractors. If there are issues that you've heard through your constituents, please reach out to me and my office because it is a complaint-based system, whether that's in the summertime, whether it's mowing or being able to clean up debris on the ditches or in the wintertime to be able to keep them plowed and cleared. I know that Carmacks has the north pretty much half of the Ring Road as well as the west side of the Calgary Ring Road. I think they do a good job, but obviously if there are any issues in any of the highway maintenance contractors, whether it's them or others, we're all ears to be able to make sure. They're great at being able to go out and respond to any new issue that might have happened on the road network.

We do a really good job. I think there are 25 different highway maintenance contracts, CMAs, contract maintenance operators, that are around the province. Obviously, there's not 25 contractors, but there are 25 different areas where we have specific agreements with them and expectations that we set as a provincial standard so that the highways in that area are maintained properly.

The Chair: Excellent. Thank you.

Member Yao, you are up for the next 10-minute block.

Mr. Yao: Thank you so much, Chair. Minister, thank you so much for all your hard work and your team. Our roads are our arteries for our communities, and we thank you for keeping them maintained. It enables everything in and out through our communities, and it shows we have everything that we can to survive.

You might not be aware, but I recently visited Grande Prairie. What a beautiful region that is. I tell you what, they are very well represented. I was recently speaking with the Member for Grande Prairie, who pointed out something to me. He said, "You know what? Key objective 1.1 on page 167 of the Transportation and Economic Corridors business plan highlights the ministry's commitment to expanding and improving Alberta's highway network to support economic growth, safety, and efficient movement of goods and people," to which I said to him, "Well, that sounds great, but what are you trying to get at here?" He mentioned to me that – you know what? – the Grande Prairie region continues to experience strong growth in agriculture, forestry, and energy development. As traffic volume increases, he's concerned that projects such as highway 40X bypass connecting 43 to 40 – he mentioned that it's a very important one for safety, reducing heavy truck traffic in developed areas, and strengthening transportation connections across northwestern Alberta and into B.C.

I thought that was really interesting. What I also noticed was that he was really echoing the comments I also heard from the Member for Grande Prairie-Wapiti. The mayor, Jackie Clayton, also carries this message. Even the former reeve and the new reeve both really support the same piece of infrastructure. I'm wondering if you can

give us any kind of an update on this particular piece, if you have any timelines for us, if there's anything you can share with us on this vital piece of infrastructure that our colleagues from the Grande Prairie region are asking for.

Mr. Dreeshen: That's an excellent question. I thought we were going to go northeast Alberta, but going northwest Alberta is very important as well. With Grande Prairie, I know, Chair, that you know this region quite well and you know the projects I'm about to list quite well. Actually, I think it was just a couple of months ago we had a town hall in Grande Prairie talking about 40X and the important highways around Grande Prairie and how important they are.

We are expecting to receive about 90 per cent design submission from our consultant by March of this year or early April on highway 40. That's something that is obviously a very important project not just to Grande Prairie and the region but to the businesses and families as well. Obviously, to get that design work closer to 100 per cent really helps out as well. Something that we learned at the open house was some land purchases as well that are needed. To make sure that project can go ahead with the design, land purchasing is something that's well under way. I know once we can get that completed, it's going to really open up the entire Grande Prairie area and not having to have large truck traffic go through downtown Grande Prairie but being able to skirt it as a ring road going around the area. I know, Chair, you're very anxious to see that. I just, again, commend you for your advocacy to make sure we can get the funding for that important project.

Mr. Yao: Fantastic, Minister. Thank you so much. I'm sure they'll greatly appreciate that.

That said, you mentioned northeastern Alberta there, so I would certainly love if you could provide us any updates on a lot of infrastructure that you have been investing in up there. One aspect I really appreciate is the twinning of the highway north of Fort McMurray. It's going to enable traffic and access to a lot of industry to be a lot faster. I wish you could do something about the speed limits, but that's a topic for another day. These improvements to the infrastructure I think are really vital. We're trying to reduce things like commuting and hoping that people can have an easier commute, if you will, from the community to a lot of these plants. I'm wondering if you can expand on some of these projects that you have been investing on in the region and if you can give us an idea of some timelines you anticipate.

Mr. Dreeshen: Again, great question. Highway 63 twinning has been a priority for the government of Alberta for a long time coming, and I think this is a really unique twinning project that goes north of Fort McMurray. Just with the daily commutes of Fort McMurray residents working in the oil sands, to be able to have that twinned road not just for safety but also cutting down their daily commutes, giving them more time at home doing the things they love versus being stuck in traffic: I think that goes a long way. It's the same whether it's Deerfoot, where we're trying to clear up congestion on daily commutes, or highway 63 north of Fort McMurray. Albertans are Albertans, and we want to be able to cut down on their daily commutes. That's a really important project to see happen.

Obviously, the importance of the oil sands is huge, so we want to make sure that people in that area in Fort McMurray can not just commute to work in a timely manner but also get the benefits of living up in Fort McMurray and being able to see that they can get around that much easier and see that the provincial government is happy to invest and to build out a very important community in our province.

Mr. Yao: Absolutely. Thank you so much for that.

I'm wondering if you can also expand on the 686. That one was also very important. You did mention that earlier. My good colleague also from Fort McMurray worked federally for transportation. He was a parliamentary secretary for transportation when he worked at the federal level. When you announced this project back in the day, he told me, "Tany, this will take 10 years, at least a decade, to build a road like that," which is kind of frustrating. It seems like a long time, but I suppose it is what it is. I'm wondering if you can update us and tell us, like, how long you anticipate that this could take and where it is at. What stage is it at, and where do you see it going here?

9:00

Mr. Dreeshen: Highway 686 and the new highway and economic corridor that we're planning to build from Fort McMurray going west is 215 kilometres. We in Transportation and Economic Corridors haven't built a new road of that scale in quite some time. It is a very ambitious project.

Again, I commend the department on its leadership in working with the First Nations in that area to make sure that the communities along that region have really important buy-in not just from a First Nations aspect or resource economic aspect but even a safety aspect as well.

For people up in Fort McMurray, obviously, the fires in 2016 have a very strong memory of people just having one way in and out access on highway 63. Being able to have a new highway with highway 686 going west, to have two safety egresses in and out of the Fort McMurray region just in case of another inevitable fire that can happen in our forests is something that I think will go a long way of not just wanting people to move back into Fort McMurray but also just feeling safer up there.

It's important on so many aspects: of connecting First Nations in that region, of opening up oil and gas and forestry development in northern Alberta as well as the safety side of people being able to get around the north in a safe manner. It's important. It checks all the boxes, and it's a really important project. I'd, again, like to commend you on your advocacy as well as Minister Jean's to be able to prioritize this project and get it across the finish line.

Mr. Yao: Absolutely. Thank you so much for that.

I would just like to pivot a little bit to highway maintenance. As you can imagine, in the north there we deal with a lot of the permafrost. We feel our roads are really chewed up from a lot of that. On page 238 of government estimates, I think 4.1, you've allocated about $350 million for maintenance. I understand that this includes snow clearing, pothole repairs, shoulder maintenance, and other activities that keep our roads safe, and this is usually, like, the base funding to really maintain our roads. I'm wondering if you can expand on the process. Take Fort McMurray's roads, for example. A fellow driving up there, inspecting the roads: when can they anticipate repairs and things like that? Can you give us a general idea of how it operates across the province?

Mr. Dreeshen: Sure. Well, yes. We have two different, obviously, seasons of highway maintenance. There's summer maintenance, which is mowing and clearing, and then winter maintenance of plowing and sanding. The highway maintenance contractors that we have up north do a good job, but we have been working with the regional municipality of Wood Buffalo on even some concerns that they've had through town on highway 63,

which is designated as a highway, but, obviously, it's right down the middle of Fort McMurray.

I've, you know, been working closely with Mayor Sandy Bowman to make sure that we can increase the standards and the look of the highway maintenance along Fort McMurray highway through 63. That's something that we'll continue to work with municipalities to make sure that, whether it's a rural highway or going through a community, we can work collaboratively with the highway maintenance contractors to clear up as nicely as possible, that we can work with the highway maintenance contractors to achieve that. Happy to continue that work.

Mr. Yao: Thank you, sir.

The Chair: Excellent. Thank you so very much.
Member Sweet.

Ms Sweet: Thank you, Mr. Chair.
Minister, you're okay to go back and forth?

Mr. Dreeshen: Sounds good.

Ms Sweet: Perfect.

I would like to focus on business plan page 167, outcome 1 primarily, the importance of economic corridors. As you know, my area in Edmonton lines up with the Industrial Heartland, which is our major exporter for LNG, among other manufacturing goods. Also, fun fact: at one point a bridge was supposed to go through my area, and we ended up deciding that the Vinca Bridge was the better choice, which maintained the agricultural land in my riding as well. My first question to you is: can you just give us a really quick actual update on the capital plan 114? Where is the Vinca Bridge in its design and staging to get to your target of the '26-28 scheduled completion date?

Mr. Dreeshen: I was just going to say that is interesting. I think that in your area there is a walking trail bridge. I'm not sure if that's where the possible Vinca Bridge was going to be in that region. It is obviously a beautiful area, and you're absolutely right that the Industrial Heartland and the Vinca Bridge are so important to Alberta's economy.

The entire Vinca Bridge budget is over $99 million, and it's something that is on Alberta's high-load corridor, which is very important for heavy truck traffic in the province. The structural design has been completed for the Vinca Bridge, and then before a construction contract can be tendered, there is still some utility relocation and some environmental permits that need to happen. Obviously, building a bridge is that much extra tricky to be able to get environmental permits crossing those waters. Justice is currently involved is in securing agreements with three utility companies as well when it comes to the utility moves. It is a complicated area just in its location, but the tender for the construction of the Vinca Bridge projects, like I said, can proceed once the utility agreements are in place. Those are contractual, so it's hard to put a timeline on the other parties to be able to advance that, but we are working expeditiously to try to get those resolved.

Ms Sweet: Well, that's good news, and I think it's good news for the Industrial Heartland.

If we could look at outcome 1, strategic economic corridors investment and innovation supports for Alberta's economic growth. Economic corridors form a network of vital links to markets in and out of Alberta, ensuring efficient access to Albertans and businesses and supporting economic vitality. Capital investment in highways initiatives and grant programs build critical infrastructure, supporting job creation and economic growth.

The reason I'm asking this is that the Prince Rupert port authority, the PRPA, is undertaking a significant expansion and has clearly signalled that Alberta's continued support, co-ordination, and investment in the Edmonton-Prince Rupert economic corridor, specifically the Alberta Industrial Heartland in my area, is essential for unlocking increased export capacity for Alberta producers. Alberta exported $3.8 billion in goods through Prince Rupert in 2022, primarily propane, agriculture, and forestry products – as you know, I'm the agriculture critic, so it's also a very important conversation from an export perspective – and demonstrates support for strategic importance for accessing global markets.

In 2024 I believe there was a $250,000 grant that was provided by the Alberta government to PRPA to co-ordinate the Industrial Heartland to B.C. economic corridor, and I'm wondering if you can give us an update if there will be additional funds to help that study to be completed and expansion on that port access.

Mr. Dreeshen: Great economic corridor question. That is very important work that we've collaborated with the Industrial Heartland, as a provincial government here in Alberta, as well as the port of Prince Rupert.

We got the idea when we were touring Prince Rupert and talking with them. They actually had an economic corridor study with the B.C. government and the importance of Prince Rupert. We thought, well, everybody always coins Prince Rupert as Alberta's port. When I was there, I talked it up a lot. We actually went to AltaGas's installation, and I just saw in the new reef project in Prince Rupert the new propane bullets that finally got exported there. It's amazing, the number of exports coming out of Prince Rupert. Once their current development is completed, I think they will rival Montreal for the second-largest exporting port in Canada.

Obviously, Prince Rupert is very important, and the $250,000 that you referenced is going to the Prince Rupert port in conjunction with the Industrial Heartland to study the economic corridor from your riding here near Edmonton to Prince Rupert. We are expecting that report and its findings to come out this spring. We'll continue to advocate for economic corridors, whether it's to Prince Rupert, to Vancouver, to the United States, to the Arctic, to Hudson's Bay, east coast, you name it. We have so many natural resources here in Alberta, and to be able to maximize the value for Albertans is obviously to get to as many markets as possible, and we'll continue to work on that advocacy work.

Ms Sweet: Thank you, Minister. I think the importance of the PRPA is the fact that it actually does help to reduce the west coast redundancy.

I'm just wondering what concrete steps your ministry has taken for the '26 budget, '25-26, to enhance transportation reliability and market access, including the interswitching and west coast redundancy, to protect Alberta's export-driven commodities as we deal with, obviously, geopolitical volatility.

9:10

Mr. Dreeshen: Extremely great question. Actually, I met with the Coalition of Rail Shippers just yesterday, and they were talking about expanding interswitching in Canada. In a previous life when I worked for the federal government in Ottawa, we actually changed the interswitching rules to 160 kilometres outside of its 30 just to have some type of competition amongst the rail companies in Canada with essentially the dual monopoly they have right now. That went a long way of opening up competitive rail shipping options for shippers of all types of commodities.

Something that was also interesting close to the U.S.: having additional rail companies in the U.S. being able to compete and not to have joint running rights but to be able to have interswitching agreements across the prairies especially. Interswitching, I think, goes a long way of increasing competitiveness in our rail sector. CP and CN, obviously, do great work and they export. They are essentially the backbone of our economy, and without them we wouldn't be as prosperous as we are now. CP and CN do great work, but I think interswitching and trying to find more ways to make our economic corridors that much more competitive is important. Whether it's funding into infrastructure or advocacy for national trade corridor funding for CN and CP to be able to build out their infrastructure network, we'll continue to advocate for that as well, especially with the federal government.

Ms Sweet: Thank you, Minister. I'm just recognizing the time, too.

I just want to move on to Indigenous participation in corridor planning. Obviously, we recognize the importance of Indigenous partnerships is essential in corridor planning and development. Can you specifically demonstrate or explain how your ministry is providing to ensure Alberta's engagement with Indigenous communities as you're expanding on those economic corridors from here to B.C.?

Mr. Dreeshen: Yeah. Treaty 8 is something that in the northern part of Alberta we've had a tremendous amount of advocacy in meetings with. I've mentioned highway 686 and the development of that economic corridor, the four First Nations throughout that possibility of a new economic corridor we've done tremendous engagement in. We did something a little different. Instead of having a line on the map and then taking it to the First Nations and getting their input, we actually flipped the script and said: "Where would you actually like to see a line on the map? Where is a natural or a historical economic corridor, for lack of a better term, in your area that you know of that you think would open up and increase safety egress when it comes to your community being able to get around or just a natural economic corridor or trade route that you think would really help your region?" It was tremendous, the feedback that we got along the highway 686 corridor just west of Fort McMurray. I think that was something that was unique and novel. We gave some engagement funding to those First Nations, and like I said before, they came back and were very supportive of that development.

Obviously, this budget doesn't have construction dollars to start that, but that is something that we'd love to be able to see once engineering gets further designed to be able to make that project a reality. Again, First Nation engagement was really key to making sure that that project would come along. As I mentioned before, whether it's 1A in the southern part of the province working with the Stoney Nakoda First Nation, that's an issue with the federal government, and that's something that we'll again continue to advocate for First Nations in Alberta.

The Chair: Excellent. Well, thank you very much, Minister and Member, for those questions.

I'm seeing Member Petrovic. You're up next for your 10 minutes.

Mrs. Petrovic: Thank you, Chair. Through you I just want to give a shout-out to the ministry. I just appreciate all of the work that you guys have done down in Livingstone-Macleod, working with us at improving some of our road safety down there. As you know, we've had a couple of tragedies lately, and I just really appreciate your guys' support and advice when dealing with some of those. I know that last year we had stage 1(a) funding down in Fort Macleod that's going to help improve safety and economic corridors for that area. It's a win-win for everyone. I just wanted to highlight our appreciation for that first and foremost.

I just wanted to chat a little bit about water and waste-water infrastructure. As you can imagine, down in southern Alberta we truly live by: whisky is for drinking and water is for fighting over. I believe many in this room can appreciate that. Reliable water and waste-water systems are foundational not only for responsible growth and environmental stewardship but for many other areas, especially in our area. I know a couple of years ago I had communities that were out of water, and we were trucking water into our communities, about $10,000 a day, in order to be able to make sure individuals had access to it.

On page 167 of your business plan it states that there's $442.8 million allocated over three years towards water and waste-water programs. This represents a significant commitment to supporting municipalities across Alberta. I was just hoping, through you, Chair, if the minister could elaborate on how the ministry prioritizes projects within this funding envelope, particularly in balancing projects driven by population growth, new development of those focused on system resilience, regulatory compliance, and the rehabilitation or replacement of aging infrastructure. What criteria or risk-based framework guides those funding decisions?

Mr. Dreeshen: Well, thank you very much. I'd just like to again commend the member on her advocacy for projects in Livingstone-Macleod, in her riding. I'd have to say that the stage 1(a) announcement with you was probably one of the windiest announcements. I think the podium blew over multiple times when we did that. But it was a very important announcement.

When it comes to water and waste water, to address your question, we do have two granting streams from the department that help municipalities be able to build their water systems. That's water for life and the Alberta water/waste-water grant. Some key priorities and how we look at the projects coming in: obviously, health-related improvements is a key one, environmental protection as well as development improvements, whether it's safety, fire protection, operational reliability, infrastructure requirements to support community growth. Those are the three priority lenses we look at when it comes to prioritizing who gets funding and who doesn't, and it is tough. I wish that the demand met the supply when it comes to grant dollars to help out municipalities.

Obviously, with municipalities in Alberta, they do have an advantage over municipalities in other parts of Canada. I think Alberta is one of the largest funders of municipal infrastructure compared to other jurisdictions. In Saskatchewan, for example, if you had a community that wanted a new water treatment facility, they would have to take years or decades to save up to make sure that they are able to fund their water system adequately or fully whereas here in Alberta we do have our provincial grants that can help out municipalities, help fund or maybe expedite some of their infrastructure needs. That's something that I think is very unique here in Alberta. Again, I'd credit our oil and gas industry and the royalties that we get to be able to help out municipalities in that regard.

Whether it's through STIP, through road and bridge projects, municipal water grants through water for life, or Alberta water/waste water, those are really important municipal grants that we have here in Alberta that we'll continue to make, but that's how we prioritize them.

Mrs. Petrovic: Wonderful. I appreciate that. I know a couple of my communities have benefited from the water for life program. I know

Nanton has benefited greatly, and I believe there are a few other communities as well, so extremely appreciative of that.

Just while we're on the topic of water for life, in the government estimates on page 239, line item 6.2, it shows water for life funded at $97,672. Sorry; $97,672,000. It's getting to be the end of the night, and I think we're all ready to go home. A noticeable increase that reflects the importance of this program. I was just hoping, through you, Chair, to the minister, if you could expand on how the investment actually strengthens Alberta's capacity to accommodate our population growth that we currently have. Then on the planning side of it how does the department incorporate the population forecast and regional economic plans when determining which water for life projects move forward each year?

Mr. Dreeshen: Great question. It's a bit of an art and a science to make sure that we can prioritize the right projects at the right time, and to have that municipal participation, obviously, is key. When you look at the population growth, there are communities that aren't always the same as communities that just have aging infrastructure. There are some fast-growing communities that obviously need additional water just to keep up with the industrial growth or the population growth, but there's also just aging infrastructures of certain communities.

9:20

I know that out in Bruderheim, actually, of all places, in MLA Armstrong-Homeniuk's riding, there is just a water pressure issue, that the village of Bruderheim couldn't actually keep the pressure in their fire hydrants to be able to have insurance companies insure people in Bruderheim for their houses. That, obviously, was something that priority ranked very high, to make sure that we could have provincial dollars going to address that problem so that you would have proper pressure in fire hydrants so that you could actually have proper fire suppression infrastructure to help out the town.

Those rankings, whether it's specific projects that have failing infrastructure or just rapid economic growth of a town growing extremely fast because of population growth: like I said, it's an art and a science to know who can get those types of funding. Again, we'll continue to partner as a provincial government with municipalities to make sure that they can get the funding that they need, because Albertans are all the same, and we want to make sure that we're the best place to live and run a business and raise a family, and that's corner to corner all across Alberta. We want to be able to have that claim to fame.

Mrs. Petrovic: Well, I definitely appreciate that. Thank you.

I'm just going to stick to water. I'm just mindful of time, so I'm going to bust out this question here really quick in regard to drought resilience in the Oldman basin. I know that I drive through that area almost on a daily basis. Under the business plan key objective 3.3 on page 169 the ministry commits to developing and maintaining critical water management infrastructure to strengthen resiliency from current and future hazards. As we know down south, drought is sort of a common occurrence for us. The ministry oversees key water management infrastructure across the province. With drought risk increasing in southern Alberta, what investments are planned in Budget 2026 to help strengthen water management systems and boost water storage capacity in the Oldman basin and its tributaries?

Mr. Dreeshen: Great question. It's an interesting dance of how Transportation and Economic Corridors co-ordinates with Environment and Protected Areas and Agriculture and Irrigation when it comes to our reservoirs in the province. Essentially, environment and parks does any of the permitting and planning up front to see how the environment as well as the design work should happen for any improvements to reservoir and the permitting of it, and then we step in as Transportation and Economic Corridors to actually be the builders, the designers and actually get it physically built, and then Ag and Irrigation, once we build it, operates it. So it is kind of a dance between the three departments to make sure that our reservoirs, especially in southern Alberta, and our irrigation districts are well maintained, and it is between the three ministries that we have that partnership.

When it comes to water management and flood mitigation, some key projects that we've accomplished just recently are the Dickson dam capacity enhancement, the McGregor shoreline erosion project, the Paddle River dam spillway rehabilitation, the Lethbridge northern headworks canal, the Belly River diversion, the Ghost reservoir infrastructure project, and, obviously, near Calgary, the Springbank off-stream reservoir. There's a tremendous number of projects that we've done, whether it's flood mitigation or when it comes to irrigation, to be able to expand our reservoirs. As you mentioned, water is extremely important in Alberta and around the world, whether it's for just communities, population growth, agricultural growth. To make sure that we can maintain that precious resource is something that we want to continue to work on.

The Chair: Excellent. Well, thank you both.

Member Dach, I believe you're up.

Mr. Dach: Well, thank you, Chair. I'd be happy to proceed once again and ask the minister some questions about the Calgary LRT green line. A study was recently conducted by a consortium of associations that represent businesses and properties in Calgary. Associations involved included the Calgary Downtown Association, commercial property management groups BOMA and NAIOP Calgary, and the Calgary Construction Association. As reported in the *Calgary Herald*:

> The questionnaire was conducted in late December and January, with respondents including both property owners and tenants along 2nd Street S.W., where the future multibillion-dollar train line is slated to be built . . . Ever since the proposed elevated alignment was included in the Green Line's most recent business case, operators of storefronts and restaurants along that stretch of downtown have spoken out, voicing concern about construction effects, noise, shadowing, parking and traffic flow.

The numbers are clear about how local businesses feel about the UCP's raised track, Mr. Chair. Ninety-three per cent oppose the elevated alignment if it is "all that was on offer and doing nothing was the alternative." Eighty-nine per cent of businesses and property owners said that they would rather have another alignment. Eighty per cent said that the UCP's elevated alignment would be negative for their business. Nearly half of businesses suggested that they would consider selling their business if the elevated route ends up going ahead. Over half of property owners expect the UCP's plan for an elevated track to lead to reduced occupancy rates and sales.

In comparison, Mr. Chair, the same respondents had a very different view on the green line as a whole and the previously considered underground alignment. At a base level 98 per cent of business owners said that they support the green line. This is a staggering number considering how unpopular the raised track seems to be. Now, among businesses located along 2nd Street, which is one of the streets that the raised alignment is set to run along, 87 per cent stated that they would support an underground alignment. To summarize, the businesses that are set to be most affected by the green line overwhelmingly are in favour of the green line and extremely supportive of an underground alignment and are very concerned with the impact that the raised track will have on local businesses.

My questions, Mr. Chair, to the minister: why does the minister insist on ignoring these local businesses, ignoring Calgarians, and moving forward with their worst alignment, one that will be bad for business? Is the minister sacrificing a better green line alignment for Calgarians in the name of political games? Did the minister cancel the underground alignment and threaten to fully pull their share of the funding from the project in a failed attempt to politically damage the new Leader of the Opposition rather than doing what's best for Calgary in the largest infrastructure investment the city has ever undertaken?

Mr. Dreeshen: We're good to go, Mr. Chair?

Mr. Cyr: Can I do a point of order?

The Chair: Member, you can do what you like.

Mr. Cyr: I'd like to do a point of order.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Cyr: He's clearly making allegations and presumptions that there's no way he could possibly make. He's trying to have the minister actually comment on something that isn't in the business plan, the budget, or the strategic plan. Now, he's clearly speaking on matters that are other than what is up for debate, which is 23(b). He's making allegations, which is (h). He has imputed false and unavowed motives of the member, which is (i), and he's used (j), insulting and abusive language. Now, this is the second time he's done this. I ask that you rule him out of order. This is unacceptable. Right at the end of the night he decides to do this. Mr. Chair, please rule this entire line of questioning out of order.

Ms Sweet: Thank you, Mr. Chair. First off, it is in the budget. It's capital grants 5.2, which would be GreenTRIP, green transit incentive programs, green line. We can talk about the Calgary LRT projects, 5.4, page 238 of the budget.

I will say that I appreciate that the government side is feeling a little bit like they feel like this is offside. However, the minister is on record repeatedly in question period talking about the Leader of the Opposition in relation to the green line. Repeatedly. Unfortunately, it is on record, and it is during question period more often than not whenever the green line comes up. So I don't actually think that the member is offside in the fact that it's on record repeatedly.

The Chair: I appreciate it. Thank you, Member, as well.

Stating a very political statement, I think, in here that is not tied directly to the budget: I would lean towards ruling this a point of order. Now, Member, I'm going to caution you this time. You've been pretty good so far this meeting, so I appreciate that. I'll state that I think there's a technicality here, but I also know that we are getting late into the evening.

Member, I feel generous tonight. I do think we are pushing towards a point of order. I'm not going to rule it a point of order right now, but this is also the second caution for yourself tonight during this just on this type of little bit more aggressive language. I think you can phrase this question without bringing those types of comments into the conversation here tonight. I'm happy to have you ask a question that doesn't bring into our conversation the conversation around what conversations here for tonight aren't part of the budget.

9:30

So I'm happy to hear a question on the green line. I do see that as part of the budget. But if we can stay away from the conversation that may have been mentioned in question period – this isn't question period – I would prefer that here tonight.

Mr. Dach: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'll continue, with the limited time I've got left, and ask the minister in very general terms but very clear and succinct terms: how in the world does the minister justify the decision to support elevated track in the face of such strong and verifiable criticism of such a move when, in fact, the underground option is widely preferred by the business community and proponents of the line, yet the minister somehow fails to see the wisdom of that line? I'd like to have the minister say on the record why he feels the elevated line should be the right alignment rather than the underground line for the green line.

Mr. Dreeshen: Well, I'm happy to state on the record why the elevated line is far superior over an underground alignment in downtown Calgary. Actually, just to get the member up to speed, the fact that we are now not tunnelling the green line under downtown Calgary is actually extending the green line by 60 per cent more ridership. It's extending it by 70 per cent longer, being able to stretch farther south into Calgary, and is adding five more stations with the same budget as a tunnelling option with a much shorter, much smaller project. So just considering value for money, the elevated alignment is far superior over the downtown alignment. With the current mayor there is a downtown engagement that's under way. Calgarians in downtown Calgary and all Calgarians can have their say on the engagement process, and that will come out in due time.

In the meantime we actually have an oversight committee, that my department sits on, working with the city of Calgary to make sure that the green line construction can finally start. It has started, through you, Mr. Chair. There's been a decade of delay when it comes to the green line. The NDP leader, when he was mayor of Calgary, promised a 46-kilometre, grandiose $4.5 billion green line, that they never got built. It was done on a napkin. I know I can't say his name in question period, but it's been dubbed the Nenshi nightmare when it comes to the green line. It never got built. The hauntingness of that is quite evident. But this government, I'm proud to say, is actually, finally building the green line, after Naheed Nenshi, the NDP leader, who was mayor for 11 years, promised a green line and couldn't deliver for Calgary. I just think the competency of the NDP leader to not be able to build major infrastructure projects, whether it's a green line or water . . .

Ms Sweet: Okay, Mr. Chair. Point of order. He said that it was going to happen, and it did. I know the minister can't help himself because he has this weird fascination with my leader.

Mr. Dreeshen: I wouldn't go that far.

Ms Sweet: Well, I don't think it needs to go that far either, in the sense of – we cautioned this, and you cautioned this as the chair, and the minister chose to do it anyway. So I'm just asking that we refrain.

The Chair: Sorry. Who's taking it on this side?

Mr. Cyr: I'll take it. You know, I will say that you've given a lot of latitude to the opposition tonight, and you've cautioned them twice. I know that when we're talking about the green line, it brings some real passion. I will note that the opposition side didn't even mention what point of order she was under. That shows that she doesn't likely feel that this is a point of order, and I ask that you don't rule this a point of order, sir.

Ms Sweet: Standing Order 23(h), (i), and (j).

Mr. Cyr: A little late.

The Chair: All right. Well, thank you both for your arguments on this. Once again I feel generous tonight. Thank you for both your arguments. In the spirit of congeniality and consistency I will not rule this a point of order, but if we can keep things a little bit more on the rails to our train conversation, that would be appreciated. I do appreciate both arguments. I won't rule it at this point a point of order, but let's keep this on the rails.

Okay. We're moving back over to the government side. Member Armstrong-Homeniuk, you're up.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Thank you, Chair. Through you to the minister, I first want to thank you for supporting my little community of Bruderheim and its water upgrades. It's made such a difference for the safety of the residents and just to even help them grow as a community, so thank you so much for that. That's very much appreciated. I know it was several years and several other governments that ignored it, but thank you for taking that up.

Minister, in the business plan under key objective 3.4 on page 169 the ministry commits to invest in capital maintenance and renewal to maintain or improve the condition of Alberta's highway network while optimizing life cycle costs and extending the life of roads and bridges.

In my riding there are ongoing concerns regarding the need for an interchange along highway 50 near Scotford industrial area as well as significant safety issues at the intersection of Mundare corner and highway 16, where tragic collisions have occurred this year. Could you outline how the ministry evaluates intersections and high-traffic corridors for upgrades such as signalization improvements, turning lanes, and full interchanges? Specifically, what traffic thresholds, collision data metrics, or economic activity indicators are used to determine when capital upgrades are warranted?

Mr. Dreeshen: A great question. If I could just go back, I agree with you, Chair, when it comes to that point of order from the opposition. Obviously, as a witness I'm here to testify, so I don't even think I can be point of ordered, but I'm sure that the former NDP House leader, again, also knows that.

To MLA Armstrong-Homeniuk: just absolutely amazing advocacy when it came to Bruderheim, and I was so honoured to be there with you announcing that important project. The look on council's face and on everyone's face to see that project in that town, the viability of it with that important investment, went such a long way and still sticks with me, so thank you so much for your advocacy on that.

When it comes to the engineering and what the criteria are that we use when it comes to looking at these projects, there are the standards that we actually have, that we run by, and that are published by the Transportation Association of Canada as well as the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials. We use those standards when it comes to determining what types of engineering, what types of improvements need to be made on certain roadways, and very technical. Whether it is curvature, roughness, scaling, there is a whole bunch of different rationales, as well as collisions, traffic impact assessments, that we use in order to make those decisions. As I mentioned before, it's a little bit of an art, a little bit of a science to be able to make sure that we can do the right investments at the right time, but obviously the planning, the engineering, and then construction dollars to follow quite quickly. That's the best way to be able to address problem areas and problem intersections and roadways and make sure that we can do the proper engineering, planning, and construction as quickly as possible.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Thank you, Minister.

Chair, through you to the minister, the business plan under mandate and structure on page 165 emphasizes: to ensure the safety of road users when travelling, the ministry conducts ongoing monitoring and maintenance of highways. In my riding I have received numerous complaints regarding highway maintenance performance, particularly winter snow clearing and summer shoulder maintenance conducted under contract. Minister, could you explain how highway maintenance contractors are procured and evaluated, and what service level standards, performance benchmarks, and response time requirements are built into these contracts to ensure reliability and safety?

Mr. Dreeshen: A great question. Our procurement process aligns with, obviously, domestic and international trade agreements, common procurement laws, directives, and our own procurement accountability framework. Procurement opportunities are open to all businesses in order to bid, but there are five distinct steps that go through within a procurement.

There is development, which is the time from when document development starts, in the procurement, to the posting of an RFP or a tender that goes out to business. Then the posting period for an RFP tender, which is a public posting on the Alberta Purchasing Connection website. The third is the evaluation. That's the time from closing of an RFP or a tender to completion of evaluation consensus to determine the winning proponent who actually had the best bid going forward. Then, four, the most important one, the award. That's the time for the government of Alberta to do their approval of the award to issuance of engagement communication, so that's letting the proponent know that they have won. Then, obviously, the fifth and final is the execution, and that's the time from issuance of engagement communication to the completion of the contract execution so that it's actually completed. Those five steps have to go through for any type of procurement process.

9:40

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Thank you, Minister.

Chair, through you again to the minister: when concerns are repeatedly raised by residents and local stakeholders, what mechanisms exist within the ministry to formally review contractor performance? Are there penalty provisions, contract compliance audits, or escalation processes that ensure contractors meet their obligations under outcome 1?

Mr. Dreeshen: Yes, to answer the question. The department uses a progressive demerit system and also financial penalties to document any inadequacies. A demerit would equate to a larger penalty with the possibility of placing the contractor into default. Demerits may be used for a contractor that continually fails to perform in its duties. Transportation and Economic Corridors are obviously committed to ensuring that we have effective processes to monitor the performance of our highway maintenance contractors and to choose the right type of contract for their work so that it manages the responsibilities and the province's resources effectively. We want to make sure that we are that effective and have that day-to-day interaction with our highway maintenance contractors. Those are the penalties and the procedures if there is lack of performance. Again, it's complaint based, so we need that information coming in to our department so we can properly assess those types of penalties.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Thank you.

Chair, again through you to the minister, performance measure 1(a) on page 168 highlights that 75 per cent of the capital plan is directed towards economic corridors. Highway 16 is a key east-west trade corridor running through my riding, and residents have raised concerns about resurfacing timelines and the condition of smaller culvert bridges and drainage structures that support rural mobility and agriculture. Minister, could you elaborate on how pavement condition ratings, freight volumes, life cycle asset management data are used to prioritize resurfacing projects along major corridors such as highway 16?

Mr. Dreeshen: Overall in Budget '26 we do allocate $1.3 billion over three years in capital investments for our highway rehabilitation projects. That, obviously, supports road rehabilitation activities that extend the life of our roads and the safety. How we do it is that the department collects pavement condition data, and that's everything from roughness to cracks and pavement strength, for analysis in the pavement management system. We do that every year.

Now, the pavement management system uses condition and prediction models to identify the required improvements and the year in which that improvement is required for the entire highway network, so there is a bit of a science of the type of base and pavement that's used. There is a predictive model of when that needs to be repaired. There's actually a very interesting graph that shows that if you do proper maintenance at the proper time, you save so much over the life of that road or that asset versus waiting too long to do the proper rehabilitation and maintenance.

If it is left for too long, then the costs get extremely high because you're having to redo the base and essentially start from scratch. There is a very predictive model that shows that maintenance should be maintained at a certain time and rehabilitation at a certain time. That really does save a tremendous amount of taxpayer dollars to maintain assets in our 64,000-lane-kilometre highway network. That's something that we keep on top of. I think our capital maintenance and renewal budget as well, being at a historic 10-year high, goes a long way in catching up to make sure that our highways are maintained and built in a way that Albertans expect as well as making sure that people can get home safely.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Thank you, Minister.

Chair, through you again to the minister: how does your ministry ensure that smaller but critical infrastructure such as culverts and rural bridge structures are not overlooked within corridor-focused capital planning, and what inspection cycles and risk-based assessment tools guide replacement and rehabilitation decisions for these assets?

Mr. Dreeshen: The department does conduct three levels of inspections on those types of structures. That includes, obviously, the simple ones that are visual inspections and visual inspections with the use of specialized equipment as well to do a further analysis as well as in-depth inspections that require inspectors with specialized knowledge or training to go in it – it is very technical in how they can go in and make sure that infrastructure is maintained – and then, obviously, the work of being able to get the right allocated funds to be able to repair them once they are identified.

The Chair: Excellent. Well, thank you very much.

It looks like Member Sweet is up next. You have 10 minutes.

Ms Sweet: Well, thank you, Mr. Chair. Minister, we've talked about ports; let's talk about rail.

Mr. Dreeshen: Light rail?

Ms Sweet: Not light rail. No.

We're going to talk collaboration, outcome 1, key objective 1.3, collaboration with industry stakeholders, other governments, and Indigenous communities to identify and advance nation-building infrastructure projects to increase market access. I'd like to focus on the CRAA in northern Alberta, the coalition that has 20 to 30 organizations, municipalities, industry groups, agriculture, forestry, energy, and regional economic organizations. They have some very specific asks that they have been asking the government to advocate for on behalf of the northern communities to make sure we have rail access and we're getting our product to market.

Minister, northern Alberta municipalities and industries report ongoing inconsistent access to railcars, which has forced some operations to cut shifts and reduce production. What steps are you taking to address these chronic, unreliable issues in freight rail services?

Mr. Dreeshen: Yeah. Great, great question. Freight rail for the class 1 railways that are federally regulated, the great partnerships that we have with both CP and CN is advocacy work, and it's great to see the investments that they do make when it comes to the rail infrastructure here in Alberta, whether that's bridges or maintaining the current rail or adding sidings. Obviously, those are two private companies; those are business decisions that they make. It is something that we do closely monitor and work with the federal government on to make sure, whether it's interswitching rules or regulations, that access to certain areas is maintained.

When I was up in Northwest Territories just recently, they were talking about a fire that damaged the CN rail line going up to Yellowknife and the importance of having that rail line built or repaired. That's, obviously, a decision by CN, but it is something that through the national trade corridors fund is something that – I think CN has actually applied for some federal funding to make sure that they can maintain that rail. It is very important. Access to railcars is important for shippers all across Alberta. I think that they know they have an advocate in this government to be able to help them with the rail access, and it's something that we'll continue to help on the class 1 side.

I would say that when it comes to short lines, it is something that we also collaborate with short-line operators within Alberta to see if there are some opportunities that we can help with. Oyen rail: we signed an MOU with them a couple of years ago to expand their network and to help them with some infrastructure that they have in their area. Short line we help out as well, but with the class 1 it's mostly just advocacy.

Ms Sweet: Thank you, Minister.

I'm just recognizing the time, and I think this is our last block, so I'm going to throw a whole bunch of questions at you. CRAA represents about 300,000 Albertans and industries, with a combination of about $90 billion for Alberta's GDP. First question: how is your ministry ensuring that inadequate rail services does not jeopardize the economic growth in northern Alberta?

Secondly, CRAA recently met with CN to address long-standing services problems. How is the province supporting or participating in those discussions to ensure northern communities and industries see concrete improvements? Because rail regulation is federal, northern municipalities are asking the Alberta government to champion their concerns in Ottawa. How will your ministry alleviate these issues to federal decision-makers to ensure the region receives the federal rail services it needs?

9:50

Industry members describe significant capacity shortage and unfair competition between CN and CP railcar auction. What is the government doing to ensure that regulations are more equitable to access railcars for northern producers? CRAA has highlighted that rail resources such as locomotives, crews, and cars are unevenly deployed across Alberta. How are you advocating to ensure that the northern region is getting fair access and adequate service?

In the winter severe winter-related service disruption happens more often in northern Alberta than in other locations. What actions will the ministry take to push for formal winter rail servicing strategies for the rail companies to ensure that they also in the north have year-round access? And will you support the CRAA's call for mandatory public reporting on railcar fulfillment statistics from CN and CP to ensure transparency and accountability in rail service delivery?

Mr. Dreeshen: Great questions. It's tough to connect them to my estimates, but I'm a large rail proponent, somebody that obviously believes in our rail system. In a former life when I worked with the federal government, we actually did a lot of work working on contractual arrangements and contracts between rail shippers and the railways. I think that fairness in those contracts is something that has improved a lot of accessibility for shippers and rail companies. There was almost an imbalance of the contracts that a shipper would have with a railway. I think that the work that was done, I guess a decade-plus ago, did improve a lot of rail contracts.

You are right. The greater transparency that rail companies can have, better line of sight of delivery of cars, the predictability that users have, is all very important. I think that there is additional reporting of railcars that both CP and CN do, but I'd be the first one to say that I advocate for more transparency just to help out our economy, help out shippers that use the railways. Yes, the railways are important, but it's the shippers that are producing and creating a product that needs to get to market. Their businesses are equally important, and they do rely on rail to be able to ship their products to market. It's important to have greater transparency, greater predictability, and also more fair contracts with the railway as a shipper.

You're very well versed in shippers, and I think that's great to see from the NDP ranks. I know I'm not part of your nomination process, but I wish there were more NDP like you.

Ms Sweet: Thank you, Minister. I don't even know what to do with that. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I appreciate the comment that you don't know how it relates to your estimates, but I would say that economic corridors rule our rail to get access to port, and ensuring that our commodity markets are able to get their commodities to market is fundamentally under your purview. It was 1.3, which is working with all municipalities, which is what CRAA is.

Let's talk about the STIP. You mentioned STIP at 7:30, when you first started, and that the grants are going to go out in June. My understanding when I did the math is that the STIP grants have actually been cut out of your budget. There is a decrease for this year, and RMA has come forward to say the impact on the local communities that are already facing $17 billion in infrastructure deficit, and the 2026 budget further reduces their capacity by cutting the strategic transportation program from $344.9 million to $265.6 million over the next three years.

Rural roads and bridges are basically the backbone of every rural community, as you know. Many municipalities – I feel like we probably have the same conversations with our stakeholders. When you have heavy equipment travelling down many of those rural roads, when you have agriculture equipment moving across those roads, it causes significant impact to many of the rural transportation networks, and municipalities are carrying that load. So they're very concerned about the deduction. I guess the concern that I have is that the grants aren't going to be put out until June, so how are municipalities supposed to proactively plan to ensure that they're able to address the transportation issues and the rural infrastructure and roads in their communities when they're already seeing this deduction and then they're also seeing a transfer deduction from the provincial government to their LGFF?

Mr. Dreeshen: Great question. With STIP, because it's a three-year program, there is a cash-flow issue just showing projects moving in and out of their completion. If there are some discrepancies year over year, a lot of times it's just certain projects coming to completion, and sometimes they're, obviously, more expensive later on in their life.

When it comes to STIP, 163 projects in 61 different municipalities are currently being funded, and new funding applications, as you mentioned, have been in since November. The department: we're currently reviewing them and then coming out in June. As I mentioned before, it is something that we in Alberta provide this type of support to municipalities far more than any other province, and whether it's on the water side through water for life or waste water, STIP is another example of that support for municipalities.

The Chair: Excellent. Member Cyr, you're up. Just a quick comment: our meeting has four minutes left, so maybe guide your questions appropriately to get an answer from the minister.

Mr. Cyr: Yes. Thank you, Minister, and thank you for your entire team. They've worked hard tonight, and you've provided us with a lot of information. I'm very thankful, and I know I can speak for my colleagues on this side that we, too, appreciate all that you do for our roads.

I do want to get into capital maintenance and renewal. On business plan page 170 you put about $2 billion towards capital maintenance and renewal, but I want to go a little bit more specific, because we don't have a lot of time here, when it comes to my constituency.

First off, I'd like to say thank you for the work that you've done for the thin overlay for highway 41 and highway 29. That has really made a difference in my constituency, and I'm very thankful for that. I'm also very thankful for the good work that Emcom has been doing for our road maintenance. This is a challenging winter that we've had. The fine men and women that are running the graders and any snow removal that they've been doing has just been fantastic. I always have some concerns come into my office, but they've dealt with them very professionally, and I'm thankful for that.

I'd also like to give a kudos out to Michael Botros, who is your regional director for north-central zone. When it comes down to some concerns that came through my office, he's worked very professionally and worked through that. If you could pass that on. I have seen his hard work, and I am feeling it.

To get back to one of the concerns, the thin overlays: while I very much appreciate them, the approaches or the sides of the roads seem to be a concern when these are put in. Some of these aprons are six, eight, even up to a foot going off on to the other side roads. You can see it's difficult to get into some of these farmers' properties and to some of these, I guess, county of St. Paul roads. Just to make sure you're aware that this is an ongoing concern for my area, and

it would be nice to see if we could, I guess, go back to putting some sort of a grade going off onto our property, the province's property.

I've got one specific farmer, that is Gary Kozicky, and he's been very passionate and very colourful with his language, but I do feel his concerns. Like a lot of them, they feel that when it comes to the aprons, we've fallen a little short there with the thin overlays. Again, I understand these thin overlays are supposed to be thin, but somehow they're ending up being quite big on the edges at least for my area. I'm sure hoping you're not hearing this as a criticism of not putting more work into my area. I am telling you that I'm very pleased with highway 41 and highway 29 and the work that you've done there.

Mr. Dreeshen: Thank you very much. Please follow up with Michael and my office to make sure, specifically, if there are certain areas where that overlay is too much and it needs to be improved. We can obviously work on that in our capital maintenance budget as well.

You mentioned it beautifully, of the $2 billion, the 10-year high, that Budget '26, if passed, will actually go towards that type of incredible investment to maintain our assets and our road network. It's good to hear about Emcom in your area and the highway maintenance work that they've done. Again, it's all complaint based, and it's great to hear the good stuff and the bad stuff. I appreciate that, and I'll definitely relay that message to Michael Botros.

The Chair: Excellent. Well, I do not hesitate to interrupt, but I must advise the committee that the time allotted for consideration of the ministry's estimates has concluded.

I would like to remind every committee member that we are scheduled to meet tomorrow morning, March 12, at 9 to consider the estimates of the Ministry of Energy and Minerals.

Everyone, have a great night. The meeting is adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 10 p.m.]

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