Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 31st Legislature
Second Session

Standing Committee on Alberta's Economic Future

Tourism and Sport
Consideration of Main Estimates

Monday, March 9, 2026
7 p.m.

Transcript No. 31-2-1

Legislative Assembly of Alberta
The 31st Legislature
Second Session

Standing Committee on Alberta's Economic Future

Wiebe, Ron, Grande Prairie-Wapiti (UC), Chair
Dach, Lorne, Edmonton-McClung (NDP), Deputy Chair

Boparai, Parmeet Singh, Calgary-Falconridge (NDP)
Bouchard, Eric, Calgary-Lougheed (UC)
de Jonge, Chantelle, Chestermere-Strathmore (UC)
Elmeligi, Sarah, Banff-Kananaskis (NDP)
Hoyle, Rhiannon, Edmonton-South (NDP)
Stephan, Jason, Red Deer-South (UC)
van Dijken, Glenn, Athabasca-Barrhead-Westlock (UC)
Wright, Justin, Cypress-Medicine Hat (UC)

Also in Attendance

Goehring, Nicole, Edmonton-Castle Downs (NDP)
Haji, Sharif, Edmonton-Decore (NDP)
Kasawski, Kyle, Sherwood Park (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
Abdul Bhurgri	Research Officer
Rachel McGraw	Research Officer
Warren Huffman	Committee Clerk
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*

Transcript produced by *Alberta Hansard*

Standing Committee on Alberta's Economic Future

Participants

Ministry of Tourism and Sport
Hon. Andrew Boitchenko, Minister
David Goldstein, Deputy Minister
Paul Lamoureux, Assistant Deputy Minister, Sport, Tourism and Recreation

7 p.m. **Monday, March 9, 2026**

[Mr. Wiebe in the chair]

Ministry of Tourism and Sport
Consideration of Main Estimates

The Chair: Good evening, everyone. I would like to call this meeting to order. Welcome to everyone in attendance. The committee has under consideration the estimates of the Ministry of Tourism and Sport for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2027.

I'd ask that we go around the table and have members introduce themselves for the record. Minister, please introduce the officials who are joining you at the table. My name is Ron Wiebe, and I am the MLA for Grande Prairie-Wapiti and the chair of this committee. We will begin, starting to my right.

Mr. Wright: Good evening, everyone. My name is Justin Wright, MLA for the charming constituency of Cypress-Medicine Hat.

Mr. Bouchard: Hi, everyone. I'm Eric Bouchard, MLA for Calgary-Lougheed.

Ms de Jonge: Good evening. Chantelle de Jonge, MLA for Chestermere-Strathmore.

Mr. van Dijken: Glenn Van Dijken, the MLA for Athabasca-Barrhead-Westlock.

Mr. Boitchenko: Good evening, everyone. My name is Andrew Boitchenko, Minister of Tourism and Sport, and I'm here to introduce my absolutely talented executive team. I want to start with the legendary Deputy Minister David Goldstein, Assistant Deputy Minister Paul Lamoureux, and Acting Senior Financial Officer Carmen Vidaurri.

Thank you.

Ms Goehring: Good evening. I'm Nicole Goehring. I'm the MLA for Edmonton-Castle Downs as well as the shadow minister for Tourism and Sport.

Mr. Haji: Good evening. Sharif Haji, MLA for Edmonton-Decore.

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

Mr. Kasawski: I'm Kyle Kasawski, MLA for Sherwood Park.

The Chair: Thank you. It doesn't look like we have anybody online, so just a few housekeeping items to address before we turn to the business at hand. Please note that the microphones are operated by *Hansard* staff. Committee proceedings are live streamed on the Internet and broadcast on Alberta Assembly TV. The audio- and videostream and transcripts of the meeting can be accessed via the Legislative Assembly website. Members participating remotely are encouraged to turn your camera on while speaking and mute your microphones when not speaking. Remote participation: participants who wish to be placed on the speakers list are asked to e-mail or message the committee clerk, and members in the room should signal to the chair. Please set your cellphones and other devices to silent for the duration of the meeting.

After some recent confusion I would like to take a moment to clarify for the members about the substitution process outlined in Standing Order 56. Committee members wishing to have an official substitute must file a notice of submission with both the clerk of the Assembly and the chair of the committee. It is appreciated if you also advise the committee clerk. Substitutions sent by e-mail must be sent directly from the member and not from their constituency office or by caucus staff. Written notices of substitutions must be signed by the original committee member.

Substitutions for chair and deputy chair require 24 hour notice, while other committee members may submit their notices prior to the scheduled start time of the meeting. If the substitution is for the chair or deputy chair role, please make it clear if your substitute is going to be filling in as chair or deputy chair or if you are appointing an existing committee member to that role. In case of a Monday meeting, a chair or deputy chair submission notice must be filed before 4:30 p.m. on Friday, and the original committee member is responsible for ensuring the substitute is prepared to participate in the committee meeting. However, going forward it is expected that the rules regarding substitution notices will be followed. If you have any questions, feel free to contact the committee clerks before your notice of substitution is due.

The speaking rotation: hon. members, the main estimates for the Ministry of Tourism and Sport shall be considered for two hours. Standing Order 59.02 sets out the process for consideration of the main estimates in the legislative policy committees. Suborder 59.01(7) sets out the speaking rotation for this meeting. The speaking rotation chart is available on the committee's internal website, and hard copies have been provided to the ministry officials at the table. For both segments of the meeting blocks of speaking time will be combined if both the minister and the member speaking agree. If debate is exhausted prior to the two hours, the ministry estimates are deemed to have been considered for the time allotted in the main estimates schedule, and the committee will adjourn. Should members have any questions regarding speaking times or the rotation, please e-mail or message the committee clerk about this process. Ministry officials who are present may, at the discretion of the minister, address the committee. Ministry officials seated in the gallery, if called upon, have access to the microphone in the gallery area and are asked to please introduce themselves for the record prior to commencing.

Pages are available to deliver notes and other material between the gallery and the table. Attendees in the gallery may not approach the table. Space permitting, opposition caucus staff may sit at the table to assist the members, however, members have priority to sit at the table at all times.

Points of order will be dealt with as they arise and individual speaking times will be paused, however, the block of the speaking time and the overall two-hour meeting clock will continue to run. Any written material provided in response to questions raised during the main estimates should be tabled by the minister and the Assembly for the benefit of all members.

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

I would now like to invite the minister to begin with your opening marks. You have 10 minutes.

Mr. Boitchenko: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I'm excited, and I'm looking forward to an interactive evening. I hope to answer all of your questions that you may have this evening.

I want to start with sharing a bit about my ministry. This Ministry of Tourism and Sport plays a key role in ensuring that Alberta remains the best place to live, work, visit, and play. With an operating budget of $126 million we continue to work with our partners to showcase Alberta's beauty, encourage healthy lifestyle, and maximize Alberta tourism and sport potential in our province.

Sport, physical activity, and recreation are critical to the well-being of our communities. It supports mental and physical health, boosts

community spirit, and keeps kids out of trouble. That is why we are investing in athlete development, recreation infrastructure, affordable programming, and the hosting of major sport events in our province. Through the every kid can play program our government is breaking down financial barriers to sport and recreation in our province. Since its launch in 2023 the program has supported over 287,000 children and youth by offsetting registration and equipment costs. I am pleased to say that Budget 2026 provides stable and ongoing funding to continue this work.

Albertans also need up-to-date, accessible space to stay active. Budget 2026 invests $9 million to continue helping build and revitalize sport and recreation infrastructure. Since 2024 the active communities initiative has supported 35 projects across the whole province. Budget 2026 invests more than $40 million in sport and recreation, providing funding for provincial sport organizations in our province, safe sport resources, coaching development, and injury prevention.

The Alberta's future leaders program helps provide community sport and recreation programs for Indigenous youth in northern Alberta and to host the Alberta Games and to support Team Alberta athletes as they prepare to compete at the Canada Games. Budget 2026 continues our investment in Podium Alberta, which directly supports Alberta's high-performance athletes to train and compete at the highest level of sport. This program eases financial barriers, covering costs associated with the training, equipment, coaching, and competitions. Last year alone Podium Alberta supported 240 athletes across 40 different sports in our province.

7:10

Speaking of high-performance athletes, my ministry works closely with our partners to promote Alberta as a premier sport destination in the country. Through our major sport event program my ministry has supported 43 national and international major sport events across the province since 2024. Budget 2026 provides over $22 million over the next three years to bring major sport opportunities to our communities. Hosting major sport events generates millions of dollars in economic impact and boosts Alberta's reputation as a premiere sport tourism destination in the country.

It's not just big events that attract visitors to our province; it is our reputation as a premiere tourism destination. From being named one of the best places to travel in 2026 to being voted the most desirable destination in the world, Alberta's visitor economy is leading Canada. This growth can largely be attributed to the success of our provincial tourism strategy. Since the launch of our tourism strategy two years ago visitor spending has grown nearly 40 per cent thanks to the marketing, improving air access, and working collaboratively with industry to develop our tourism offerings in the province.

In 2024 we broke the record with visitor spending, reaching $14.4 billion, and again in 2025, reaching $15.2 billion. These results put us ahead of schedule to meet our goal of $25 billion in visitor spending by 2035.

Tourism is Alberta's number one service export and fourth-9largest export overall in the province, with the sector supporting more than 260,000 jobs across the whole province. This growth in access does not happen by accident; it requires continued investment in Travel Alberta, and Budget 2026 provides over $75 million to support Travel Alberta's destination promotion and development efforts. They deliver great returns on investment, with the attributed revenues for Travel Alberta's marketing efforts in 2024-25 reaching $449 million, almost $450 million. The ROI, also known as return on investment, was a staggering 31 to 1, meaning for every dollar Travel Alberta invests into marketing it generates $31 in visitor spending.

Our government invests directly in local businesses across the province to Travel Alberta. This $20 million annual investment supports, one, new and improved products and experiences; two, rural development and promotion, events and festivals, regional destination organizations, strategic partnerships, and Indigenous entrepreneurs and operators in our province. This investment has supported tourism development in over 16 communities across the province, with over 75 per cent direct to smaller urban and rural areas. This funding incentivizes over $200 million in private capital, generating a return of over $12.50 for every dollar invested.

Another important factor that is driving our growth is Indigenous-led tourism. One in three international visitors are actively seeking authentic Indigenous experiences when travelling to our province. In 2026 Indigenous tourism in Alberta is expected to bring $293 million in revenues and create more than 4,000 new jobs. This helps create meaningful employment and also ownership opportunities for Indigenous people in our province. That is why our government is investing $2 million more annually to support Indigenous tourism in Alberta, more than any other province in Canada. I'm proud to highlight the amazing accomplishments of my small but mighty ministry. We are working together, tasked with ambitious goals, and we have delivered time and time again. We still have lots of work ahead of us to deliver on many mandates and continue to implement the provincial tourism strategy. It is an honour to lead such an extraordinary team.

I would like to say thank you. Before I end – I still have 30 seconds – I want to say that our strategy is to make sure that we reach a $25 billion industry by 2035, and I say that, with our team in the ministry and Travel Alberta, we're getting there. We are proud that we can also work with Indigenous tourism along the way. I'm looking forward to expand. I'm looking forward to reaching our goal. I'm actually looking forward tonight to answer your questions, as you may have, for our ministry.

Thank you.

The Chair: Well, thank you, Minister.

Before we begin the question period, I would like to ask Mr. Stephan to introduce himself for the record.

Mr. Stephan: Well, thank you very much. Jason Stephan, MLA for Red Deer-South.

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now begin with the question and answer portion of the meeting. For the first 50 minutes members of the Official Opposition and the minister may speak. Hon. members will be able to see the timer for the speaking block both in the committee room and on Microsoft Teams.

Member Goehring, would you like to combine your speaking time with the minister?

Ms Goehring: I would like to combine. Minister, are you open to doing that?

Mr. Boitchenko: Can we do block time? I'll try to answer all your questions.

Ms Goehring: Okay.

The Chair: So the time will not be shared.

Member, you have 10 minutes to ask your questions and make comments to the minister. Once you have done so, the minister will have up to 10 minutes to respond. Go ahead, Member Goehring.

Ms Goehring: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I just have to say, Minister, that I'm a little disappointed that we're not going back and forth. The minister in last year's estimates was open to going back and forth, and it was just a much easier way to have a conversation and get real-time answers. But I respect your decision not to.

Mr. Boitchenko: It's my first estimates. I will try my best to answer as much as I can. I'll take my notes, and I'll try to get most of your questions answered right away.

Ms Goehring: Thank you.

Tourism in Budget 2026 is a sector of the government that is taxing more and spending less. The 45 per cent increase in tourism levy revenue to $200 million significantly exceeds the ministry's $127 million expense, and that gap will widen as the ministry budget falls to $112 million by 2028-29. The government's approach is clearly to enable private-sector led growth through regulatory frameworks like the All-season Resorts Act and destination management organizations rather than direct public investment. Your government has introduced a new tax on vehicle rentals. I would like you to answer how that was selected and why, out of all of the things that were available, it was chosen to tax vehicle rentals. We see an increase of the levy by 150 per cent.

Albertans, as you know, Minister – it's shown on page 160 of the business plan – are the majority of customers in the tourism industry at 31.6 per cent in 2024. Canadians, in general, were 4.1 per cent, and international were 2.4 per cent. Ultimately, this is a significant tax increase on Albertans during a time of an affordability crisis. That is a 150 per cent tax increase. Some in the industry are referring to it as a provincial sales tax. As you mentioned, tourism is Alberta's fourth-largest overall export. When looking at this budget, that's not reflected in the support that should be given to the tourism industry.

To quote the tourism industry association of Alberta: It's difficult to comprehend the logic of government to limit investment in tourism at a time that Alberta is leading the country fourfold in visitor spending growth and both meaningfully and sustainably contributing to the very noncyclical revenue diversity this province has sought for decades.

7:20

This increase is a tax on industry productivity. It should be offensive to most Albertans that these taxes have slipped through. How were Albertans consulted on the creation of these new and increased sales taxes? Industry partners have said that this budget has created distrust and confusion. In a time when they are doing well, as you mentioned in your opening remarks, why aren't they seeing a significant investment? This budget significantly decreases public trust in the government that they can actively improve the quality of life in Albertans.

Tourism and sport are both vital to Alberta's well-being. Tourism growth matters greatly to Alberta and to Albertans, from the rural economies it supports and the 1 in 10 Albertans who owe their jobs to the industry, to the growing number of businesses that see a bright future on Alberta's tourism landscape and are investing in their own potential.

The Premier's earlier mandate letter to the Minister of Tourism and Sport reflected a desire to ensure visitors to Alberta paid their fair share of taxes and fees to support the tourism sector's growth. The reality is that additional dollars generated by the ATL increase are continuing to go directly to the government's general revenue account. The vast majority of the visitors who will actually pay the increased costs are not visitors to Alberta, rather Albertans themselves. It's another tax on the citizens of the province at a time where affordability issues matter greatly to their way of life.

Not only has this government failed to invest in its most successful industries, but it is actively scaring away investors and creating an environment of instability by refusing to denounce the growing separatist narrative in this province. How can we expect the growth outlined in this business plan when separation is creating instability?

Tourism and Sport expense falls to $127 million, a decrease of $8.4 million, or 6 per cent from the 2025-26, declining further to $112 million by 2028. Ultimately, despite historic revenue and an affordability crisis, Albertans have been met with a 150 per cent tax increase, an overall decrease in sport and physical activity. The tourism industry has been successful in spite of this government and many challenges that were out of their control, like the wildfires to pandemic and travel restrictions. Now we have a Premier and government that are creating more instability in this sector because of their support of separating and their stance on immigration.

Performance indicator 1(d) on page 161 of the business plan speaks to tourism sector employment. The Premier has stated a commitment to immigration-focused referendum in the fall. Many businesses in the tourism sector are very concerned about any efforts that may reduce immigration or make it more difficult to recruit and hire immigrants in the workforce. Some businesses in the Bow Valley have as much as 85 per cent of their staff on work visas, student visas, temporary foreign workers, and short-term visas. Many of those immigrants are on short-term visas while they work towards getting their permanent residency. Many of those workers could not come to Canada if their children couldn't go to school or if they couldn't see a doctor.

To be clear, these workers pay just as much taxes as Canadian citizens. Some businesses have already begun to lose workers due to federal government delays in processing immigration paperwork and applications. Minister, do you think that those delays are acceptable? Has the minister considered how this anti-immigration sentiment will impact the ministry's ability to meet this performance indicator if immigrants aren't attracted to come work here, can't get in the province, or can't stay because of uncertain and unwelcoming immigration policies?

Alberta's tourism industry includes many temporary foreign workers working in restaurants, recreation and entertainment, accommodation, and/or other service jobs. They have been integral workers who have contributed to the success of our tourism industry. In 2024 nearly 40 per cent of workers in Alberta tourism industry held closed work permits obtained through the temporary foreign worker program. With the reduction of temporary foreign workers in the province, what type of supports will the ministry provide for our tourism-based industries who depend on temporary foreign workers? What is the government's strategy to ensure that these jobs are not left unfulfilled, putting a strain on Alberta's small businesses? With the reduction of temporary foreign workers into Alberta it's very possible that we see a lull in the labour force, leaving many service jobs unfulfilled. This will definitely impact the tourism industry.

How is this ministry supporting Albertans choosing a career path in the tourism sector? That is something that we've been hearing for a long time from the industry. They want to see a plan that supports Albertans going into a very fulfilling career in the tourism sector. However, I don't see anything in this budget that speaks to that.

Now, when we go back to talking about separatism, the government has been asked very clearly to denounce separatism, yet there's nothing in this budget that's clearly saying that. Tourism in Alberta relies heavily on being Canadian. My next line of questions relate to specific

areas of the budget that are impacted by the separatism rhetoric and questions on contingency plans. Some examples of the budget mention relationship with airlines and relying on airline traffic. How much federal funding does Alberta get for sports relative to other provinces, for example, hosting national and international competitions and running national sports programs? How will the minister negotiate further funding for Alberta athletes and sports facilities? Since this government has encouraged conversations of separatism, how will the provincial government support athletes who received federal funding if Alberta is its own nation?

With continuing to encourage and perpetuate conversations of separatism quite heavily over the last year, how much has the ministry put aside in contingency funding in the event of separation? When tourists come through Banff and Jasper and Canmore, they spend their money in our local economies, supporting local coffee shops, the mom-and-pop restaurants, and boutique shops. How will the government make up the loss of local economic spending when our national parks are not as accessible because the province has separated?

With Air Canada and WestJet being Canadian companies, how will our national air industry function if Alberta were to separate?

The Chair: Minister, you have up to 10 minutes to respond.

Mr. Boitchenko: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you for the questions. There are quite a few of them. I tried to keep track and will try to answer all of them, maybe in a different order.

I would like to start by saying that this Premier that we have is the strongest supporter of tourism in our province's history. The amount of work she's doing and the amount of work I'm doing with my ministry and the Premier – even to start with the All-season Resorts Act, we are creating new opportunities. Let's remember what I've read earlier today, that we are leading Canada in growth and expenditure. In 2024 we were four times our national average tourism spending in the country. In 2025 we still remain double the national average, and we are the only province in Canada that still continues to see the growth of tourists from the United States. Tourism is the fastest-growing sector in the world.

With that, my mandate letter from the Premier was to make sure that tourists pay their fair share of fees and taxes in our province. I will actually cite the line from my mandate later if I may. It says here,

> [to work] collaboratively with Treasury Board and Finance to ensure that visitors to Alberta pay a fair amount of tax and fees to ensure Alberta can grow its tourism industry and related infrastructure in a sustainable fashion.

I want to point something out, "[to work] collaboratively with the Treasury Board," because ultimately it sits with Treasury Board, and we have to work collaboratively.

We are diversifying our economy by growing the tourism sector in our province, and that's something probably everyone wants to see in the province here. I have some notes here as well to speak to the destination and experiences.

7:30

Alberta is a premier destination with unique experiences, and we are keeping them affordable and accessible for Albertans and Albertan families with the lowest tourism levies nation-wide. We are committed to ensuring that visitors to Alberta pay their fair share of taxes and fees to ensure Alberta can grow its tourism sector in a sustainable fashion. Every dollar from the tourism levy is reinvested back into Alberta for Albertans and driving economic growth across the whole province. We are ensuring that tourism growth is supported by those who benefit from it the most by leveraging visitor contributions to responsibly grow and sustain the Alberta tourism sector.

I want to mention something else as well here, speaking to the car levies and levies increasing. By far visitors to Alberta are the ones who are renting the cars in Alberta, and in this way these fees are put back on the travellers to our province rather than Albertans in our province. When we have to provide and make sure that visitors pay their fair share, we're trying to find a way where most of it lies on the tourists that would like to come and see our beautiful province.

I guess my team would add a little bit more on some numbers here, especially when it comes to the temporary workers. I would probably ask Deputy Minister David Goldstein to share some numbers and our plan on the temporary workers' permits.

Mr. Goldstein: Thanks, Minister.

Just a quick circle back on the levy issue. I think, Mr. Chair, the member asked a question about the division between foreign contribution or international contribution, non-Albertan contribution versus Albertan, and the cost issues. Just to be clear, while the number of visitors in Alberta is predominantly Albertans, the revenue is actually predominantly non-Albertans travelling to Alberta. Over half of the revenue in the visitor economy is from non-Albertans. Therefore, when we talk about issues like the levy, which is not just invested in Travel Alberta but across a number of tourism-related projects within the government of Alberta, this is predominantly aimed at non-Albertans.

I wanted to follow up, Mr. Chair. The member asked a really good question about temporary foreign workers and the availability of labour. Again, I think there are some misconceptions. Especially, I believe, she referenced the Bow Valley. I think there is a misnomer between the different types of visas and some of these younger workers. Let's state first that this sector is the largest employer of young Canadians and folks around the world. I think sometimes the temporary foreign worker issue is confused because through the federal program there are about six or seven different streams. Tourism is one of them, but agriculture and others make up a fairly significant portion of that program. I think it's often confused with the working vacation visa. You know, when you go to Banff and you hear the Aussies and Kiwis, those young people are here on a different visa, not the temporary foreign worker visa.

I think folks in our industry would begrudgingly agree that there's been an overreliance on the temporary foreign worker program over the years and that young Canadians and Albertans deserve that opportunity. It's our understanding that that's the government's intent for this.

I believe, if I can, Minister, the member also asked a question about rural tourism. Would you like it, or would you like me to continue?

Mr. Boitchenko: Sure. If you can touch on rural tourism, and then I'll finish up.

Mr. Goldstein: I just wanted to share. Mr. Chair, the member asked a good question about rural tourism. I just want to reiterate that since Travel Alberta's mandate was expanded to be an economic development organization, over 80 per cent of the economic development dollars in Travel Alberta are going into rural communities, small communities. In fact, over 65 projects have been funded over the last three years alone. That, as the minister raised in his statement, is about $40 million, which has triggered another $200 million in extra private-sector support. We are the envy of the provincial organizations. I understand the member's concern about the funding level, but we want to assure

members of the committee that Travel Alberta is still the best funded provincial organization in the country right now.

Mr. Boitchenko: Okay. If I may just touch a little bit on the fees we're collecting, we can understand that the return on investment is tremendous in this industry, and 70 to 80 per cent of the levies and fees going towards the value of the tourist levy was distributed to Travel Alberta for destination marketing and promotion. It is that particular marketing promotion around the world of our beautiful province that brings more tourists to Alberta than other provinces in Canada. This is what actually supports our local economy.

Speaking of rural, a majority of investments are going to rural investments. When visitors come to Alberta, we've got to remember that they shop here, they dine here, they stay in Alberta. They are supporting the rural economy.

We also have developed 10 new tourism development zones in Alberta to make sure that the tourists that come to our province go and see the rest of the province that we have. We know that everybody wants to see Jasper and Banff and Lake Louise, Kananaskis. We have a lot of tourists, but we want to showcase the rest of the province and also be able to spread a little bit of that traffic that's coming to see our beautiful province on a year-round basis. Instead of just coming in, like, summer seasons or shoulder seasons, we want to make sure that they also go and see our province year-round. That creates certainty for our local small towns, rural hotels, restaurants, and lodging.

So although there is a little bit of an increase in fees, the fees are actually coming from travellers, and we ensure that by making sure we're charging car rentals. You know, when people come here, they can rent a car, we charge the fee, they go see the province, and we support province and local businesses through those fees. So we charge the fees. It went up a little bit, but it's getting reinvested at a staggering rate. I see that as a benefit to the province, and I want to make sure that we continue to grow.

We still have Alberta spending about $2 billion more in B.C. than B.C. residents spend in our province. We want to change that and want to make sure that's balanced.

The Chair: Member Goehring for your next set of questions, and if I could just remind you to speak through the chair, that would be awesome. Thank you.

Ms Goehring: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you very much, Minister and Deputy Minister, for responding to some of the questions. There were comments about a lot of attraction coming from international tourists, also the great work that Travel Alberta is doing.

You know, when I look at the website, it says: Travel Alberta/Official Destination Website/Canada's Alberta. Again, when we're going back to this talk of separation and the damage it's doing to the industry, I would like to know what the minister's contingency plan is on this. The way to get to Alberta from international is by air. We are a landlocked province. We rely heavily on Air Canada and WestJet, which are Canadian companies which would not exist if we are not a part of Canada.

I'm curious what contingency plans you have because on page 232 of the government estimates the transfers from government of Canada are $640 million. So what are your plans about separating? The whole success of Travel Alberta is advertising that it's Canada's Alberta. It's Canada's wild side. It's heavily reliant on Alberta being part of Canada. The international draw to sporting events is because we are part of Canada. So I would like to know more about what the contingency plan is.

7:40

Outcome 2 on page 161 of the business plan, involvement in sport. We look at what the outcomes and targets are under the performance metrics. There's a youth active recreation and youth organized sport. We see very, very little increase in the projected measures, yet girl in sport is no longer a target. With the introduction of the Fairness and Safety in Sport Act, key objective 2.6, to ensure fair and safe participation for women and girls in sport, I'm curious what tracking you're doing to see if this has actually improved girls' access into sport. We know that girls decline sport at around age 12. That used to be tracked. It's no longer a metric, so I'm curious how successful this implementation has been. I know, hearing from community, from parents, from girls, from women, that this act has actually decreased their desire to be involved in sport, so I'm curious why you're not tracking it.

We see a decrease in participation for youth in sports from 55.6 to 55, and active recreation sees only a .2 per cent increase. What is the reasoning for that? You talked in your opening statement about investing in youth sport, but your performance measures do not reflect that.

When it comes to increasing awareness and the incredible success of the tourism industry targeting international travellers, yet this budget doesn't reflect support overall for the industry. You talk about the levy being this great thing, it's a promoter, yet it goes to Treasury Board. You have to ask for money to spend back in your ministry, Minister. Industry has been asking for that money to be transparently spent. When there's a significant 150 per cent tax increase on it, we don't know how it is actually being reinvested outside of Travel Alberta back into sport and recreation.

Now I'd like to go into community infrastructure and sport. Of the $38 million allocated to sport, physical activity, and recreation can the minister explain how much is specifically allocated to funding local sports programs, and how many programs does the ministry currently support? Additionally, what metrics does the ministry use to gauge success of supporting local sports programs?

Alberta, specifically Calgary, has been home for many Olympic-level training facilities and athletes. However, many of these facilities, like the Olympic Oval for example, are decades-old infrastructure that have not seen upgrades. The luge and the skeleton track have already become unusable without the proper infrastructure funding to ensure it is still usable. As a result, professional athletes will opt out or be forced to train in other facilities in other cities and provinces that can provide better resources. Is the priority of this ministry to ensure that Alberta does not lose high-quality professional athletes? How much funding will the government allocate to upgrading and retaining these training facilities? What actions are being taken to keep Alberta's exceptional talent here in the province, or does the government intend to let these athletes train and succeed in other places?

Government estimates page 227, decrease on line 3.4, support for sport, decrease in capital grants, 3.5 and 3.6, is not supporting affordability. These are programs that lower income families depend on, and with an affordability crisis these are essential funds.

Now I would like to start about the Indigenous support that the ministry has shown. There is one mention of the word "Indigenous" in the business plan. It mentions partnerships. Today we had an unprecedented experience in the House with the leaders from the Indigenous communities asking for an unprecedented vote that they do not have trust or confidence in the government. We heard from treaty chiefs of treaties 6, 7, and 8, and they asked for a nonsupport vote of this Premier and this government. They've said that they deserve leadership grounded in accountability, stability, and respect for treaty.

Now, you spoke a lot about the Indigenous partners. I don't see it specifically in the budget. The Alberta Indigenous Games, Minister, are held annually here in Edmonton. It's the largest Indigenous summer multisport event in North America featuring over 7,000 youth athletes from treaties 6, 7, and 8 as well as participants from across Canada and the U.S. The games focus on sport development, culture, and education. Despite their importance there is no mention of supporting Indigenous sport initiatives in Budget 2026. If you could point to the line items where that spending comes from, that would be greatly appreciated.

Moving on, hearing from industry, the Alberta Hotel & Lodging Association has said that while hotels are subject to extensive regulation, taxation, and enforcement, commercial short-term rentals continue to operate largely unregulated, evading the cost of doing business. Alberta's short-term rental market grew by 33 per cent between 2022 and '24, making it a national outlier with 11,600 whole homes operating as commercial short-term rentals in summer of 2024, removing them from the long-term housing market. They're asking: how will the government ensure short-term rentals are included and better regulated going forward?

We've heard from the Tourism Industry Association of Alberta, TIAA. It has quoted Darren Reeder: I've yet to see a government prove that selective increased taxation efforts afford a path to improved economic output or productivity, yet this is exactly what the government of Alberta has done with its decision to increase the Alberta tourism levy by 150 per cent effective April 1, 2026, generating an expected $200 million in the coming budget year. One hundred per cent of the incremental increase will flow not into the very sector producing outsized economic results for the province; rather, into general revenue, rendering both the government's and Travel Alberta's ambition of growing tourism to $25 billion by 2035 a considerably steeper climb.

Budget '26-27 has unfortunately clarified that the government no longer views the Alberta tourism levy as an industry-enabling, industry-focused effort to grow Alberta's tourism industry and support the government's vision of a $25 billion tourism industry.

The Chair: Minister, you now have 10 minutes to respond.

Mr. Boitchenko: Perfect. Thank you. Well, thank you for your questions. I'll try to go as much as I can in order here. If I miss anything, you will have an opportunity to maybe ask again. I want to start with the website and rebranding that we have for Canada's Alberta. It has been put there because Alberta is Canada's province, and our government, our United Conservative Party, strongly believes in a strong, sovereign Alberta within a united Canada, a statement that has been said over and over and over again, and I don't think it will ever change. We do believe in a strong and sovereign Alberta within a united Canada. That's why we also have a website saying, "Canada's Alberta," and people around the world love it. They love our province, they love the beauty of our province, and we're constantly the top travelling destination in the world to visit.

The second question: you were talking about fairness and safety in sport, about females' sports activities. I want to start with saying that sport is for everyone, which is why our government is working on making sports fair, safe, and accessible for all Albertans. We believe that no athlete should be afraid of playing in the sports that they love, and they should feel free and safe to participate in sports where we have women's competitions only.

7:50

I would like to also cite the percentage of how much we're spending and the athletes themselves in the sports activities. We have 51 per cent of athletes receiving podium athlete funding for women over the past four years. We have 49.6 per cent of Canada Games participants that are women and girls. Fifty-one per cent of Arctic Winter Games participants are women and girls. We also have coaching development through national coaching certification programs. Fifty-four per cent of multisport training participants are women and girls.

Provincial sport organizations, PSOs: over 40 per cent of PSO members are women and girls. Ninety per cent of Alberta-funded PSOs have adopted gender equity policies, and an additional 5 per cent have reported that the policy is in order. We have 53 per cent of PSOs that have female staff participation greater than 40 per cent. Forty-seven per cent of Alberta's PSO executive staff are women. We have 43 per cent of PSO board positions held by women. Fifty-eight per cent of PSOs have at least 40 per cent female board memberships, and 40 per cent of PSOs have at least 50 per cent female board membership. So we can see about 50 per cent almost throughout here. I just want to, you know, point out that we feel and we think it's fair when the split is this close.

When it comes to the sport infrastructure and funding spent in sports, you were asking why it's not increased. I would say that when we have a deficit of over $9 billion in this province and we manage to keep our budget for sports untouched and continue as the same, this is a win for Albertans. This is a win for everyone who plays sports in our province. I have to agree that we do have a problem with aging infrastructure not only in Alberta. I think we have aging infrastructure problems across Canada. We have so much infrastructure coming near the life cycle.

I had a great opportunity back in August of last year to be at the FPT meeting. Federal-provincial-territorial ministers of sports were getting together to discuss the overall sport in the country and individual provinces. We brought up sport infrastructure that we had, you know, issues with because they're coming to near the life cycle. At first we were not getting anywhere, and then our team and I offered to strike a committee and I offered myself to volunteer chairing this committee so we can put together all the aging sport infrastructure, first of all in Alberta, in our province, as well as the rest of the provinces. That proposal was supported by a majority, and today we're actually running the committee. I'm chairing this committee. We're putting together the list of infrastructure across our province that is in dire need of repairs, renovations, and maybe upgrades. We're putting the list together, and I'll be advocating this list to the federal, provincial, and territorial ministers with the hope that we can get the federal government to participate in renovating, repairing the aging infrastructure that we have.

Our active community initiatives: we're also spending $9 million to either repair or build new infrastructure for the sport activities in our province for youth, for kids, because I truly believe that the more kids we can have off the street in the sport infrastructure in the province, the less trouble kids are going to have on the street, the less catalytic converters we're going to be having stolen on the streets. If people, youth can commit themselves to sports, if they can engage themselves in a sport, if they have opportunity to participate in sport, we will have fewer troubled kids on the street. We're going to have a healthier, both mentally and physically, community in the province. I'm advocating big time for expanding our infrastructure as well as repairing aging infrastructure in our province.

You touched on Indigenous sports in our province. I'll cite from my notes here. The Indigenous Sport Council of Alberta is a provincial multisport organization and the direct recipient of the Indigenous bilateral supplement. ISCA receives a total of $377,000 annually, which supports their operational capacity and the delivery of culturally relevant sport programming for Indigenous children and youth. Of the sport participation support program $80,000 goes to

support rural life-saving societies and delivers the Indigenous swimming programs in the province; $57,000 is going to basketball Alberta's Indigenous 3x3, which is, actually, I would say, my favourite type of sport these days; $40,000 goes towards school sport, Alberta's Indigenous school sport support; $70,000 in spending for the Alberta Rugby Football Union's Aboriginal and Métis outreach program; $75,000 goes to support the gloves, not guns program to empower women and Indigenous youth through boxing and mentorship; $80,000 goes to support the Alberta winter association Indigenous and learn to train youth and booster program.

You can see that I can go on and on and on with this list. We spend a significant amount of dollars to support Indigenous sport and participation in the province, and I'm proud of that. In my previous ministry and role as parliamentary secretary to Indigenous Relations I got an opportunity to visit a lot of First Nations and Métis settlements, and I've seen the difference between the kids who participate in sport and who don't. When I got into this ministry and I saw how much we're spending, I'm proud. I'm proud that we can help and support Indigenous youth, Indigenous kids in sports as well.

We have a couple of other questions that you asked here that I probably have to, given the time, maybe get back to you in my next block. We have also Team Alberta. We have Team Alberta with 250-plus people in Whitehorse as we speak right now. We have kids up north right now.

The Chair: Okay. Ms Goehring, we have 10 minutes left in this segment.

Ms Goehring: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I heard a lot of information, and I appreciate the attempt to try and get through it all. It's a lot. It would be easier if we were going back and forth, but I respect that.

I just want to go back to your statement around separatism. It is something that this government has said over and over and over, and it's not clearly denouncing separating from Canada. While that's the language that your Premier has approved, that is not language that gives confidence in economic investors, the Indigenous communities. Albertans in general aren't feeling that confidence. It's a phrase that you've been approved to say. It's just not resonating, Minister.

Just to finish off the Tourism Industry Association of Alberta – I was cut off before the last part of his quote. It was that it has simply become, referring to the levy, a provincial sales tax on accommodation by another name. They're not believing it either, Minister, when you're saying all these fancy things that the tourism levy is doing. The industry itself is not believing that it being put into general revenue is actually supporting the tourism industry.

The $18 million total capital plan stands in contrast to the sector's $15.5 billion visitor spending target, underscoring the government's reliance on private-sector investment for tourism infrastructure and development. U.S. tariff risks on geopolitical instability are continuing to cause stress within investment in the province.

8:00

The rural all-season resorts legislation is something that I would like to focus on now. We're hearing over and over from community, from the Indigenous community, from the locations of these all-season resorts that there was no consultation. The oversight requirements for all-seasons: where is that money coming from? Is any funding going toward consultation regarding land rights, water usage? There have been lots of claims of robust consultation. Who was consulted in that?

The All-season Resorts Act and designated areas relates to outcome 1, "Tourism is a key driver of diversified economic prosperity across the province." This outcome includes developing innovative strategies to attract investment, foster sustainable development. Key objective 1.2 is "implement the All-season Resorts Act by expanding opportunities for sustainable tourism in the Alberta Rockies with a special focus on the Kananaskis, Crowsnest Pass, David Thompson, and Grande Cache regions." It's on page 160 of the business plan. As part of this objective the first three all-season resort designated areas have been defined: Nakiska, Fortress, and Castle. There are a series of questions associated with these destinations. The government has stated that one of its original intentions with a tourism strategy in the all-season resorts was to distribute tourism opportunities across the province, focusing on areas where tourism was not as developed. Why are two of the three destinated areas in Kananaskis the most popular tourism destinations in Alberta?

Over 5 million people per year visit Kananaskis Country. Many issues arise out of this high level of visitation, from parking to traffic to wildlife encounters. How will introducing two new all-season resorts compound these issues, and how would the ministry of tourism account for these challenges in development requirements and approvals? What are the cumulative effects on visitor use patterns, visitor expectation and satisfaction with having two new all-season resort areas 13 kilometres apart from each other? Has an economic or a visitor demand been measured or demonstrated to have two new all-season resorts so close to each other? They will be in direct competition. If the objective was to spread out visitor use, why have two resorts been set so close together? What local communities will benefit from these all-season resorts? Were they consulted or involved in defining the boundaries of these new all-season resort areas? According to those communities they were not. How were First Nations engaged or consulted in the designation of the all-season resorts designated areas? Again, the Indigenous communities, First Nations are saying that they were not consulted. What role will they play in these developments?

Water is a scarce supply across Alberta. The South Saskatchewan basin is closed to new water licences, yet all three new all-season resorts are in the South Saskatchewan basin. The development of all-season resorts will undoubtedly use a large volume of water for toilets, showers, pools, spas, landscaping, restaurants, and so much more. Through the chair: where will this water come from? Fortress's current water licence will only cover about half of what they need for their draft proposal. While water conservation, recycling, and increased efficiencies can address part of the need, it will not cover all of what is required. This issue is further compounded in the Castle where water is even more scarce. Where will the water come from? How will the minister explain to downstream users, including municipalities, ranchers, farmers, and other businesses, that an all-season resort takes priority of water use? What will happen to these resort proposals if water is not available?

All of the designated all-season resort areas involve changes to provincial park boundaries. This is particularly concerning for Nakiska, which was designated by removing over 900 hectares from Evan-Thomas provincial recreation area and Fortress, which involved the removal of 130 hectares from Spray Valley provincial park. Why were park boundaries amended for these developments? In bill debate we proposed amendments to ensure any park boundary amendments were the subject of public and First Nations consultation. The minister at the time said that all standard public consultation practices would be followed.

> I want to be clear that the All-season Resorts Act does not replace existing standards for development on Crown land. That bears repeating. No existing environmental or Indigenous consultation standards will be replaced. Any new development proposed under the All-season Resorts Act will be required to maintain the same rigorous environmental reviews and consultations with Indigenous people prior to the approval being obtained.

Clearly, this was not the case when the decision was made. Why were Albertans, local communities, First Nations, and even public park servants not consulted on these changes to the park boundaries? Who was consulted?

Parks are a promise that a government makes to Albertans that commit an area of land to be managed under the Provincial Parks Act, which legally defines the kinds of development and activity that are permitted. Amending boundaries for developments goes directly against its intentions and weakens the entire park process. How did the minister engage with the Ministry of Forestry and Parks to make the decision to remove land base from parks? How can the minister justify changing park boundaries to allow for development without consulting anyone?

Outcome 1 speaks to fostering sustainable development. How is changing park boundaries at all sustainable development? What kind of signal does this send to other developers? Will other developers now expect for park boundaries to change to allow for their development ideas? What happens if they want to build a neighbourhood or a gondola or a gas station? Will all of these things be permitted without consultation or thorough environmental impact assessments because the minister has the discretion to designate it as an all-season resort area? Through the chair: how can Albertans trust this government to do anything sustainable on the land when the first thing they do is remove park boundaries; therefore removing commitments to environmental protection and public recreation sustainability?

Lands that are managed under the Provincial Parks Act come with a set of regulations that are enforced by conservation officers and park officials. Tourism and Sport has no such series of regulations or enforcement branch. Nakiska is part of the Kananaskis village area, which contains a complex set of trails and staging areas. Many of these areas are now split between the Evan-Thomas . . .

The Chair: Members, that concludes the first portion of the questions for the Official Opposition. We will now move to the 20 minutes for the government caucus and the minister.

Mr. Stephan, would you like to combine your time with the minister?

Mr. Stephan: If he would permit, Chair, I'd love to share some time with our great minister.

The Chair: Minister.

Mr. Boitchenko: It's a tough decision, but we might as well maybe go back and forth a little bit.

Mr. Stephan: Sure. Why not? We don't have very much time. It's a little different.

Thanks, Minister. I appreciate to share some time and appreciate to talk about the very best province in all of Canada. What a beautiful, wonderful place, and what a happy Ministry of Tourism and Sport.

I want to ask the minister about the first outcome on page 160 of the minister's department business plan. We have this awesome goal of increasing the visitor economy to $25 billion in annual visitor expenditures by 2035. That's a super big number, but we're having so many people that love to come to Alberta. I'd like to, kind of, reference; it's outlined in the higher ground tourism sector strategy. Can the minister explain how his department continues to implement the tourism sector strategy towards this goal?

Mr. Boitchenko: Sure. Thank you for the great question. If I may, I want to just go back a little bit and touch on some of the answers that were asked by members just to indicate how much support we got for all-season resorts, and then I'll get right back to you to answer your question.

8:10

You know, when it comes to all-season resorts, I want to indicate that we had strong support of Albertans to do all-season resorts. We also had concluded an extended consultation with First Nations, with neighbouring communities. We have record of that, and I would like to maybe read it now or maybe share throughout the questions tonight. A province-wide public survey found that 90 per cent of Albertans support growing the tourism sector to help diversify the economy; 73 per cent of Albertans supported responsible all-season resort development on provincial Crown lands.

Alberta currently has no all-season resorts on provincial public land. Our neighbouring NDP B.C. has 13 all-season resorts on provincial lands. I would say that maybe this is why we're having Albertans spending $2 billion more in B.C. versus B.C. residents spending in Alberta. B.C.'s tourism sector generated $8 billion more than Alberta last year and has 40 per cent more jobs because they have all-season resorts. I think it's a great idea and Albertans support it majorly. We have a lot of Albertans going to, for example, Panorama ski hill in B.C., that you can do ski in and ski out. Albertans don't have that opportunity. We don't have that yet. Talking to the local communities, talking to Albertans during surveys, we find out that they do want more ski resorts; they want more resorts in Alberta as well. We can actually share records on the consultations as well with you through my team here.

I want to say that over the next decade these three all-season resort areas have the potential to create 24,000 jobs for Albertans, $3.6 billion of GDP, and $4 billion in visitor spending in Alberta. That will not only equalize the spending between the provinces, but I think that we're going to actually outgrow the B.C. residents spending more in Alberta than Alberta residents spend in B.C. when we have this. Most of all, we're going to make it more affordable for Albertans. That's why we have so much support when we have options.

You were mentioning that it's getting a little overcrowded to build so many resorts maybe in one spot, but I would say that, you know, the eastern slopes all the way from B.C. to the Northwest Territories are a beautiful part of our province where a lot of Albertans like to go visit. We would like to share and show them more of the province, but I think these are the key locations where visitors would like to see more resorts, more destinations, more opportunities. The more we have, the better pricing and affordability would be for Albertans.

In terms of consultation, we will share more details with you, because I have a list of, you know, the groups that were consulted on the record. As well, we did tremendous consultation throughout the local communities, Indigenous communities, and we had overwhelming support for it. I am looking forward for this to be developed in our province, and I'm looking forward for Albertans to be able to stay, play, and travel the province rather than going to B.C., that has 13 of those resorts and we have zero so far.

I wish I had a little bit more time to share with you. Even in February – I'll go back to the answer to the question of the member, when he was asking about Alberta's tourism strategy. I think that our strategy that we created two years ago of reaching $25 billion by 2035 will tremendously diversify the economy from everything else. We know that our economy strongly relies on energy, oil, gas, and hopefully we have more access to international waters, but our strategy is diversifying and hopefully we can get there by 2035. I think that we can beat the timelines with the growth we have right now.

But what is it built on? Alberta's tourism strategy is made of five pillars: leadership and alignment, competitive products, people and careers, expanded access to the product as well as the most

important one, Indigenous tourism. I go a little bit more in detail to give you a little bit of highlights of what it means, the five pillars.

Leadership and alignment, a co-ordinated effort of growing the visitors economy through an industry-leading, commercial-focused Travel Alberta and a co-ordinated supportive crossministry approach. We would be involved with the environment minister and parks minister.

The second pillar would be competitive products, enhanced conditions for tourism investment and the responsible and sustainable development of the new products and experiences across the province, including all-season resorts.

Pillar three, people and careers, policies and programs that ensure the province has sufficient workforce for the growing visitors economy, which is important for us to have that workforce.

Expanded access, improved infrastructure system and ensures safe, affordable, convenient land, air, and utility to and access across the province.

And the fifth pillar, my favourite one, Indigenous tourism. Indigenous tourism would be to work with Indigenous tourism operators to increase products, offerings, and ease access to capital for large-scale development. I would like to mention again that every third international traveller to the province of Alberta is here for the Indigenous experience.

I had an opportunity just recently to visit the Métis Crossing, and I was blown away of the amount of work and effort they put into their facility. I think that everyone in this room needs to travel and experience it. It was breathtaking for me to see it. I didn't start it, but I'm glad I can continue to support Indigenous tourism.

Mr. Goldstein: Can I . . .

Mr. Boitchenko: Sure. Yeah. I'm sorry. I'm taking maybe a little bit too much time.

I would like to give an opportunity to my deputy minister to share a couple of words on your question there.

Mr. Goldstein: Thanks, Mr. Chair. The member raised a very good question. I believe the member opposite raised that question as well about Indigenous tourism. Just a couple of quick facts. We are, as the minister stated, the largest investor in Canada Indigenous tourism, over $2 million a year through Travel Alberta. And I think the member asked the question about where that money is. It's within the Travel Alberta budget, but it's well articulated in the long-standing three-year rotating MOU that we have with Indigenous Tourism Alberta.

We're running out of time, so I would love to spend more time or we would love to spend more time because I know it's a shared passion for the minister and I. That includes consultation and it includes a commitment that expanded the mandate of the Indigenous Opportunities Corporation to allow not just for oil and gas projects but for tourism projects as well, which will provide ownership opportunities within the all-season resort program and other important pieces, I believe. Most recently Enoch Cree, right around the corner from here: their recent hotel expansion was a part of that work with Indigenous Opportunities Corporation. The department has been driving this with other members of the government of Alberta because it's a significant priority.

Mr. Boitchenko: Well, thank you for mentioning AIOC. We have added AIOC to tourism and hospitality, and that gives an opportunity for Indigenous participation, meaningful participation, in the tourism sector. There are a few examples in the province so far, but there is $3 billion for Indigenous opportunity to be able to participate in tourism in our province, and I think this is the most proud piece both in this ministry and my previous . . .

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

The next question goes to MLA Bouchard from the government side.

8:20

Mr. Bouchard: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Albertans know the vast beauty that our province has to offer. It seems the rest of the world is becoming aware of this fact as well. With international tensions and uncertainty abroad more Canadians are choosing to stay closer to home, and Alberta is proving itself to be a stable, inviting destination for global visitors as well. Page 160 of the business plan allocates $75.2 million to Travel Alberta to foster the growth necessary to attract visitors from around the world. Could the minister speak to the return on investment that we receive on this investment? How does Travel Alberta disburse this funding? What areas are specifically prioritized for the agency in terms of attracting private-sector investment?

Mr. Boitchenko: Thank you for the great question, Member. I really truly appreciate that. Many of you know that my background is business, land development, construction, real estate. I can tell you with certainty that I have never seen a return on investment near to what we have through our ministry. This is what makes it so exciting, because for every dollar we put in, we have so much in return.

I will read from some of my notes here to share that exciting news with you guys. The funding to Travel Alberta will be invested in products, experiences, and events across the province as well as direct funding for local destination marketing organizations such as Tourism Lethbridge, Tourism Red Deer, and Fort McMurray Wood Buffalo Economic Development & Tourism, so you can see it's spread throughout the whole province. It also includes the support for the strategic partnership including Indigenous Tourism Alberta, which we spoke so much about today. It's my favourite. Investment in rural and Indigenous tourism: in 2024-25 more than 75 per cent of Travel Alberta investment was actually in rural and smaller urban parts of our beautiful province, and 10 per cent were Indigenous led, strictly 10 per cent.

Alberta saw $15.5 billion in visitor spending in '25. We heard that today already, up 6 per cent from 2024. It's a tremendous growth, and with that growth we can surpass and reach our goal a lot quicker than 2035.

Alberta saw a 5 per cent increase in overseas travellers by air and a 7 per cent increase in travellers from the U.S. Again, we are the only province that saw an increase of travellers from the U.S., and that's not by chance. That's by the great work that Travel Alberta does. By air from January to November '25 compared to the same time in 2024 it was a 7 per cent increase.

The Alberta tourism sector creates the most jobs per dollar of provincial government funding, full stop. Tourism supports more than 260,000 jobs. That's almost, like, 10 per cent of our province in the tourism sector, representing more than 86,000 full-time jobs as well. Travel Alberta's air access program has supported 1.2 million incremental seats into Alberta. That's a lot, and that's from '22 to '25.

I hope that this would answer your question a little bit. It's just exciting news that we're sharing here. Like, the return on investment is unprecedented.

Mr. Bouchard: Awesome. Thank you.

The Chair: The next question goes to MLA de Jonge.

Ms de Jonge: Thank you so much, Chair, and thank you to the minister for being here and talking about your ministry. I can see your passion for this file and for supporting tourism and sport in the province through your answers tonight. I really appreciate your

works on behalf of my constituents and Albertans. Thank you for your work on this. It's really commendable.

I wanted to talk a bit about your department's plan to increase tourism spending in Alberta. I see in your business plan on page 160 under key objective 1.2 it makes mention of expanding all-season resorts as a key pillar in achieving this and growing our visitor economy. These resorts, I know, were modelled after those in British Columbia and their successful tourism strategy and aim to provide a regulatory framework to increase investment in a sustainable way. My question is, you know: can you explain how you will continue to expand these resorts, maintaining our world-class environmental stewardship? That's really important. Can you confirm that our government has protections in place to protect against overtourism, which I guess is a thing, from the expansion of all-season resorts? Then, finally, can you just talk about, in our last few minutes here, how much revenue the province is expected to generate from all-season resorts in the province?

Mr. Boitchenko: Thank you. Thank you for the question, and thank you for the great work you do. You know, I met a lot of your constituents who are passionate about sport and tourism, so I appreciate the amount of effort you're putting in and introducing me to your constituents.

Yes, I'm excited about the work I do because I've never seen in my business life a better return on investment than what the government spends and gets in return. I shared with some of my previous business partners and friends and they said, you know: this is unheard of, to have such a return on investment. It just testifies to the amount of work that Travel Alberta does and the ministry both provincially, nationally, and internationally. I had an opportunity to travel a little bit and meet the people that are excited to come to our province. They're willing to spend the dollars, and the small advertising we do there comes in manyfold when it comes back and brings tourists to our province.

I want to share that we are proud of the amount of work we do with our tourism sector, especially when it comes to consultations. I'll read from my notes here. Tourism and Sport has been staffed with land, environmental, and water experts and statutory decision-makers who have extensive experience under the Public Lands Act, the Water Act, the Environmental Protection and Enhancement Act. When it comes to all-seasons, we're making sure that all the regulatory work is scrutinized, is getting done properly with the professional experience, I think over, like, 50, 80 years of combined experience we have, over 100 years of combined experience in that line of work. It's not just a fly-by-night; it's experts of the industry who will be working, making sure that all the approvals are done properly and according to our high standards of environment.

All-season proposals must follow Alberta's environmental laws, including assessments for wildlife, water use, and land impact as specified by the Public Lands Act and Water Act. The acts that we have in place right now: we are using those acts to make sure that we and the experts, that all the environments – to answer the questions about the water and the land acts and Water Act, Environmental Protection and Enhancement Act, they are all being followed thoroughly. Each proposal is reviewed by the all-season resort regulator on a case-by-case basis, including an assessment of water availability, consideration for cumulative impacts, ecological sensitivities, and land use compatibility. So I just want to highlight that, you know, the amount of work being put in is to ensure that everything is done to the current rules that we have right now.

The Chair: That concludes the government members' first block of questions.

We will now move to the second round of questions and responses. The caucus rotation going forward will be the same as the first round, starting with the Official Opposition and then the members of the government caucus. However, the speaking times are now reduced to five minutes for the duration of the meeting. We will begin this rotation with a member of the Official Opposition, who will have up to five minutes for questions and comments, followed by a response from the minister, who may speak up to five minutes. After both individuals have had an opportunity to speak once, we will then move on to the next caucus in the rotation. If the member and the minister agree to share time, we will proceed with a 10-minute segment during which neither member nor minister may be speaking for more than five minutes at a time. Members are reminded that they are not to share any unused portions of their five minutes with another member.

Member and Minister, do you wish to share your time? Mr. Kasawski.

Mr. Kasawski: Sure. I'm willing to share.

8:30

The Chair: Minister?

Mr. Boitchenko: You know what? I'll go blocked so I can take notes and respond to every question they have.

The Chair: Okay. Mr. Kasawski, the floor is yours.

Mr. Kasawski: Well, thanks, Mr. Chair. You know, I think of the minister almost as, like, the marketing manager for Alberta, and I think that the minister is bringing a lot of passion to this role and really presenting that. Tourism strongly promotes trade between countries, so it goes well beyond the economic impact of just tourism. When you have tourism spending, it boosts sectors like agriculture, retail, handcrafts. Essentially, when tourists travel, they consume local products and services, they get familiar with the area, it builds trade relations with other countries, so it's a really important catalyst for deeper, more diversified economic relationships. That experience that Alberta presents to visitors actually impacts our trade relationships. It's really important, the work that is done here.

The main question for the minister is this ROI that is being spoken of at 31 to 1. That's an incredible return on investment, so I want to contrast with a lot of the things that were highlighted by the Member for Edmonton-Castle Downs. You know, there is going to be a decrease in investment in Travel Alberta, and there is going to be an increase in taxes, so looking at a growth industry that has this ambitious growth goal of getting to $25 billion – by the way, Chair, if the minister can take his $126 million budget and turn it into $25 billion, we should talk about turning him into the manager of AIMCo for the heritage savings trust fund. That's incredible ROI, to see that return.

So we have our marketing manager for Alberta. I want to know the question inside cabinet, inside this government: how do we justify to the tourist industry that we're going to tax them more, and they're a growth industry, and we're not going to chase their growth with more investment? I think that's what the industry has been trying to ask through our members. We have a growth industry here that is not seeing the marketing manager for the province, the minister, encourage their industry, that's growing, with more investment. So that's one key thing.

The next thing is kind of in a different direction. One of the responsibilities of the minister is to keep people healthy and promote healthy lifestyles, but you're not funding that. How many approvals have you given to rec spaces around the province?

Swimming is a passion that I like to bring up. It's a life skill. It keeps people safer around water. Being able to swim increases opportunities for recreation, but access is limited, and hundreds of thousands of Albertans are growing up without access to swim lessons. Chestermere – the Member for Chestermere-Strathmore didn't bring this up – has a population of almost 35,000 people, and it doesn't have a single swimming pool. Airdrie has a population of over 90,000 and now has two pools, and it's desperate for more recreation space with swimming facilities. And they know in Okotoks and Airdrie that people are coming from Calgary, and they're good neighbours, and they welcome them to their community, and they use the swimming space. We need more swimming lessons across Alberta. How does the budget address this important need for swimming lessons in our province? It's beyond just recreation. It's promotion of health, but it's also life skills that people need.

I think, just touching on one of the things the minister said, it was this vision of kids all over the streets and catalytic converter theft. I was wondering if the minister had some report or study that tied a reduction in catalytic converter theft to recreational facilities and the renovation of recreational facilities. If he does, if he can bring that to this committee now or table that in the House, I would love to read that report.

I'm good. Those are my main questions. I have those three focuses, Minister.

The Chair: Minister, it's your turn to respond.

Mr. Boitchenko: Okay. Well, there are quite a few things to respond, but I'll start with catalytic converters. I came to the city of Edmonton, I parked my car, and I came to the car and it was missing a catalytic converter. When I started my car, it was making a crazy noise. At that time I'm thinking: what can I do to help people who are on the street to actually get busy with, you know, life and with sports to make sure that we have things to do and we don't go out and cause problems?

I thought of myself when I was a youth. I was like: if I didn't have a place to participate in sports, if I didn't have a place to participate – I played soccer all my youth. I would say that keeps me and people like me off the street and in sports in the places where we can do the best with our life. Catalytic converters was a personal experience when I felt, you know, missing one and I thought: what can I do? Growing our tourism and our sport facilities in our province creates jobs and creates places where people can go and play sports and participate in something they like. That's the moral of the story.

When it comes – you were talking about tourism. I want to say this, that tourism is the largest service export in our province. You know, you were saying that you wish I was the minister of the Alberta heritage savings trust fund. It's an interesting idea. We can talk about that offline. I love seeing returns, and this portfolio provides an amazing return investment. I have a list of items, and I don't want to kill time and go over everything that we do with our active community initiatives, but this is a straight investment into Albertans, into the sports facilities, into sport infrastructure in our province to keep our province and our youth physically healthier, mentally healthier, and giving a sense of belonging. When you belong to a team, when you belong to sport, it's a good feeling, and I speak from experience.

My deputy minister wanted to add a little bit on some of your questions here, and I will give him a couple of minutes here to touch on that.

Mr. Goldstein: Thanks, Minister. Mr. Chair, the member raised a really good linkage between tourism and trade. I just thought it bore some extra analysis. Of the $15.2 billion last year over half of that were dollars from outside the province. When you create currency exchange, that means you are an export sector, a services export sector, but the member is correct that it's not just about the dollars that we bring in. It's about the public linkages, the people-to-people linkages that we create in the markets that we're in, whether it's Japan, Korea, Germany, the U.K.

We're hosting a series of prominent CEOs who will be coming here next week to enjoy winter in Alberta. In some of these cases they're responsible for 15,000, 20,000, 30,000 visitors that come to this province, but it also becomes a very important aspect from a trade and investment perspective. It's a known fact, and we recently did some work with Deloitte, that people invest in places they've been, so the indirect investment piece that comes from the visitor economy is also a very important part. The public diplomacy that happens from people-to-people relations is also very important.

I think we as Travel Alberta – I congratulate the member for giving my boss a promotion to the chief – what did you say? Chief marketing officer? I thought that was my job, but now I'm off the hook. Yes, this is a marketing exercise, but you can't just market your way out of the problem. Product development and creating experiences that are worth while for especially international audiences will drive that export revenue. Again, I have to assert that we appreciate the concern that members have raised, but Travel Alberta is still the best funded provincial agency in the country right now. We have other provinces who are studying our model and trying to figure out how we have achieved this type of significant success over now four or five consecutive years.

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now go to the government side. Member van Dijken and Minister, would you like to share your time for the next 10-minute segment?

Mr. van Dijken: I could go on shared time if the minister is still welcome to that.

Mr. Boitchenko: For you, any time.

Mr. van Dijken: Okay. Thank you, and thank you, Minister, for all the work that you are doing. It is always exciting to speak with you on the ministry's work and the results that are coming from that. I also want to thank the staff here that have taken time out of their day to come meet with us. It is important work.

8:40

One thing I will highlight is that you mentioned Métis Crossing. Métis Crossing in Smoky Lake county is within my constituency. I have had many different engagements at Métis Crossing with whether it's municipalities, whether it's family groups, cultural engagement sessions and the like. It's a great experience, and I highly recommend it to anybody to participate in learning more about the Métis culture at Métis Crossing. They can bring their families. They bring their ability to participate in some of the events there, and it's well worth their time.

Minister, I'm going to start by discussing sports development and participation. Alberta has a proud history of hosting successful sporting events, and our province is well positioned to compete for even larger national and international opportunities. Major events not only showcase our athletic talent but also generate economic activity, support local businesses, and strengthen community pride.

I note that under outcome 2.5 on page 161 of your business plan it speaks to completing the development of a provincial bidding policy for national and international games that strengthens transparency and delivers maximum community benefits.

Mr. Chair, through you to the minister, can the minister explain how his department is making Alberta the premier host destination for major sporting events but also how his department is collaborating amongst all stakeholders to help achieve this?

The Chair: Go ahead, Minister.

Mr. Boitchenko: All right. Thank you for the question. You do have a beautiful facility, Métis Crossing, in your riding. I would love to visit again. I'll make sure that I do, and I'll give you a call and, you know, maybe you can tell me more about the riding when I'm in the area.

To talk about sports, through our major – I'll let my sport expert here speak a little bit on it as well and share a few words because he has dedicated his life to this file and a lot of time to sports and probably can share more than I can, but I want to give broad strokes of what we do in the major sport event program.

Our government helps communities across the province host major national and international sport events. Also, major sport events boost the local economy as athletes, friends, and family stop, shop, dine, stay, and play in our province. Every time I go out and speak to the athletes at events in sport, I always encourage them to travel locally because we have this land throughout the province. If I'm in central Alberta, I encourage them to check out local central Alberta destinations. If I'm in the north, same for the north and south.

We do have a beautiful province. When the athletes come here and play and participate in sports, we always ask them to go around and see the beautiful province we have. They do shop, they do dine, and they do stay and play in our province. By supporting national and international competitions, our government is creating jobs for Albertans, supporting local Alberta businesses, and reinforcing Alberta's reputation as a premier destination for major sport events in Canada.

The major sport events grant program builds on Alberta's reputation as an attractive destination with proven capacity for hosting a wide range of national and international sport events. It recognizes the network of strong sport organizations who demonstrate the ability to collaborate and deliver high-quality events in our province.

With the next few minutes that I have here, I'll let the deputy minister share a little bit of what you do for sports in our province and on this file.

Mr. Lamoureux: Thank you for the question, Chair. As the minister alluded to, sport has a very important role not only from a physical activity perspective but also from a mental and physical health perspective. When the Ministry of Tourism and Sport was created back in June of 2023, the sport mandate was transferred from the former ministry of culture to the Ministry of Tourism and Sport. At that time, in moving the responsibilities for sport to Tourism and Sport, the minister mentioned the one sport event grant program that was transferred to our ministry, which is the major sport event program. It is a relatively small grant program at $2.5 million per year. That said, we've done remarkable things with that grant programming, funding up to 40 major international and national sport events per year.

When we look at moving beyond that, the business plan does mention the development of a bid policy, as does Minister Boitchenko's mandate letter from the Premier. The department has been actively engaged in working on the development of a bid policy. That has included looking at international research and best practices across the globe and looking at how jurisdictions effectively identify high-value sport events and criteria for that evaluation. Our work on the bid policy is starting to develop an Alberta-based approach, one that will best meet the needs of our province. We're looking at that bid policy building on the foundation of the major sport event grant program, which provides up to $250,000 in matching funding per event. We've seen over the last three years as a ministry that there are a number of major international and national sport events that require an initial investment far beyond $250,000 per event. So that sport policy will articulate how we're going to go about evaluating . . .

The Chair: Member van Dijken.

Mr. van Dijken: Thank you for that answer. I'm going to move into discussion – time is limited – with regard to Indigenous tourism, what we can do to help grow that. You know, I take a look at Indigenous tourism. Alberta is kind of positioned second only to Ontario with dollars generated with Indigenous tourism. About $635 million is added to Alberta's GDP through Indigenous tourism. My question to the minister is: can the minister detail what his department is doing to help promote and grow Indigenous tourism in the province and possibly give the committee examples of partnerships with Indigenous tourism providers?

Mr. Boitchenko: As a key pillar for Alberta's tourism strategy Indigenous tourism is one of our main pillars. Alberta's government has committed to investing another $6 million to support Indigenous-led tourism over three years through the Travel Alberta renowned agreement with Indigenous Tourism Alberta. As I mentioned, that tourism is – you know, every third international traveller is coming here for that experience, so we are proud to be able to invest that $6 million in Indigenous-led tourism. It's growing. Indigenous tourism is proud and is growing and is strong in our province.

As my deputy minister mentioned before, Alberta is the biggest and strongest supporter of Indigenous tourism. You won't find anywhere in Canada as much funding as we're spending to support Indigenous tourism. If you're actually considering the potential $3 billion through the Indigenous opportunity corporation, that blows everybody out of the water. There is no one in the world that can compete with that. All these tools are provided to support Indigenous tourism, to support Indigenous people in our province, and to give them a hand up instead of a handout, to make them feel strong and make them feel part of Alberta's tourism strategy. That's one of my proudest moments in my ministry.

8:50

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We will now go back to the Official Opposition. Member Dach, you have five minutes.

Mr. Dach: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I'll just go block. I've got a lot of things to say.

I'll start with the revelation, of course, the full disclosure that the minister and I actually had some history back in real estate days. He mentioned his past career. My career also was in real estate, and both of us shared time together in the same real estate office for a few years before getting elected. So both of us understand the value of investing in our businesses and the return on investment.

That's been a major theme, Mr. Chair, of this meeting, where the minister has repeatedly talked about the 31 to 1 return on investment in terms of dollars invested in the tourism and sport industry. I posit to the minister, and I ask him: how much would the minister have been willing to invest in marketing and product development, when he was a realtor, if he knew he would realize the 31 to 1 return on investment? Now, I suggest that he would probably invest every possible dollar he could get his hands on for

that kind of return, which begs the question: why has the minister failed to convince his cabinet colleagues, the Finance minister, and the Premier to feed the tourism golden goose instead of strangling it with a pittance of the $126 million as a budget for this ministry, given the return on investment that the minister claims there is to be had? Why will your colleagues not listen to you, Minister, in terms of the size of your budget? It's peanuts compared to the return that is available if greater investment was made by your ministry, in terms of having a larger allotment given to you by your cabinet colleagues and the Premier and the Finance minister.

I also wanted to continue on another theme, too, and it's not been touched upon. Minister, you talked about ground transportation in terms of vehicles and so forth, we talked about air transportation, but we haven't really spoken about the value that we're forgoing in this province for tourism and not having a regularly scheduled rural bus transportation network right throughout this province. We know, Mr. Chair, that Greyhound vacated Alberta in 2018. There has been no regularly scheduled rural bus transportation. We know there are major bottlenecks in terms of transportation and congestion in places like Banff, Jasper, Canmore. Yet there is no indication in this budget that the minister is recognizing this by looking at an immediate solution, not a 10-year-down-the-road solution by rail to Banff from Calgary but an immediate solution by looking at bus transportation to relieve the congestion that we see in Banff, which is strangling the economy there. I really invite the minister to take a long look at the benefits to transportation that a regular-scheduled rural bus network would have in this province.

I remember when I was travelling as a young person that I bought an Ameripass for 145 bucks, and it was all summer long. I could travel anywhere in North America for 145 bucks. We don't even come close to having anything like that because we don't have a regularly scheduled bus network throughout this province. The minister, I think, has failed to see the benefits of really investing in that and recommending that the province support a rural bus transportation network.

There's a whole sector of the tourism economy which are the budget tourists, the young people, who you want to come back, maybe go to university here, maybe come to work here. If they are as a budget traveller able to come and travel the province in an affordable and easily accessible bus, they just might come back and live here. Those kinds of things are, I think, short sighted on the part of the minister from forgetting about the benefits of rural bus transportation and only focusing on international travellers as they use air transportation to get to the national parks, Banff and Jasper in particular.

I also think that we could expand to other national parks in the northeast of the province if we had a transportation network that got people there. I'm talking about Wood Buffalo national park. That, indeed, is a national park which is an undiscovered jewel, and indeed, Minister, I think that would be a wise decision to make.

On top of that we certainly need to once again visit the issue of temporary foreign workers. We know there is a high number of those people in service roles in the restaurants and hospitality and accommodation industry, and they only address working holiday visas. That doesn't mean that there aren't other Albertans looking to do the job. Temporary foreign workers' marks are being lowered. It still means we're going to see fewer workers coming in, but we need the help.

The Chair: We will now move to the minister for the last block of answers.

Mr. Boitchenko: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I feel that I'm not at the estimates but at my job interview here because I got two promotions here today, one to the Alberta heritage savings trust fund to run that and optimize the revenues, and the other one to the transportation ministry, since we're talking all about transportation here. My ministry does not do transportation as of yet, but I appreciate the question about travelling and transportation and busing. Growing up in Europe, everything is trains everywhere there. You know, that would be even better, to have that, and I hope that we had this 100 years ago.

To come back to your actual question, you were talking about the investment into the ministry, into sports and tourism, and I want to mention something. Before COVID we were spending about $44 million into Travel Alberta, and today we did invest more because we have the absolutely exceptional returns on our investment, so we nearly doubled that investment in Travel Alberta. You know, I'm proud of that because we have such a great return, and it's amazing work they do to keep us as a leader in the country, not only by a bit; in 2024 four times, in 2025 two times the national average. The more we, I guess, invested, the better and quicker our industry grows. So I'm with you that we're doing a great job, and I'm with you that investment into the tourism sector in our province pays its dividends. The industry keeps on growing, and every year over year we're breaking and shattering the records.

I want to say that improving access, improving busing and transportation, would be the ministry of transportation. You know, we'd probably suggest to be there when he has his estimates. I would mention on my behalf that we want to increase that.

I only have a couple of minutes here, so I will probably take my last couple of minutes to thank my colleagues on both sides for great questions. You know, I feel like I'm in a group where we're working together. I feel that we're in a group that understands how much tourism and sport in our province means for Indigenous groups, for First Nations in our province, for everyday Albertans. I'm very proud of work we're doing with all-season resorts in our province, and I'm looking for your support. We all agree here today that it's a great return on investment. We all agree that, you know, having facilities for sport is good for your mental health, is good for your physical health, is good for Albertans, for kids, for teenager Albertans. We all agree that the return on investment particularly in tourism is absolutely amazing. So I want to take this time to thank you and ask for your support going forward so that we can build our province into the beautiful province we have, to invite travellers from around the world to see our beautiful province.

With our 10 new development zones that we have created throughout the province, I'm proud to share that with the world. I came back from my tour in Asia, and people there said: "We know about Jasper. We know about Banff. We know about Lake Louise." They said: but we want to see more; we want to see more of Alberta. So I'm hoping that together we can invite more people, diversify our locations around the province, and also invite the tourists to see our province year-round to keep our businesses, hotels, restaurants sustainable, predictable, and, you know, keep the labour force in our province busy.

I want to say thank you again to everyone for . . .

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

I would like to remind the committee members that we are scheduled to meet tomorrow, March 10, at 3:30 p.m. to consider the estimates of the Ministry of Service Alberta and Red Tape Reduction.

Thank you, everyone. This meeting is adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 9 p.m.]

Published under the Authority of the Speaker
of the Legislative Assembly of Alberta