



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 31st Legislature
Second Session

Standing Committee
on
Resource Stewardship

Ministry of Indigenous Relations
Consideration of Main Estimates

Wednesday, March 11, 2026
9 a.m.

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Second Session**

Standing Committee on Resource Stewardship

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Standing Committee on Resource Stewardship

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Ministry of Indigenous Relations
Hon. Rajan Sawhney, Minister
Kristina Midbo, Executive Director, Indigenous Women's Initiatives

9 a.m.

Wednesday, March 11, 2026

[Mr. Dyck in the chair]

**Ministry of Indigenous Relations
Consideration of Main Estimates**

The Chair: Well, good morning, everyone. Great to see everyone here, cheery, on this wonderful Wednesday morning. I would like to call this meeting to order and welcome everyone here. The committee has under consideration the estimates of the Ministry of Indigenous Relations for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2027.

I would like to do introductions here this morning and have members introduce themselves. Minister, when it comes to you, if you would please introduce yourself and your ministry officials here at the table – that would be fantastic – then we'll carry on around. My name is Nolan Dyck. I am the MLA for Grande Prairie and the chair of this committee. We will begin with introductions to my right.

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

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

Mrs. Petrovic: Chelsae Petrovic, Livingstone-Macleod.

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

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

Mrs. Sawhney: Good morning, everyone. I'm Rajan Sawhney, MLA for Calgary-North West and Minister of Indigenous Relations. To my left I have Deputy Minister Donavon Young, and to his left is executive director of Indigenous women's initiatives Kristina Midbo. To my right is executive director of financial services and senior financial officer Howard Wong, and to his right is assistant deputy minister of First Nations and Métis relations Don Kwas.

Thank you.

Member Arcand-Paul: [Remarks in Cree] MLA Brooks Arcand-Paul, Edmonton-West Henday.

Member Calahoo Stonehouse: [Remarks in Cree] Michel First Nation, MLA for Edmonton-Rutherford, Jodi Calahoo Stonehouse.

Mr. Sabir: Irfan Sabir, MLA, Calgary-Bhullar-McCall.

The Chair: Excellent. Thank you so very much. We have no one joining online, so no introductions there.

I would like to note the following substitution happening potentially throughout this meeting: Mr. van Dijken for Mrs. Petrovic.

A few housekeeping items that we do need to go over. Please note that the microphones are operated by *Hansard* staff. The committee proceedings are live streamed both on the Internet and broadcast on Alberta Assembly TV. The audio- and videostream and transcripts of the meetings can be accessed via the Legislative Assembly website. Members participating remotely are encouraged to turn their camera on while speaking and mute your microphone when not speaking. I believe everybody is here live today so far. Remote 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 myself as well. Please set your cellphones and other devices to silent for the duration of the meeting.

All right. For the considerations of this meeting the main estimates for the Ministry of Indigenous Relations shall be considered for three hours. Standing Order 59.01 sets out the process for consideration of these estimates in the legislative policy committee handbook. We have a rotation set out in 59.01(6). The speaking rotation chart is available. There are also handouts available here if you would like or on our committee internal website. For each segment of the meeting blocks of speaking time will be combined only if both the minister and the member speaking agree. If debate is exhausted prior to three hours, the ministry's 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 rotation, please e-mail or message the committee clerk here to my left.

I do need consensus on this. I would like to call a five-minute break around the middle of this meeting; however, the three-hour clock will continue to run. Does anyone oppose having a break? Perfect. We will have a five-minute break.

Ministry officials, at the direction of the minister, may address the committee. Any ministry staff are welcome to the podium to speak for the minister. Please introduce yourself if that's the case, and then you can comment for the record. At any point those in the gallery cannot approach the table at all. There are pages if you do need to deliver something. There are pages on hand for delivery of notes or information back and forth.

Points of order will be dealt with as they arise. Obviously, we're a great committee, and we won't have any. I look forward to that.

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

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

I would now like to open 10 minutes of opening remarks for the Minister of Indigenous Relations here. You have 10 minutes. Thank you for joining us here, once again, today.

Mrs. Sawhney: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and thank you to the committee members for inviting me to speak today. I want to acknowledge that we are gathered on Treat 6 territory, the traditional lands of First Nations who have lived on and cared for this place for countless generations. I also recognize the Métis people, who maintain a deep and enduring connection with this land.

To begin, I'd like to introduce the other members of my team who are here in the gallery: chief of staff, Riley Braun; press secretary, Karah Folk; policy adviser, Kaylee Townend; assistant deputy minister, pipeline Indigenous engagement, Thomas Djurfors; assistant deputy minister of consultation, land, and policy, Sara Wong; communications director, Carla Jones; and executive director of executive operations, Genevieve Turcotte.

I appreciate the opportunity to talk about how Budget 2026 maintains our commitment to improving economic security, the foundation for cultural revitalization, community-driven growth, and self-determination for Indigenous communities across Alberta. This budget reflects the respect we have for partnerships and our shared commitment to working towards supporting reconciliation. Indigenous leaders across the province have been clear.

Relationships aren't built through paperwork or meeting agendas; they're built through action.

Budget 2026 empowers communities to act on their priorities with partnership, support, and follow-through from Alberta's government. This budget allows us to continue working closely with Indigenous communities to strengthen relationships and advance development projects together. It also provides greater stability so communities can plan for the long term and pursue their own priorities.

Just as importantly, it helps remove barriers to economic participation. We know we must make every dollar count, especially during uncertain economic times. Budget 2026 focuses on sustaining programs at work and building on the progress made in recent years. Above all, this budget recognizes that reconciliation is not a single program or initiative; it's a continuous process that must be grounded in partnership.

Partnership is central to one of our core focuses in the year ahead, the proposed pipeline to the west coast. Alberta's government is acting as a proponent for this project as we move toward a submission to the federal major projects office. We are still in the assessment phase, but the potential of this project is clear. A direct connection to new global markets would strengthen Alberta's long-term economic resilience. Further, communities would directly benefit from the opportunities that come with major infrastructure development.

Indigenous Relations is leading engagement with Indigenous communities in Alberta and British Columbia to ensure their perspectives shape this work from the outset. These early conversations have been informative and valuable, reinforcing the need for transparent, respectful dialogue as we assess the project's possibilities. Ultimately, this work is about building trust, fostering strong relationships, and ensuring that as this project proceeds, it does so in a way that reflects the interests, concerns, and aspirations of Indigenous communities. These conversations will continue as work progresses, and we are committed to sharing information transparently and working together as partners.

Of course, the Alberta Indigenous Opportunities Corporation, or AIOC, also stands ready to support Indigenous co-ownership of this pipeline. The AIOC continues to play a major role in facilitating Indigenous ownership of major projects, helping create long-term revenue streams that benefit communities for generations. Since 2019 the AIOC has backstopped more than \$745 million in loan guarantees for eight projects. These investments have benefited 43 Indigenous communities, helping to establish long-term revenue streams. Budget 2026 ensures the AIOC will continue to have the capacity to foster new partnerships and expand investment opportunities across a wide variety of sectors.

The AIOC reflects our commitment to promoting economic reconciliation. It helps ensure Indigenous communities have access to real equity, shared decision-making, and long-term ownership in major development projects. Economic reconciliation, as has been mentioned, is not only participation. It's about Indigenous communities having a meaningful stake. It's about moving beyond inclusion towards influence and ownership. That principle guides the work of the AIOC and is a key driver behind our major grant programs.

Through Budget 2026 the Indigenous reconciliation initiative, the Aboriginal business investment fund, and the community support fund will provide more than \$16 million to support Indigenous-led projects this year. Since their inception the demand for these grants has consistently outpaced the funding available. This tells us that communities see real value in them and that the need they are meeting remains significant.

9:10

The Indigenous reconciliation initiative continues to empower communities through two funding streams, cultural and economic. Both are essential, and we must recognize that reconciliation requires investment in cultural revitalization as well as economic opportunity. Nearly \$4 million will be available in 2026 to support cultural revitalization initiatives, business planning and feasibility studies and capacity building and skills training. In 2025-26 this program supported more than 30 cultural and 20 economic projects. Cultural streams included \$80,000 to Bears paw First Nation for the establishment of the Bears paw First Nation archives and \$100,000 to the Urban Society for Aboriginal Youth for Echoes of the Past, a virtual reality journey through Treaty 7 history.

On the economic side, IRI grants included support for projects such as strategic training and economic development planning for the Aseniwuche Winewak Nation of Canada. The economic stream of the Indigenous reconciliation initiative is particularly important for communities in the early stages of business development. It helps them build the planning and capacity needed to pursue future opportunities.

In some cases this support has led to further grant funding through the Aboriginal business investment fund once the projects become ready to break ground. The Aboriginal business investment fund, or ABIF, will continue to support Indigenous community-owned businesses with capital funding so they can launch or take their next step. These investments help bring business projects to life. They create jobs, generate revenue, and support long-term financial stability for communities. Budget 2026 includes \$8.3 million in ABIF funding.

Last year Enoch Cree Nation and partners received \$750,000 for a new surgical facility. The facility will provide specialized health services while creating jobs and revenue for the community. Another project in the East Prairie Métis settlement received \$650,000 to help expand heavy equipment services and their firefighting capacity. Moreover, in 2026-27 \$2.5 million in ABIF grants will be targeted towards projects proposed by Métis settlements. Since the Aboriginal business investment fund launched in 2014, more than 100 Indigenous community-owned businesses have received grants through this program. These investments have helped create nearly 1,200 jobs for Indigenous people.

The community support fund is another important program. It supports Indigenous-led initiatives seeking to reduce violence and improve the safety and economic security of Indigenous women, girls, and two-spirit-plus people. In 2025-26 the fund supported 23 Indigenous-led projects with about \$4 million in grant funding. Initiatives supported included but are not limited to financial literacy and entrepreneurship programming, healing and wellness programs, and projects focused on violence prevention and community safety. The community support fund is making a meaningful impact on the ground, and I'm looking forward to seeing these projects continue to grow and succeed.

On a related note, I recently attended the national Indigenous federal-provincial-territorial meeting on missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls, and two-spirit-plus peoples in Ottawa. The meeting brought leaders together from across the country to discuss strategies to combat human trafficking, reflect on red dress initiatives, and ensure that major projects take into account the safety and well-being of those affected. These conversations were illuminating and reinforce the need for collaboration across governments and communities, and I look forward to seeing how the work of the Premier's council evolves.

In '26-27 Indigenous Relations will also begin administering a new program funded by 2 per cent of the revenue from the Alberta government's iGaming framework. Budget '26 projects that more than \$12 million will flow to First Nations from the iGaming fund this fiscal year. This funding will complement the \$178.5 million that the First Nations development fund is expected to provide.

Now, before moving to your questions, I'd like to reiterate that the progress we have made so far reflects respectful and transparent communication. Relationships are dynamic, and developing them takes time and sustained effort. They are consistently . . .

The Chair: Excellent. Thank you very much for those comments, Minister.

We will now turn it over to the Official Opposition. How this will work is: you have 60 minutes on the clock. No individual person can speak more than 10 minutes at a time for a single block. It can either be back and forth or block time.

Minister and – sorry. I'm not sure who's going first.

Member Arcand-Paul: I'm going, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Excellent. Just before you start, Minister and yourself, do you want back and forth or block time?

Member Arcand-Paul: I'm happy to go back and forth if the minister is.

Mrs. Sawhney: I would choose block time.

The Chair: Perfect. Okay. Block time. Block time it is, then. Member, you can start your 10 minutes.

Member Arcand-Paul: Nanaskamon, Mr. Chair. It is a pleasure to be here with you all today on Treaty 6 territory, not far from the site where my great-great-grandfather Catchistahwayskum commandeered a treaty for all of our benefits to share this land now and in the future. Let us remind ourselves that we are all treaty people. We share this territory with the many First Nations that called this place home, the Haudenosaunee, the Blackfoot, the Dene, Nakota Sioux, and we now share this land with our Métis sisters and brothers.

Thank you to the ministry and the staff for being here today and for all the work that you do to ensure the work that gets done is meaningful. I thank my staff today for helping out and my colleagues the members for Edmonton-Rutherford and certainly Calgary-Bhullar-McCall but also the government members that are here today as well. Thank you so much for your candour and the conversation that we will have today.

Mr. Chair, I do have to ask this question given the large deficit that this UCP government has racked up for a majority of this government's term. A projected \$9.4 billion deficit would undoubtedly cause some concern. I must ask when the third-party manager might come in. You see, in First Nations country the federal government, in its patriarchal way, will come, own, and force a First Nation government to undergo third-party management because, in its effusive way, the federal government would allege that First Nations could not manage its budgets appropriately. I cannot take credit for this question. It actually came from Chief Arthur Rain of the Paul First Nation.

Minister, through you, Mr. Chair, I ask this because the government has wasted a boom during the boom and has a projected deficit for the second year in a row with an estimated \$9.3 billion according to the fiscal plan table on page 147 and repeated throughout the budget documents. I know this government wants to feign federal overreach and will whine and moan about, quote,

Alberta sovereignty, end quote, and keeping Ottawa away. But with year after year of mismanagement of Albertans' tax dollars and their health and social transfers from Ottawa, which eclipse the amounts that First Nations and Métis people receive from the federal government, it leaves me to wonder what this government's gripes actually are other than having another body to blame for their inefficacy.

In these budget documents I do find it a bit rich that this government has no leg to stand on with its gripes with Ottawa when we look at the health and social transfers these governments receive. If I look at schedule 4 of the fiscal plan tables, page 151, the UCP government is anticipating \$7.36 billion in Canada health transfers and \$2.198 billion in social transfers. That's \$9.234 billion. Should separatism be further facilitated by this government, this government's deficit would be \$18.6 billion without those federal transfers. To this effect, Mr. Chair, through you to the minister: can you please elaborate how much this government receives for Indigenous peoples in this province and, in particular, the exact amount in each of these transfers for those Indigenous peoples registered under the Indian Act? If not, why does the minister not know? If the minister does not know now, I'd be happy to receive answers in writing after.

I also want to ask, through you, Mr. Chair: has the minister asked her office or staff or her ministry staff to prepare an estimate of the increased costs for Indigenous Relations likely to result from potential separatism from Canada, which this government . . .

Mr. Rowswell: Point of order.

The Chair: A point of order is called.

Mr. Rowswell: Yes. The separatism comments are outside – we're here to talk about government estimates, and the bulk of your question is talking about that, but the separatist comments within it aren't required, and I think you can ask the question without it. This is a point of order, 23(b).

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Sabir: I don't think it's a point of order. In the case of First Nations the fact is that there are a lot of funds that flow from the federal government to the province to First Nations. That's a fairly relevant question, and First Nations are fearful that in the event of Alberta separating from Canada: what will the consequences be for them? What will the funding structure look like? How will the province step in to make up for that funding? I think that's a very relevant concern of First Nations that's within the scope of this estimate. It's a fair question.

9:20

Member Arcand-Paul: Mr. Chair, if I may.

The Chair: I'll let you this time. Yeah.

Member Arcand-Paul: Thank you. Okay. I will link it back to the budget documents. I do see that this ministry in the business plan '26-29 on page 89 is tasked with crossgovernment . . .

The Chair: Sorry. You're still responding to me, I believe, on the point of order, correct?

Member Arcand-Paul: Yes.

The Chair: Okay.

Member Arcand-Paul: I do believe that within that crossministry work, this is a relevant question. I do not see this as a point of order.

I would like to speak to the budget documents as they reply to this current question.

The Chair: I appreciate the arguments on both sides on this. We're stretching that pretty far to talk about the separatism perspective based around the budget. I think that's a perspective not of estimates as a strong link here. I think the question outside of that is a fair question but not to link it to the separatism. However that works itself out, I don't think that's a fair estimate question right now. I'm currently not going to call it as a point of order, but I will call it a point of order in the future.

Member, if you can keep your questions revolving around the direct budget conversation and not that, that would be fantastic. I think the rest of your question is fair, so if we can keep that on the rails, I would love for you to continue on with the rest of your question, leaving that section out.

Member Arcand-Paul: Okay. Thank you. But I will turn to business plan '26-29, if that's okay, on page 89, with this crossgovernment collaboration with ministry partners. With this crossgovernment approach I am curious, without this conversation about separatism, about the minister's work for Justice, for example, where there's an increase of \$6.3 million for civil law, which accords to representing the UCP government in courts and tribunals. So I do want to ask that question because it is particularly relevant to the spending of government.

As the minister is aware, there have been several files that the UCP has utterly failed their obligations to First Nations, particularly when it comes to potential issues around the province, and, in so doing, causing the expense to fall to Albertans to not only bear the burden of the costs of those potential issues, Mr. Chair, but Albertans are also left to bear the burden of this government not consulting or working in true partnership with the treaty First Nations in this province despite comments from the minister. To this end, where in the budget '26-27 can I find the costs for court challenges to the government's facilitation of any potential issues in this province?

I think this is incredibly concerning because there has been a real cut to the First Nations and Métis relations capital grant in '25-26 on page 131 of the estimates and page 156 of the fiscal plan, which is on schedule 14. I'm curious, through you, Mr. Chair, if the minister can justify why this cut was made and what the repercussions will be to First Nations and Métis communities. I know that there are legal responsibilities in this province, and without First Nations' consent or consultation their treaties remain to be government-to-government relationships with the Crown through Canada. This legal uncertainty itself discourages long-term corporate investment, major capital projects, and funding partnerships with First Nations. That's in both resource extraction industries but also in other areas of the province that different conversations are being had.

At a minimum, First Nations and Métis in resource-dependent areas of the province may face greater economic instability by this consultation concern and a slowdown in potential investments and partnerships in the natural resources, for example. As we are moving closer to including more projects through the AIOC, I do think that existing business opportunities will face those delays or possible cancellations. I would like, through you, Mr. Chair, to know what the ministry's response to that potential economic instability might be.

Mr. Chair, I do hear time and time again that First Nations and Métis people want to be part of the economic and social future of this great province. In the strategic plan on page 11 of the government documents it signals that it may be interested in helping

to facilitate "economic reconciliation," heard again today from the minister, which is not one of the calls to action from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission – but I digress – while also doing this work "while respecting traditional territories and treaties."

Mr. Chair, let me tell you, I am floored that this government has even alluded to respecting the treaties, but I guess they're finally listening to my advice, and I hope they take more because I've got some really good ones. However, to the minister: I'm concerned that this is potentially just lip service, and I'll elaborate on this more in my next block of time.

My question with respect to this section, through you, Mr. Chair, to the minister: what is the ministry's plan to support First Nations and Métis communities through economic instability? Has the ministry or AIOC assessed the increased risk of failure or delay and the associated potential costs for the current number of government-backed loan guarantees because of this economic uncertainty? The last published information in 2023 said that the Alberta government had underwritten \$511 million in loan guarantees, involving 27 communities. In the strat plan, page 23, it is stated there has been more than \$745 million in loan guarantees since 2019. I do believe we just heard from the minister as well that there was a specific number there as well. I cannot find it in my notes at the moment, but what is that current amount of government-backed loan guarantees in '25-26? Does the government have any plans to publish this information on '25-26?

Further, of the \$2 million that goes to the AIOC under line item 9 of the expenses on page 131 of the estimates, how much of that is purely for administrative costs? I do think that potential economic fallout would disproportionately hit Indigenous workers and businesses, particularly in the resource sector.

Through you, Mr. Chair, has the ministry undertaken a risk assessment and developed a risk management plan to support First Nations and Métis communities through this period of economic instability? Coupled with my earlier comments, I do not see anything in this budget or any of the crossgovernment ministries to accommodate this work.

I do take note that the AIOC's administrative costs are \$1.3 million, as disclosed in '25, with the board administrative costs being \$150,200. Coupled with other expenses, the total calculated in 2025 was just over \$3 million in operating expenses for staff alone. Looking at last year's budget of \$9.7 million for funding provided by this government and this year's estimate of \$8.2 million as well, I'm curious where the balance of the AIOC budget is going to. Through you, Mr. Chair, can the minister clarify where the balance of those funds is going?

Mr. Chair, for clarity to the minister I asked on three topics: clarity around the AIOC, ministerial aid to assist with economic instability, and monies received from the federal government for Indigenous peoples in Alberta, particularly the health and social transfers, and how the government can justify not being put under third-party management for their second deficit.

The Chair: Excellent. Thank you, Member, for those questions.

Minister, you have 10 minutes for remarks back. Please go ahead.

Mrs. Sawhney: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and thank you to the member for all those questions. I do appreciate it, and I will start off by saying that, of course, we are all treaty people. I know that since I've come into this portfolio, it's been an opportunity for me to learn, to listen, and to really demonstrate that I am present in communities and with chiefs and councils at their meetings, and definitely myself and my team are there to support in whatever fashion that we can.

I do appreciate the questions. I know one of the first questions was around the deficit. Of course, as we released our budget documents, it was very obvious that we had forecasted using a WTI of close to \$60 per barrel. Obviously, the world is changing very dramatically, and we're seeing vast changes in that. Time will tell in terms of what this price will be.

The reality is that we have seen unprecedented population growth in this province, and that is why this government took concerted steps to make record investments in health as well as education. We are going to make sure that we invest in people, we invest in communities, we invest in society. This is incredibly important. The size of the deficit, obviously, isn't ideal, but it's also reflective of the fact that these investments are critical in the here and now.

I know that another question that was asked by the member was around health, social transfers from the federal government, and: how do we quantify that in terms of what is going to Indigenous communities?

Now, the reality is that these Canada transfers occur on a per-capita basis. You're not the only one to ask this question. This question has been posed to me by leaders in Indigenous communities, and I think it's a valid question. It's very difficult to back calculate because the data that we have is not conclusive in terms of the number of individuals in this province who will identify as Indigenous. That is something that we've kind of taken back, that we've reflected upon. Certainly, we will probably do some additional studies to see how we can break that down on a further basis. As I mentioned, I've had this conversation with others as well, and I think it's a valid question to take back and to try to understand.

9:30

There were some comments made on the work that we do in terms of working with other ministries. What I would say is that the Ministry of Indigenous Relations is like a facilitator ministry. We work with communities, people who reach out to us and ask us: how do we connect with health, with education? Part of our work is to make sure that community leaders and community members are connected to the right ministries.

The questions around litigation and court cases: obviously, I can't speak directly about anything that's before the courts right now. Those questions are really better to be directed at the Ministry of Justice because those elements are not within my ministry budget.

I know that there were a lot of questions around the Alberta Indigenous Opportunities Corporation, and if I don't get an opportunity to address all of them at a detailed level, I'd be happy to provide some of those answers in a written format. Just to reiterate, since 2019 the AIOC has backstopped more than \$745 million in loan guarantees – that is the right number – which has benefited 43 communities across the province. This work is critical. It's foundational. It's transformational. It provides generational revenues to communities who may otherwise not have been able to invest in social programs or infrastructure programs. We are looking forward to potentially announcing some more projects and programs in the coming year.

The projected distributions of \$1.4 billion, based on these projects that I just mentioned, will be provided to participating Indigenous groups over the lifetime of these projects. That's \$1.4 billion. I've been able to drill down into some of these projects and have actually seen the revenues that have been incurred by some of these communities. They really are game changing. I'll have more to say about that in terms of one project in particular that was very transformational for one community. By the end of '25-26 the

AIOC expects to close one project with a loan guarantee value of approximately \$218 million.

As you know, the AIOC's mandate was expanded to include the tourism sector as well. There were some questions around risk assessment and the work done to really understand what that could potentially look like for Indigenous communities. What I can say is that the ministry and the department have been very particular about maintaining funding. In fact, our budget has increased by \$12.2 million because of revenues that we're expecting to receive by the end of Q2 2026 for iGaming. That is another tremendous opportunity to put together some programs that really will be in the spirit of supporting Indigenous communities, particularly those communities who don't have the business development opportunities that we've seen with some nations or don't have sources of revenue that can help support the work that they would like to do.

I believe that I have answered most of the questions that were posed. I do want to talk about the Aboriginal business investment fund. Now, there was an adjustment made to this particular program from \$10 million to \$8.3 million. We know, given the deficit, given the budgets of this government, given population growth, and the real need to make sure we're making sound investments in health and education, that all ministries were tasked with making difficult decisions. I didn't want to touch any of the community support funds or the initiatives around supporting Indigenous women, but the Aboriginal business investment fund has been a program that's almost doubled in budget in the last couple of years. We made this reduction, and we are going to be taking a closer look at the program to see how we can expand it to additional communities. I'm also heartened by the fact that we have an additional \$12.2 million in revenues that will be coming to the ministry and department, which will help us complement ABIF and expand some programs that will also help with economic development.

I just want to reiterate, because we're talking about how we're going to support Indigenous communities through economic upheaval, through difficult times, that, once again, my budget is pretty much intact with the exception of this reduction to ABIF but also supplemented by the iGaming revenues that will come in at the end of Q2. Again, you know, through the Indigenous reconciliation initiative, the community support fund, and ABIF more than \$16 million is available in Budget 2026 to support Indigenous-led projects and priorities.

I'm going to take the opportunity to talk a little bit more about ABIF because it is such an important program. In fact, I had the opportunity to visit the Kikino Métis settlement to talk about their project. Essentially, it has supported more than 108 community-owned businesses, with more than \$58 million in support helping create nearly 1,200 permanent jobs for Indigenous people in Alberta. Again, we will have more to say about the iGaming programs that we will develop.

We also have budgeted \$178.5 million for the First Nations development fund. Keep in mind that this is a forecast based on the revenues that will be accrued by those nations who have host casinos. This program has currently 47 First Nations participating in the program, which includes the six host First Nations and 41 nonhost First Nations. I do bring this up, even though it wasn't directly asked, because I do want to emphasize the level of budget support that is available for Indigenous communities. Again, I've had the opportunity to visit some of these communities who have received this funding and have basically indicated that it was a game changer for their communities as well.

I do also want to say that the other elements where you might see some reductions or adjustments to the budget, including some of the elements in AIOC, are predicated on the forecast that we see.

They are not real budget cuts in any sense of the word; they are budgets that have been rightsized to reflect what we expect to see in the future. Certainly, we don't want to overbudget when we know, for example, that capacity grants in certain programs are not being used to the full extent, so it's important to be very prudent and very fiscally responsible to make sure that you're allocating the right amount of resources to those particular line items.

I know we'll have more to discuss in the following block, and I'm looking forward to that conversation.

The Chair: Excellent. Thank you so much for your comments, Minister.

I just want to make a couple of comments here before we get into the next block in anticipation of maybe where it's going. For everyone, let's keep our conversation directly to the budget and not in personal speculation of what might be coming. Let's tie it back. The budget is what is planned for, not personal speculation on what potentially could be coming down, so if we can keep our comments to the budget that way.

I'm assuming, Member, that you're up next. Thank you. Go ahead.

Member Arcand-Paul: Mr. Chair, through you to the minister, on page 92 of the business plan, the ministry is to

develop a Memorandum of Understanding with the federal government for the Pathways Carbon Capture project and west coast pipeline to align consultation processes and create efficiencies that support timely and effective engagement with Indigenous communities.

This is also in light of the agreement in principle that has been announced this past week. Further to the vision statement in the strategic plan on page 5, the UCP intends to partner with "First Nations on pipeline ownership for economic reconciliation", and as reflected in the minister's comments in the introduction to these budget estimates. I appreciate talking about ABIF and FNDF, and I will get to those questions, Minister; not at this time, but I am excited to have that conversation and ask these questions.

9:40

Will all Indigenous communities in Alberta potentially impacted by the Pathways Carbon Capture project and the west coast pipeline be consulted or involved in any work related to the MOU with the federal government? If yes, is the funding for the Pathways and west coast pipeline consultation in the '26-27 consultation land and policy line item included in the \$19.3 million dollar budget? Will the Indigenous consultation capacity program budget of \$7 million for Indigenous participation in consultations need to cover this new consultation, or is this new funding coming from another program? Can First Nations and Métis communities expect any additional support for this work, or is the ministry prepared to financially take on the burden of this extra work with the MOU and the agreement in principle?

Looking at this budget, an increase of \$626,000 for the Aboriginal consultation office and \$22,000 for strategic engagement and policy innovation is very unlikely to capture the magnitude of this increased workload the province is intending to undergo. Through you, Mr. Chair, to the minister: I know you are new to this role, so by way of background I have raised significant concerns with the consultation processes by this government every time I've sat at these estimates not only because I worked in this prior to getting elected but also because I hear it about it from stakeholders, and I'm sure you do as well. This current status quo for consultation and ensuring "Indigenous perspectives are included in land and resource management decisions," in the description on page 130 of the government's estimates, with an increase of \$699,000 cannot be

reasonably considered to carry the workload needed to undertake this work. I also couple this with the fact that the employee complement of your ministry will remain 175, as outlined on page 160 of the fiscal plan tables.

Mr. Chair, last year I had the honour of doing consultation on an opposition member's MSA, my own Bill 209, and while I can tell you I was able to do it because I have been doing this my entire career, I can tell you that it's a lot of work and something that must be done correctly or risk the entirety of the projects being proposed by the provincial and federal government. In looking at this budget, I am concerned.

Through you, Mr. Chair, I did warn this ministry that we would see greater comeuppance given the lack of investment in the consultative requirements of this government. However, instead of additional investment it appears that there has been more workload put on this ministry, with menial increases in the budget. I do worry where this is going. It is going to leave major projects and the provincial Crown's relationship with First Nations and Métis people in this province at jeopardy. To the minister through you, Mr. Chair, how will the ministry undertake this work without honouring the Herculean work of your ministry, which makes up less than 0.6 per cent of the full department complement of the minister's colleagues departmental staff?

I now want to ask the minister, through you, Mr. Chair, about the department's '26-29 business plan positions for Indigenous Relations and crossgovernment facilitator for housing, water safety, consultation, and economic participation on page 89 of IR business plan '26-29, and I will get into further detail on the crossgovernment work later this morning in very specific detail on the budget documents. However, I look at, for example, outcomes 2 and 3, report on departmental performance metrics focused on the percentage of weeks in a fiscal year, that consultation adequacy assessments are issued within four to 10 days for outcome 2 and the number of Indigenous learning initiative sessions given to EPS employees over the year for outcome 3.

For my first estimates I can tell you that between '24-25 and '25-26 there were only about 5,000 Alberta public service staff that have undertaken that initiative in between that period, at least from the numbers that I'm getting from the ministry. Since 2018 twenty thousand staff have taken this training, at least from my understanding from the minister. Perhaps that has gone up this past year. That is about 8.6 per cent of the entire FTEs in this province presently. Through you, Mr. Chair, can the minister please explain to me how these 100 sessions are enough given this math, and how do they intend to provide training to about 50 staff in each session? Roughly that's how much the calculation could be, about 5,000 staff per year. In 100 sessions that's only about 50 staff in each of those sessions.

Further given that this government has made it difficult for professionals to undertake cultural competency training, I'm curious how this training will be carried out for professionals that do work for the government of Alberta. I would like to hear what meaningful outcomes or deliverables that Indigenous communities can anticipate from the '26-27 budget given these outcomes.

In particular, I would like to know how you intend to address and measure success in terms of, one, the targets your ministry expects to hit in '26-27 in terms of jobs and Indigenous employment for government's investments in housing units, water connections, and safety and economic security, as referenced on page 91 of the business plan, in particular when we look at EPP and ABIF on page 92 of the business plan and funding for initiatives to address violence and increase safety and economic security for women and others; two, the line-by-line dollars tied to those outcomes across ministries; and three, your commitment to quarterly reporting on

these targets to demonstrate to First Nations and Métis communities that your promise for progress is real.

I ask this because the number of FTEs under the EPP and through the ABIF funding for programs is anticipated to decline according to the figures on page 91 of the business plan, performance metric 1(b), down from 145 FTEs to 100 in '26-27 and moving forward until '28-29. I ask: why is this? Is this just to be conservative, small "c"?

In the strategic plan, page 10, it specifically states that the government will support "industry-led workforce development initiatives that address sector specific labour shortages." Can the minister point either to what ministry or what line item this will be coming out of in the ministry's expenses?

In further review of the fiscal plan '26-29, \$1 million is unaccounted for in schedule 24, expense by function, on page 162. That's in the tables. Can the minister just provide an answer for this and why this should not cause some concern? I think it might just be that the expense by function is not recorded appropriately. If it's not recorded appropriately, would government be able to make that change to make sure that that is recorded appropriately?

Mr. Chair, through you, on page 92 of the fiscal plan can the minister please clarify what projects were completed that resulted in the \$6 million decrease in capital grants? I do see in the estimates on page 131 line items 2 and 7 under capital grants, the First Nation and Métis relations and investing in Canada infrastructure, have decreased although the last time I had asked the minister's predecessor, the projects were in the process of being completed, so I'm not sure why this line item has returned.

I'm just trying to understand how the estimates and the fiscal plan are saying that the offset of the increases in iGaming and FNDF responsibilities yet the minister in '24-25 said that the ICIP just flowed through his ministry then out to communities. I will ask again more detailed questions on FNDF and iGaming later today, but I'm just curious the interrelation here between those funds in regard to this accountability.

I'm also curious as the transfers from government of Canada to the ministry, aside from the health and social transfers I mentioned earlier, as reported as revenue for this ministry is estimated to be about \$1.2 million, which is up one whole million dollars since '25-26. Through you, Mr. Chair, can the minister please clarify this amount and what that \$1 million in transfers from the government of Canada are and if they are, again, flowed right to community, as your predecessor had mentioned these previous transfers were doing?

Mr. Chair, for clarity, to the minister. I know I asked a lot of questions. Two topics in this block: I focused on how will the ministry undertake this work when the government's consultation record is already very poor given the staff complement and the lack of investment through this budget and accountability through the various line items in the business plan and the estimates for success metrics with money out and more details on money coming in.

Thank you, Mr. Chair. Those are all my questions for that block.

The Chair: Excellent. Thank you so very much for those questions, Member.

Minister, you will have 10 minutes in order to respond to those questions. Thank you.

Mrs. Sawhney: Well, thank you very much, MLA Arcand-Paul, for those questions. There were a number of questions posed. I tried to capture most of them, but I suspect that I won't be able to answer them fully, which is why I will again commit to answering some of these questions in writing.

I will respectfully disagree with your assessment about our consultation processes in the province. We have been known to be quite effective, and certainly when we work with Indigenous communities and companies across the province, there's no such thing as perfection. There are always ways to improve upon processes. Nonetheless, when we compare ourselves to other jurisdictions, we really are leaders in this space, but I do take your point around the fact that we are going to see an uptick in activity. It's really important to understand how we are going to appropriately respond to that.

Before I get into that, let me just backtrack a little bit and talk about the west coast oil pipeline. In October of last year we announced that the government of Alberta is going to be the proponent for this project. Shortly thereafter, in November, we signed a memorandum of understanding with the federal government, which, again, is really something incredible because we have a pathway to move forward in terms of working with Albertans, with Indigenous communities, with Canadians to developing additional egress to the west coast.

9:50

Part of this initial work, as you may be aware, is that as government we have to make sure we're engaging with communities not only in Alberta but in British Columbia as well because if you're not engaging and sharing information and hearing about their concerns and questions about opportunities, then what develops is a vacuum that can be filled by other voices. So we are trying to take a very responsible approach in terms of sharing what this project could look like, what equity participation could look like. So far this whole process is proceeding nicely. I've had lots of conversations with Treaty 6 and Treaty 8, both collectively as a group and individually. In fact, even last night I was having a meal with one of the chiefs from Treaty 8, and we discussed this project in detail.

What I do want to emphasize is that this is merely engagement at this point. True consultation will not take place until an application is submitted to the major projects office and that will kick off. Of course, we know that when that happens, there is going to be a need to adjust our forecast for the funding that we are providing for consultation. Right now we have a \$7 million grant for ICCP grants. That is the right number for today, but as we move forward, it's going to be incumbent upon us to re-evaluate these budget numbers and invest where we need to invest.

You know, we've talked about the ACO office and the number of employees. That number hasn't changed because it's predicated on the level of activity that we're seeing right now. Of course, in the future this is all going to be something that's going to be evaluated and reviewed, and there will be a commitment to invest monies where it is required, but in this budget in terms of what we're expecting to see in this fiscal, those numbers are going to stay the same. I will have to give a shout-out to all of the staff members in the ACO office because it isn't easy work, as was mentioned by the member. He's done this work before. I think that the work that they do is comprehensive. It's very impactful, and we want to make sure that they're supported to the greatest extent possible.

If I haven't answered some of the questions that were posed around consultation, I'd be happy to respond to them further in the next block.

I'm really glad that you had brought up the Indigenous learning initiative because this is something that the ministry and the department is very, very proud of. It was implemented in 2018. They developed the Indigenous introductory training in response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's report and call to action 57 to educate public servants on the history of Indigenous peoples.

It is a very comprehensive, very detailed initiative. Anybody who attends these sessions knows that. The sessions are intentionally kept small so that they are impactful and they resonate and there is opportunity for one-on-one discussions and engagement.

As of December 2025 about 21,533 public servants have participated in the Indigenous learning initiative training. I myself am very eager to participate in this, and I'm trying to find a time in my schedule in the coming months to do so. Nineteen thousand one hundred and seventy-six employees have taken the Indigenous introductory training since 2018. I'm just giving you these stats; they're in the business plan as well, some of the metrics. Two thousand three hundred and fifty-seven employees have taken Indigenous cultural protocol since 2020. Four to eight Indigenous introductory training sessions are delivered per month. Again, they are deliberately kept small to ensure the integrity and the quality of the delivery of the programs. Additional sessions are delivered as requested by specific ministries and divisions. If there are more questions around that, again, would be happy to address that.

I know there was a question posed about the employment partnerships program. These programs are incredibly important – I put on my old hat of Minister of Advanced Education when I talk about employment partnership programs – because this is a way to create pathways to prosperity, you know, to stability, to actual employment that is really going to matter. It has to be done in a way that resonates with the recipients of these supports so that they feel that they actually have a future that they can look forward to and that they have a way to work and to support their families.

As you know, in Budget 2026 over \$4 million is allocated to the EPP program. It's a labour market transfer agreement with the federal government, and I'm very pleased to say that we use every last penny in this funding allocation. The intention is to do so again in Budget 2026. It involves working with Indigenous organizations to fund training and employment initiatives and make connections with industry stakeholders who help create jobs.

One of the things that I plan to do outside of this program is to create another program in the future where we work with the Building Trades of Alberta and other trades organizations to make sure that this kind of training is available to Indigenous youth, women, anybody who might be interested so, again, they have a pathway to a very decent, successful career that offers real living wages.

Just going back to EPP, it not only addresses systemic barriers to Indigenous employment; it helps boost the economy by connecting employers and job creators to the skilled workers that they need. There's a lot more that I could say about EPP, but you know, I'll pause there. I'll have some more success stories to share later on.

I know that there was a question around ICIP, and there was also a question around a \$1 million expense in our revenue expense statements. I'll have to ask for more clarity around that because I didn't quite get that. But in terms of the investing in Canada infrastructure program, the Ministry of Infrastructure holds the ICIP funding, and Indigenous Relations manages the relationship with Indigenous communities and provides support with the federal application. Originally six Indigenous communities received federal approval of their ICIP projects under regular program parameters. Right now the projects that are approved under the regular stream – they have been completed – include the Red Crow Community College, Meander River essential power upgrade, broadband and cellular upgrade expansion, Cold Lake First Nations broadband expansion, and Yellowhead Tribal College's GROW project, which is active, and it is nearing completion. Okay. So that is the ICIP. Certainly, we can provide some more information.

I just want to go back to something that I just realized that I'd missed. You had asked this question at the outset. It was about the

Pathways Alliance project and the consultation that is happening around that project. I do want to reiterate that the government of Alberta: we do have a legal duty to consult. Absolutely. I've reiterated that in the House many times. You know, we remain committed to meaningful consultation with Indigenous communities when projects may adversely affect these rights or traditional uses and to accommodate their interests where appropriate. But when it comes to the Pathways Alliance, the formal consultation process on the Pathways Alliance project began in August of 2023.

The Chair: Excellent. Thank you very much, Minister, for those comments.

Member, back to you.

Member Arcand-Paul: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and I thank the minister for the answers and the promise to follow up by writing. I just want to go back. Just to be clear, schedule 24, expense by function, on page 162 in the tables of the fiscal plan. I'll follow up in writing on that question, Minister.

Mr. Chair, through you I am curious about the funds budgeted to the Premier's Council on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls and Two Spirit Plus People. The council is intended to operate at arm's length from government but relies on the ministry through the secretariat, under key objective 3.4 of the business plan on page 93, for the allocation and management of resources, and the council itself does not have authority over its budget. Thank you to Ms Midbo, who's here today, for her work on this important initiative. Thank you so much for making sure that our relatives are being taken care of and that this council is moving forward.

10:00

Looking at the council, it has expenses totalling approximately \$50,000 for '24-25, which appears modest given the scope of the council's mandate including province-wide engagement, advising multiple ministries, and monitoring government actions under the MMIWG Roadmap and the 113 Pathways to Justice.

With that context I'm curious about the funds allocated for the work of the Premier's council. Through you, Mr. Chair, can the minister clarify what portion of the \$1.9 million of funding as budgeted for the Premier's councils as identified on page 93 of the business plan is specific for the MMIWG2S Plus Premier's Council? Further, how will the ministry ensure that resources intended for the councils are not spending ways that limit the council's ability to fully carry out its mandate and raise issues identified by families, survivors, and council members?

The council on MMIWG2S-plus has a clear mandate to monitor and report annually on actions undertaken by the government of Alberta ministries to prevent violence and increase safety and economic security for Indigenous women, girls, and two-spirit-plus people. It is my understanding that the council also emphasizes the importance of accountability for families, survivors, Indigenous communities and the public, particularly in the context of ongoing mistrust in institutions and under-reporting of violence.

Given this mandate and pursuant to key objective 3.3 under the business plan and the council's role in advising government and reporting publicly on progress and challenges, Mr. Chair, can the minister clarify how the ministry ensures that the council's annual reports are completed, released, and tabled in a timely and transparent manner and confirm whether all required reporting has been made public in full so that this Legislature, families, and communities can meaningfully assess whether government actions align with the MMIWG Roadmap and the council's findings pursuant to that key objective that I mentioned?

Further, Mr. Chair, the Premier's Council on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls and Two Spirit Plus People has said that violence and discrimination faced by Indigenous women, girls, and two-spirit-plus people are rooted in colonialism, racism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia and that addressing these harms requires culturally safe systems and Indigenous-led approaches across government.

Council members have raised lived experiences on discrimination within core public systems, including health care, justice, and policing and have consistently advocated for inclusive, culturally safe governance. Under objective 3.3 of the business plan, again, despite these explicit commitments, serious and troubling concerns have been raised that discriminatory practices may exist within the secretariat and management structures supporting the council itself. These concerns include the exclusion of two-spirit and trans people from consideration for roles based on gender presentation, intentional misgendering, and workplace practices that undermine dignity, cultural safety, and trust, contrary to that objective 3.3 under the business plan.

Given the council's credibility depends on the integrity of its own support structures and looking at this budget and the language under outcome 3, which will allocate that \$1.9 million to "support the resiliency and well-being of Indigenous women, girls and two-spirit plus people," it's not clear in the business plan or the strategic plan how the minister is ensuring that the secretariat and management supporting the Premier's council are fully aligned with the council's stated values and mandate and what concrete oversight, accountability, and corrective mechanisms are in place to address and prevent discriminatory or culturally unsafe practices within the council's own operations?

This is concerning, Mr. Chair, because of the \$9 million estimated budget allocation this fiscal for work on Indigenous women's initiatives, including missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, it is essentially flat for the '26-27 and mirrors the amount expended in the '25-26 estimated budget.

On page 91 of the business plan \$4 million is being allocated from the community support fund for projects that address violence and increase safety and economic security for Indigenous women, girls, and two-spirit plus people. For Albertans, they should go and check out this important work that is being done and funded for many of the communities doing this work. Further, Mr. Chair, where is the balance of that \$9 million going after subtracting from the Premier's council spending roughly around \$50,000 a year on expenses? I just want to confirm that every single dollar is accounted for for all of those projects, including the work on the Premier's council.

Further, through you, Mr. Chair, what is the amount allocated in IR's statement of operations to provide that secretariat support to the First Nations and Métis women's councils, both on the MMIWG2S plus and economic security in '26-27? I know it's not free to provide secretariat support, so I would like to know that hard figure number on what that amount is.

I note that in the '24-25 annual report from the Premier's Council on MMIWG2S Plus it outlines some of the good advice and recommendations that council advanced across the public service. I'm curious: when will the '25-26 annual report for the Premier's council be published? I note that in the April 2024 annual report the Premier's council chair presented to the United Conservative caucus on the implementation of the Alberta MMIWG Roadmap. Was a similar presentation provided in '25-26 offered to the opposition caucus members? Were similar presentations offered to the opposition caucus members? If not, why not? If not, can we expect that? Are there plans to provide this presentation to the public? Alberta's survivors and families deserve to hear these plans.

Mr. Chair, through you I'd now like to turn to another matter of concern in terms of relationships that I've seen in this budget this year. Firstly, I've been at this table for three years now, a bit longer than the minister, but each year I have been waiting for a Treaty 8 protocol or relationship agreement to be finalized. While this year it looks like the same, given performance metric 4(a) in the business plan is perhaps putting the cart before the horse, particularly with Treaty 8 and an MOU and a fourth agreement in place, my question through you, Mr. Chair, to the minister: the government may have prematurely stated that there is a Treaty 8 protocol agreement in place, and the Premier made comments in the House a few days ago saying that there was a treaty protocol agreement or some similar agreement in place with Treaty 8, but it looks like this metric already has this as a fait accompli. Can the minister please clarify if such an agreement or MOU has been accomplished with Treaty 8, and if not, how is it going to ameliorate the relationship that was shown just this week to be extremely strained, particularly with Treaty 8?

Further, I also see a troubling matter arise under outcome 4 of the same business plan, but I am seeing a trend. I see \$1 million allocated to the First Nations for these agreements and relationships whereas there is \$4.6 million to the Métis, with \$1.6 million to the Métis Nation of Alberta framework agreement, \$1 million to implementing the protocol agreement of the Métis Settlements General Council, and \$2 million for the Métis Settlements enhanced community policing. Coupling this with the decrease in the First Nations and Métis relations estimate this year of \$695,000, I am concerned only because, based on this budget and the business plan, I see the government doing what colonial governments have been doing since the first immigrants arrived on my territory: dividing and conquering. Through you to the minister: please explain to not just me but the First Nations why the budget is showing this trend? I do think this is also concerning given what I mentioned earlier today about consultation and the need for greater investment in this ministry to facilitate the much-needed work around the MOUs and AIP. Otherwise, they will fail.

I do want to highlight that I think that all work with all First Nations and Métis groups in this province are absolutely necessary, and I do not want to see one take advantage over the other. I want to see very fair and equitable funding to all initiatives. Through you, Mr. Chair, I do want to ask that question because I don't want to see animosity grow between First Nations and Métis groups in this province. I do think that there is a respect that is owed to both First Nations and Métis folks in this province, and I do think that the budget is highlighting a very concerning thing, particularly in those objectives. I would like to see some answer from the minister through you, Mr. Chair, on why this is.

To recap through you, Mr. Chair, for the minister's ease, I've asked about the trend of funding Métis relationships while perhaps underfunding First Nations relationships under those objectives and greater accountability around the Premier's Council and Indigenous women's initiatives.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you very much. I appreciate that and with a few seconds to spare.

Minister, you have 10 minutes in order – sorry about 6 and a half minutes to respond here.

Mrs. Sawhney: Okay. Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. I'm going to respond to the questions not in the order that they were posed; I'm going to mix it up a little bit.

Just around the Treaty 8 protocol: we don't have a protocol signed as of yet. We've certainly made efforts. I know Treaty 8

leadership has made effort. We do have a draft that has been put in place. We've exchanged this draft with the Treaty 8 leadership, and they've reviewed it. There's an ongoing iteration, and it is a commitment on our behalf to try to move towards getting this protocol agreement signed. We think it's incredibly important because those are the tables – and you've heard my predecessor say this before as well – where we can get various different ministries together, whether it's Health or Education or Children and Family Services, to be able to assist communities to get the additional government supports that they might be looking for.

I will commit to continue working on that. I am continuing to speak with Treaty 8 leadership, with chiefs individually, with some council members as well, to see if we can get this moving forward. That is the update on that.

10:10

I just want to talk about some of the comments around, you know, the reductions in budget particularly I think we're talking about element 2, First Nation and Métis relations. I just want to be very clear that the only thing that has been reduced in that particular element is the reduction that I've already mentioned in the Aboriginal business investment fund.

I take to heart your comments that we don't want to see any animosity between the First Nations, Métis settlements, Métis communities as well. That's why we have very concerted policies to make sure that we're supporting, and in fact, with ABIF grants – this has been mentioned before in this very same room – we make sure that there are certain amounts that are allocated to the settlements.

Just to reiterate, again, in terms of the budget, no reductions have been made other than the one that I'd mentioned to the ABIF grant, and of course our overall budget has been supplemented by the additional \$12.2 million of expected revenues in iGaming, which will fill some of that gap that adjustment in ABIF has resulted in. I do believe I've answered that question.

Now, lots of questions on the Premier's Council on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls and Two Spirit Plus People. Obviously, we had developed a road map a while ago. The Premier's council, the work that they do, it's very relational. It's incremental. It takes time. Sometimes there aren't too many tangibles that you can actually point to that talk about the incredible work that they're doing. I know that in addition to the council, the First Nations Women's Economic Security Council, the Métis Women's Economic Security Council as well, all of these organizations together liaise quite closely with many of our ministries, including health and education, particularly with the Indigenous health division. It's critical work to make sure that the voices of Indigenous people are reflected in some of the policies that are coming forward, particularly in health. That's where we tend to see most of the focus.

I do want to ask Kristina to talk a little bit about the work. I just want to make sure I give her enough time. I think one of the tangibles – and I'll just take a minute to talk about this – that has come out of this work is the Aboriginal Alert. I was just recently at an FPT in Ottawa and Dan Martel had joined me at that event and he had an opportunity to speak for three minutes about Aboriginal Alert. You know, how do you speak about your work that is born out of tragedy, seeking to create purpose and meaning and providing some sort of a forum where people can access to help search for their loved ones? He talked about the Aboriginal Alert, and he did have a very rapt audience, and there were people from other jurisdictions who are very much interested in the work that he's doing.

Now I'm just going to pass it over to Kristina – you've got two minutes – but of course, we'll follow up with some more information.

Ms Midbo: Thank you for your questions and your interest in the work of Indigenous women's initiatives division and the advisory councils that we support. In terms of the secretariat work and the costs of the Premier's councils, they do report every year in their annual report. They are preparing their next annual report, and that will include this year's expenses.

The \$1.9 million supports not just the councils, all three councils, but also we use that money to support community-based and Indigenous-led initiatives through several grants. We are strong partners with the councils themselves, and as they identify priorities, my team looks for opportunities to advance those.

We partner as a ministry with the councils to advance those projects and their priorities. I would also say – and I just lost my thought; I think it's age related – that all three councils, the value that the councils bring to the government of Alberta, is reflected in the 10-year strategy to end gender-based violence. All three have been noted as important partners in the implementation of that strategy. We also use the council's advice to build knowledge and support for the inclusion of Indigenous perspectives into provincial laws, policies, programs, and services. It enables my team to work with our crossministry partners to share those perspectives and identify the gaps so that . . .

The Chair: Excellent. Thank you so very much for your response there.

We are going to move over to the government side for some questions. What's going to happen now: you can cede your time for the next. This is a block of time, so any member can cede some time to others. You cannot speak for more than 10 minutes at a time without going back to the minister or back to a member.

Minister, a question for you, and I believe Member Cyr caught my eye prior. Block time or back and forth would be your preference?

Mrs. Sawhney: Block time.

The Chair: Okay. Excellent.

Member Cyr, you are up first.

Mr. Cyr: Well, thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to the minister and her entire team for joining us today and the fine work that you're doing. I'd like to discuss the Indigenous Relations 2026-27 budget and the continued work your ministry is doing to strengthen partnerships with Indigenous communities across Alberta. In regions like Bonnyville-Cold Lake-St. Paul we are working closely with several First Nation communities, including Cold Lake First Nations, Frog Lake, Kehewin, and Saddle Lake First Nation as well as the Elizabeth Métis settlement and the Fishing Lake Métis settlement. Strong partnerships with these communities are essential as our region continues to grow.

I have three different questions I'd like to present to you today, Minister. One is about the funding increase, the other one is about Indigenous employment and economic development, and the last one is about the Métis settlement policing initiatives.

Minister, in your opening remarks you mentioned that Indigenous Relations has received strong funding support and that we can see that reflected in the business plan. On page 95 of the 2026-2029 business plan the ministry's opening funding increased from \$238 million in '25-26 to \$267 million in '26-27, representing an increase of more than \$29 million year over year. Through the chair, could the minister expound on why this increase in funding

is important and how it will support strong partnerships with Indigenous communities in Alberta?

The second question. Minister, on page 91 of the business plan the ministry highlights continued support for both the employment partnership program and the Aboriginal business investment fund, which help create employment and economic opportunities within Indigenous communities, specifically within my region. I see that your ministry has been very active, and I look forward to seeing what this can do for all of my First Nations within the region. Through the chair, could the minister please speak about how the ministry measures the outcomes of these programs, including sustained employment, credential completion, and the creation of long-term Indigenous jobs and businesses? How is the ministry ensuring that programs remain responsive to regional labour needs in rural and northern communities? This is even more important for our area as we are looking at the F-35 expansion in Cold Lake and the Pathways Alliance project that is being moved forward, the carbon capture. Clearly, these are remarkable opportunities not just for my area but for my First Nations and my Métis settlements. So how do we capture on that, Minister? I look forward to hearing that.

Question 3 is something with a bit of an exciting part of it. Minister, turning to community safety on page 94 of the business plan, under initiatives supporting key objectives the government has committed \$2 million to support the Métis settlements enhancement community policing initiative. In my constituency we have the Elizabeth Métis settlement and the Fishing Lake Métis settlement. I appreciate the work that's being done to support communities like those two. Can you please give us an update of what you're doing with our Métis settlements and how this funding is going to help them? Through the chair, could the minister please explain how the \$2 million invested will be used and what outcomes the government expects this initiative to achieve?

10:20

Minister, I will just say that when it comes to the responsiveness of your ministry within Bonnyville-Cold Lake-St. Paul, I'm very thankful for all of the work that you have done. I know that when it comes to projects, I look forward to potentially seeing you, hopefully, in the coming months or within the year up to my area. I would love to have a conversation, especially with my First Nations and Métis settlements. This is important, especially with the scale of investment that's happening in Bonnyville-Cold Lake-St. Paul. We're looking at tens of billions of dollars of money being put in, and ensuring that these partnerships are engaged and we can fully allow my First Nations to flourish under these circumstances, I think, is pivotal. It does send a strong message of reconciliation back to our First Nations and Métis communities.

I'd like to thank you again, Minister. I know that when it comes down to the focus that you've put onto this file, when it comes to our local First Nations, they're in good hands.

I'd like to cede my time over to my good colleague MLA Yao.

Mr. Yao: Thank you so much, Minister Sawhney, for all the hard work that you're doing on this file. I know you've been travelling lots, trying to build up relationships with First Nations not only here but in other provinces. So thank you and your entire team for that.

I'd just like to continue the questions that we have, continuing that thought on reconciliation. This continues to be a central priority for Alberta's government, reflecting a province-wide commitment to walking alongside Indigenous peoples towards a safer, more equitable, and more prosperous future for all. This work encompasses not only building meaningful partnerships with Indigenous communities but also acknowledging and addressing the historical and ongoing impacts of residential schools.

Celebrating Indigenous cultures, supporting Indigenous-led initiatives, and ensuring government programs are informed by Indigenous perspectives are all critical components of supporting reconciliation.

Outcome 3 on page 93 of the '26-29 business plan, related government initiatives, reflects these priorities across multiple sectors: justice, health, education, mental health and addictions. Maintaining reconciliation as a guiding principle ensures that programs are culturally grounded, responsive to community needs, and contribute to stronger relationships between Indigenous communities and the Alberta government.

First off, through the chair, of course, can the minister provide an overview of how Alberta's government has celebrated Indigenous cultures, including initiatives or events that honour traditions and heritage while also acknowledging and remembering those affected by the legacy of residential schools? Through the chair, can the minister expand on some of the specific initiatives in place to support reconciliation across key sectors such as justice, health, education, mental health and addictions and explain how programs incorporate business perspectives and community priorities?

I want to expand on this. You know, my First Nations in my community, my region, Fort McMurray: they've all been extremely successful, especially when I've toured around the rest of Alberta and seen, quite honestly, the state of some of the other Indigenous communities. It makes me quite proud to know that my First Nations in my region are doing phenomenal. Their businesses are doing great, and quite honestly they've been some of the biggest benefactors of things like the AIOC and other supports that our province has provided. So again to Minister Sawhney and your entire team: thank you so much for working with my First Nations in my region and ensuring that they have been absolutely successful and they will continue that success.

Again, just understanding more of the initiatives that reflect on culture, I'd be very interested in understanding that a little bit more. Pardon me; I just lost my thoughts here. Yeah, and I guess some of the key initiatives regarding reconciliation. I have a bit of a health background, and that's something that really comes naturally to me. Up in Fort Chipewyan, as an example, they're supposed to be led by – oh, my goodness. I'm blanking on the name of the federal health institution that's up there right now.

Member Calahoo Stonehouse: Nunee.

Mr. Yao: Nunee. Thank you very much.

The questions come, like, from my First Nations, and I ask them all the time about the federal participation in that. Other than some basic funding they haven't really improved and expanded on services. People in Fort Chipewyan, as an example, continue to have to fly sometimes even as far as Edmonton for things like dialysis. I know that over a few years here we've grown our dialysis a little bit in Fort McMurray, but we still see people from Fort Chipewyan going all the way to Edmonton and even Lac La Biche for these things.

Again, the federal government, in my mind, is supposed to be responsible for these things, but they're dropping the ball. Alberta will just naturally pick up the slack and try to cover these things. I'm just wondering if you could explain perhaps a little bit about the relationship with Ottawa and your discussions in that regard in supporting these communities. I find it so important. I've noticed that there has been a big emphasis on the treaties and stuff recently with the visit from First Nations to the Assembly. But, again, so many other things are reliant on the federal government. I'd like to understand that a bit more, as to how our federal government works with the province to ensure they are providing those supports. It's

mind-blowing that I don't find the federal government really providing much impact at all. I truly find our province has been really pushing on a lot of these things. I would love to understand that a little bit more.

Minister Sawhney, again, you and your entire team: great work. Thank you so much.

The Chair: Excellent. Minister, you have the next just over nine and a half minutes left to respond. Feel free to start.

Mrs. Sawhney: Okay. Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and thank you, MLA Cyr and MLA Yao, for your questions. I will endeavour to try to get through all of them. If we begin with the questions from MLA Cyr, the first one was, essentially, on the budget. I know I've covered some elements of the budget already in my previous responses, but I'll just give a very high-level overview. Budget 2026 provides funding across our ministry to continue the very important work that we're doing through a variety of initiatives, including protocol and relationship agreements; Indigenous consultation capacity program, which I touched upon earlier; First Nations and Métis women's councils on economic security; a range of supports for Métis settlements, organizations, and communities; native friendship centres; and, of course, many other programs or services.

The majority of the increase that you had noted before is for the First Nations development fund – that's \$17.5 million – where we receive a portion of the gaming revenues from government-owned slot machines in First Nations casinos. That, essentially, is a forecast that we receive. It can change, depending on what the forecast looks like, depending on what we anticipate the level of activity to be at some of these casinos. Similar to the FNDF fund, the new iGaming initiative will be funded through a portion of provincial iGaming revenues and is expected to provide about \$12.2 million in '26-27.

MLA Cyr, you also had mentioned the employment partnerships program. We made changes to the performance measure for this program in the business plan to better achieve intended results. Since 2023 Indigenous Relations has strengthened its performance measurement and reporting processes by improving our data collection, which is very important, and controls and also regularly reviewing data sources to better align the activities with intended outcomes.

In preparation for our 2026 budget our ministry further reviewed these objectives, programs, and performance measures to ensure that they are truly reflecting the impact and outcomes that we expect to see for Indigenous communities. Ultimately, we want to make sure that there are meaningful employment opportunities available as a result of these programs, so we're very centred on making sure that we make adjustments wherever required.

Then I'm just going to move on to your next question. It was around Indigenous police services. Indigenous Relations funds up to \$2 million annually to cover the costs associated with enhanced policing on Métis settlements. We were just talking about this in the ministry yesterday, trying to ascertain, like, what the future is going to look like with this funding. Indigenous Relations only covers RCMP billing for filled positions. Any unspent funds up to the \$2 million are directed towards the Metis Settlements General Council to help promote other safe and healthy initiatives. I'll have to, you know, give them a lot of credit for really using these funds in a way that does promote those safety outcomes in their communities. The funding supports a dedicated RCMP officer whose focus is on the settlement community that they are assigned. The expected outcome is a fully resourced police force that collaborates with each

of the eight Métis settlements and focuses on the priorities established by each settlement.

10:30

Okay. Now I'm just going to move to your next question, which was around the community, social, and economic development efforts of First Nations and Métis settlements, credibly asserted Métis communities, and other Indigenous organizations. We know that the ABIF fund is a very important mechanism for supporting Indigenous economic development. That's been proven time and time again, and I can tell you all kinds of stories about how this particular program has resulted in creating long-term, meaningful employment for Indigenous people right in their communities. We know that a funding adjustment has been made, but, again, it's been more than offset by the revenues we're going to see from iGaming. We're committed to creating additional programs with that revenue stream that will complement the ABIF program.

The program maintains a consistent intake and review process to provide clarity and predictability for applicants even when funding levels change. What that essentially means is that we work very closely with communities whenever they submit an ABIF application. We want to make sure that communities are successful in these applications. We always get more than we can possibly fulfill. That's why it's really important to make sure that they are spread out evenly throughout the province and everybody has an opportunity to gain from these grants, and that's why our department staff liaises very closely with these communities to ensure that they have all the elements that they need in their applications. Ultimately, funding decisions are merit based and guided by established program criteria to ensure that projects demonstrate viability and meaningful community benefit.

I'm just going to jump to MLA Yao's question on reconciliation, essentially. I think this is a really important question, and I think you brought up some really good comments around, you know, some of the lack of health supports that you see up north, and I'm going to get into that in a minute.

You wanted to have some additional information on how the government has celebrated Indigenous cultures. In my first year, essentially last year, I did host a National Indigenous Peoples Day celebration in partnership with the Royal Alberta Museum. It was a wonderful celebration. It included prayers from elders, Elder Saddleback. There was Métis jigging and singing, traditional dances.

On the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation, on September 30 every year, I hosted a commemorative event at the reconciliation garden on the legislative grounds. I was happy to see lots of representation from Treaty 6 and Treaty 8, and it was a very poignant celebration. We had prayers from Elder Makokis, songs of reconciliation, and I don't think there was a dry eye in that area at all. We are going to continue to make sure that we honour the children who never returned home and we continue to support survivors or families and we continue to walk the path of reconciliation together.

Your second question was on the specific initiatives in place. We do have our protocol and relationship agreements with Blackfoot Confederacy, the Stoney Nakoda-Tsuut'ina Tribal Council, the Confederacy of Treaty Six First Nations, and the Métis Settlements General Council that facilitate crossgovernment initiatives. I have met with all of them except for one, the Blackfoot Confederacy. We have a time set up in April to have that meeting. The Premier attends all of these as well, as well as various ministers. Of course, these are very, very important tables because this is where we connect leadership from Indigenous communities to the very important

ministries that can provide additional supports and pathways for additional help where required.

I did want to address your comments around the lack of dialysis in certain health facilities that are very important. When I spoke to the chief of the Mikisew Cree First Nation when I first met him, he brought this up, and he brought up the fact that his mother had passed away recently from cancer. I posed that question as well, like: why can't we get dialysis services in their nation? I went up there and I saw the very real issues around logistics. You're right; this is a federal responsibility for sure. I did actually pursue trying to get more of these services there, but the capacity to deliver is not available on nation right now, which is why it's so critical for them to fly to Fort McMurray or to Edmonton.

It's not ideal. It's not the way anybody should live. I do agree with that, and I did bring this up with the federal Minister of Indigenous Services, with ISC, on a phone call because we were also talking about emergency responses in the EMAP program and the fact that some communities are still out of pocket. In fact, I was speaking to Chief Sheldon Sunshine. We had dinner yesterday together, and he talked about the fact that they're still out of \$19 million from the federal program.

There really is a true responsibility. This isn't me just randomly pointing fingers at the federal government. It is their jurisdiction to take care of some of these very real health considerations and deficits as well as these deficits in terms of emergency response. I will be a very fierce advocate in making sure that we get these additional supports wherever we need, so I tell these stories at the federal level very frequently, and I'll continue to do so.

Thank you.

The Chair: Excellent. Thank you so very much, Minister. I greatly appreciate your comments there and the answers to questions.

We are going to take a five-minute break at this point, and we're going to keep that pretty tight, so five minutes on the clock. See you back here.

[The committee adjourned from 10:36 a.m. to 10:41 a.m.]

The Chair: Excellent. Well, that was a wonderful break. Thank you, everybody, for being back here. Quickly, for the record, we see we put this on the record before, but MLA, can you introduce yourself?

Mr. van Dijken: Glenn van Dijken for Athabasca-Barrhead-Westlock.

The Chair: Excellent. I also noticed before the break that there was a cellphone that went off. In the future any cellphones that go off in the middle of the meeting: we would ask that those members make a donation to their favourite charity. While we hadn't set that precedent in this meeting yet, we will from this point on. Thank you, everyone, for doing so.

All right. This concludes the government's first block of questions part. We're going to move on to the second round of questions. These are member specific, so you cannot cede time. It is 10 minutes of time. You can talk for five minutes at a time, maximum amount. We will begin this with the Official Opposition, so you can speak up to five minutes, and then the minister can respond.

Minister and Member, I'm not sure which member – Arcand-Paul? Yep. Would you like shared time or block time between you?

Member Arcand-Paul: I think I'm open to what the minister wants. Block time?

Mrs. Sawhney: Thank you. I'd prefer block time.

The Chair: Perfect. Well, we'll continue in that way, then. Block time. Member, you have five minutes.

Member Arcand-Paul: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and through you to the minister, according to IR's statement of operations on page 95 of the business plan, the ministry will flow nearly \$191 million from gaming initiatives. What makes up this estimate of \$191 million for '26-27? I note this is up from \$155 million last year. I do think it's pretty noteworthy that these First Nations casinos make up 12.7 per cent of the entire gaming and lottery revenue of this province, at least according to schedule 4 of the tables in the fiscal plan, the closest any figure has gotten to how much we represent the Alberta population given that First Nations people represent over 3.4 per cent of the Alberta population and despite all the underinvestment elsewhere.

On page 92 of the expenses in the fiscal plan, an increase of \$12 million in iGaming revenue is forecast, and \$8 million of on-reserve casino gaming revenue is being transferred to the First Nations development fund this fiscal, which I assume accounts for that increase in the dollar amount from the last year. This \$20 million adds to the expected \$178.5 million under the FNDF in '26-27, which is up from '25-26, when it was \$161 million as budgeted but \$170 million forecast. Through you, Mr. Chair, can the minister elaborate why there was this discrepancy? Further, through you, can the minister confirm whether there are any FNDF funds being used for the administration of the FNDF by the ministry? I know that the exchange of slot machines and the changing of the slot machines on host First Nations does account for part of that, but I'm curious about the administration of that FNDF and the cost thereof to the ministry.

There is an agreed formula for the allocation of the nation revenue from government-owned slot machines in First Nations casinos. Will that same formula be used to allocate funding from the \$12 million iGaming revenue, or will there be a separate agreement? I do think I heard the minister say in the opening statement that there was a percentage, and – correct me if I'm wrong – I think that was 2 per cent of iGaming. I note that page 62 of the revenue section of the fiscal plan has a forecast of \$75 million for iGaming in '26-27, which would roughly be about 16 per cent of that going to this ministry. How did this government arrive at that calculation of, I think, 2 per cent the minister said? I see about 16 per cent, unless I'm wrong. Correct me if I'm wrong.

Will current host First Nations receive 75 per cent of iGaming revenue and nonhost First Nations receive 25 per cent, similar to what the FNDF is currently set up? Or is there a different relationship that's in place there with respect to the changes and the money that will be received from iGaming?

I'd also like to take this time to ask about ABIF. I am a bit dismayed by the \$2 million reduction in ABIF funding from last year's budget to this year's budget, as the minister then was proud to have doubled it in size in the last year since the two budgets prior. Through you, can the minister please clarify why ABIF was reduced in this budget? Is there any plan to return it to the \$10 million target that was in place? I take note of the minister's comments that the only reduction in her budget this year was through ABIF. I do understand from her conversations and with the previous minister's conversations that it was a game changer for First Nations and Métis communities. I understand the predication on the forecast and the budgets being right size, as the minister says. I would wonder if there's an anticipation for it to go up when there is a plan for additional monies with WTI potentially going up in the next year.

I also see the capital grant under First Nations and Métis relations on page 131 of the estimates. I am curious if that is part of that calculation. I do think the minister confirmed that, but I would like to hear that that \$8.3 million that has been identified on page 131 of the estimates is that amount.

While I've been at this table, I have issued my concerns with AIOC, and ABIF was one jewel that did provide that \$58 million in grants since 2014. I would hate to see further cuts to this program because, unlike the AIOC, Indigenous nations do not have to go into debt to develop their economies with this capital grant. I would ask through you, Mr. Chair: can the minister commit today or in writing that ABIF will be restored in future? If not, why not?

I do think that loan guarantees are a lot different than capital grants, particularly for First Nations that have been deprived of the riches of this province as we anticipated to live together and did not cede any minerals to the depth of a plow.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Minister, you have five minutes to respond to questions.

Mrs. Sawhney: Okay. Thank you very much, and thank you very much for those questions. I know that one of the questions was around how we came up with the 2 per cent in regard to the iGaming revenues. I know that the ministries involved, including service Alberta, did consult with host nations and other Indigenous communities. Ultimately, it was a cabinet decision to come down to 2 per cent as being the appropriate number. Of course, that's going to result in over \$12 million of revenues accruing to the ministry. We are still going to be deciding how we're going to allocate those dollars. There will be discussions with the chiefs as well as other Indigenous communities around that, and we're going to develop some program parameters around that as well.

Let's just talk about ABIF and AIOC. Of course, you're right; there is a difference between loan guarantees and grants. Obviously, that is the case. Nonetheless, it doesn't mean that both are not instrumental in providing economic development opportunities. Certainly, with AIOC – I've discussed it at length already – there have been, you know, eight projects where over 43 nations have participated in these projects, and that has resulted in tremendous amounts of revenues that have already flowed to these communities. Over the lifetime of these projects it's going to be in excess of \$1.4 billion of revenue. This is significant, and I've heard lots of feedback from the communities who have participated that they are able to invest in social programs, health programs, and housing with these revenues that are unencumbered. They don't have to report to anybody and they don't have to answer to anybody, because it's their revenue that's coming in as a part of their equity participation. I just did want to reiterate that.

10:50

When it comes to the ABIF program: yes, this program has been reduced. Every ministry was tasked with looking for some savings, and I was very firm that this is a program that creates jobs and it creates employment opportunities, and these are lasting, meaningful employment opportunities. When it came down to really understanding which programs we were going to take a look at, ABIF was one of the programs that we thought that we really need to figure out how to expand so more communities have access to these funds. As the iGaming revenues come in, we plan to use those revenues to help complement ABIF. So while it looks like a reduction on the surface – it is actually a reduction – it will be complemented, this program, with other programs that we're going to announce later in the year.

When it comes to some of the community responses that we've received around ABIF, I can tell you that certainly Enoch Cree Nation has been a recipient of this grant, and they've talked about how investing in surgical facilities is going to be a game changer for their community. To have these facilities on reserve to make sure that people have access to these supports very close to their own communities, that are culturally sensitive, that are responsive to their needs, is something that they've been talking about for decades. This is one of the examples of how ABIF has really supported communities beyond economic development. It's about making gains in health and social initiatives.

I've touched upon the questions that you had posed in regard to ABIF. Again, it was the only reduction that the ministry saw, and it was complemented by an additional increase of \$12 million in iGaming revenues. There was, I think, a comment around the difference between FNDF forecasts this year as compared to last year. Again, I just want to emphasize that these are not budget allocations per se. They are always predicated on a forecast of the level of activity that you will see at the host casinos. This is what we're expecting to see, and that explains the uptick in that number.

There was also a question around how much of this budget allocation is directed to administrative activities, and the answer is that it's less than 2 per cent, so out of that budget you can expect that less than 2 per cent is going to go towards administration. Of course, we have to have staff. We have liaison officers as well who work with communities to make sure that these funds are directed to their priorities, and they support in getting their applications together, and that's why administrative support is important.

The Chair: Excellent. Thank you so very much.

Our next section will be the government's side. MLA Rowswell, you have five minutes.

Mr. Rowswell: Thank you very much. So far we've touched a little bit on the west coast oil pipeline, and I'd just like to expand on that, maybe some different questions, so that we can get a more fulsome discussion about what's happening there.

The Alberta government has repeatedly emphasized the importance of respectful and early engagement with Indigenous communities on major infrastructure and economic development initiatives. In the case of the proposed west coast oil pipeline, government materials note a commitment to ongoing engagement and collaboration with Indigenous nations and communities that may be affected by the project, with the goal of ensuring that Indigenous perspectives guide the planning and regulatory processes. This approach aligns with the priorities outlined in the '26-29 business plan where outcome 2, key objective 2.4 on page 92 identifies a role for the ministry in supporting lead ministries to advance nation-building and provincial-priority projects in a way that reflects Indigenous interests and priorities. Through the chair, focusing specifically on community-facing work, can the minister describe what opportunities Indigenous nations have had to shape or influence Alberta's exploration of the west coast oil pipeline? How is the government ensuring these perspectives are reflected at the earliest stages of consideration?

Through the chair, turning to the internal role of government and in reference to outcome 2, key objective 2.4 of the 2026-29 business plan, can the minister explain how Indigenous Relations functions as a central support for co-ordinating bodies for other ministries on major provincial projects, including what tools, standards, or advice are provided to ensure projects advance and align with Indigenous priorities? You're kind of the conduit between different ministries, the ones that have the main responsibilities for the pipeline, I take it. If we can just expand on that a little bit.

Next, the Alberta government has highlighted the importance of Indigenous partnership, early engagement, and prudent management of public resources in its approach to major infrastructure projects. The proposed west coast oil pipeline represents a potential provincial priorities project, and it is critical that planning and decision-making reflect self-determined participation by Indigenous communities while adhering to responsible timelines and resource management. In the 2026-29 business plan on page 92 outcome 2, key objective 2.4 again, the ministry regulatory approvals are for priority projects with a stated goal of achieving a 120-day approval timeline. While this timeline is intended to increase efficiency and predictability in project approvals, it raises questions about how Indigenous consultation and collaboration will be maintained without being compromised by an accelerated process.

Through the chair, can the ministry explain how the government is ensuring that early planning and engagement of the west coast oil pipeline is grounded in Indigenous partnership and self-determined participation while also making prudent use of public funds? Through the chair, regarding the 120-day regulatory approval timeline referenced on page 92 of the business plan, can the minister clarify what this timeline entails in practice and how the ministry will ensure that meaningful consultation with Indigenous communities continues without being constrained by an accelerated approval process? I know in the past, when we've been trying to get approval for the Trans Mountain pipeline, how long that took, and it just seems to never end in the conversations. But how is 120 days going to be able to accomplish the goal and still account for making sure it is fully consulted on and everyone feels like they have had an opportunity to have their complete say? I will leave that to the minister to answer.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Excellent. Thank you, Member. Minister, you have five minutes to respond.

Mrs. Sawhney: Thank you very much for these questions. This is a very important, very exciting project that we're embarking on. Like, when we talk about the west coast oil pipeline and the memorandum of understanding with the federal government, it really does require all hands on deck. So, as the Minister of Indigenous Relations, I've been doing some work that is very different from what my predecessor did before me, and that really does involve working with communities not only in Alberta but in British Columbia as well.

I had mentioned this before that whenever a project of this scale is announced, it's very important to be in community to talk about what it means, what the opportunities are, what the challenges are, where we're at because if you don't do that, then you end up developing a vacuum, and then other voices, such as NGOs perhaps, could fill that vacuum with information that isn't always correct.

We are very much in the early stages, and part of what I've been doing is talking to communities – B.C. coastal First Nations, the actual chiefs who are there, not the association itself – about what this could potentially look like. I've had four trips to British Columbia thus far. My last trip I met with the Treaty 8 nations in British Columbia, and we had a very robust conversation. But ultimately, I'm always very clear with them that we are just having preliminary conversations. We are going to start with a meet-and-greet phase, and then we're going to talk about your concerns and your worries and take that back to the technical advisory group who takes these comments and these, I guess, ideas and aspirations and reflects them in the work that they do. So there's no route that has

been determined as of yet, and we are still the proponent. We are very optimistic that a private-sector proponent will come forward.

11:00

Some of the comments that we've heard is that we want to make sure that this isn't Northern Gateway 2.0. We've heard that directly from communities. That was a project where Indigenous voices were not intrinsic to the whole process. There were decisions made at that time before speaking to Indigenous communities. We're doing the exact opposite. I've met with, you know, McLeod Lake Indian Band, Kitsumkalum, the Gitksan Huwilp Government. I've met with Metlakatla, Lax Kwa'alaams, Gitga'at First Nation, Nisga'a Lisims Government. There are so many nations that I've been able to connect with in B.C., and we've actually taken their comments to heart.

One of the items that was brought up very early in this engagement process was around marine safety. Obviously, these communities rely on the land and water for sustenance and their livelihood, so some of the questions that were posed to us: we took it back to the technical advisory group, and there is a video that has been produced as a result of that. You should be able to find that very shortly on our website that we have put together around the west coast oil pipeline project that talks about the different elements of marine safety, how far we've come, how the situation has evolved in terms of vessels that are on the water, the double-hull system. There's a west coast marine response corporation that is industry funded that received a further investment to make sure that we had more vessels that could help out with safety. All of these kinds of considerations are, again, taken into account to ensure that we are reflecting these concerns in the work that we do.

Now, I know you had also talked about the 120-day regulatory approval timeline. When the federal government announced Bill C-5, there was a clear commitment to making sure that regulatory approvals would be expedited. Of course, there have been concerns expressed around: what does that mean? What does fast-tracking mean? Are you going to take shortcuts? I can assure you that when the consultation gets kickstarted once the application is submitted to the major projects office, there are going to be no shortcuts that are in place. Regulatory red tape and burdens that are there because of government policy are one thing, but the consultation that has to take place with Indigenous communities has to be done properly and appropriately because we all have that legal duty to consult and it is the right thing to do.

Our early feasibility work is structured, again, to understand whether Indigenous communities also have interest in economic participation, governance involvement, or potential partnership should the concept advance. This is another very important element to emphasize because people want to know how they can be involved in the project.

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

We're going to turn back over to your side. I'm just going to make a blanket statement here. I'm assuming we're just going to do block time for the rest of the meeting. I think everybody is anticipating that.

Member, you have five minutes.

Member Arcand-Paul: Thank you, Mr. Chair. On page 18 of the strat plan and page 135 of the Primary and Preventative Health Services business plan there is an allocation of \$6.1 million to First Nation, Métis, and Inuit communities and organizations through the Indigenous primary health care innovation fund. How many organizations are already identified and how much will go to each

initiative? If the minister doesn't know, I think from the conversations we've had earlier she may provide me an answer to this in writing.

On page 19 of the strat plan and page 121, key objective 3.3, of the Mental Health and Addiction business plan five recovery community facilities led by Indigenous communities are to receive a portion of the \$21.3 million for building and \$52.8 million to operate these facilities. Through you, Mr. Chair, can the minister provide clarification on how much is going to each of these five facilities? Again, if she does not know, she can provide me an answer in writing. In addition to this, will this money be without strings, and will those five facilities led by Indigenous nations be able to incorporate culturally relevant and independent programming that is not tied to the Recovery Alberta requirements? Through you, Mr. Chair, that minister can also provide me those in writing if she does not know.

Next, on page 20 of this strat plan, on page 48, outcome 2 of the education business plan there is reference to enhancing "relationship-building with First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities, partners and schools to enhance student success and advance reconciliation." Further, how is \$4.6 million equitable given that it accounts for about .05 per cent of the entire budget while Indigenous peoples in the province represent 6.6 per cent of the population of Alberta? Through you, Mr. Chair, is the minister involved in this? If so, which nations are involved and what deliverables aside from high school completion will be relied on for the success of this investment? Again, if the minister does not know the answer, she can provide me an answer in writing.

I do see a line item in the capital plan for Indigenous police service buildings at \$4 million for this year and target at \$1 million next year. However, it is unclear in the public safety business plan where this specific amount is coming from. Through you, Mr. Chair, can the minister clarify? Is this through ICIP as referred? Is that a project that's completed and that's the reason why the reduction has gone forward? When I look at page 143, initiatives supporting key objectives for that same ministry, \$28.9 million is allocated to expand First Nation police services, but without steady building investment, through you, Mr. Chair, to the minister, how does this government propose to keep up this important work?

Now I'd like to turn to page 95 of the business plan to ask a question about ministry support services and the funds from '26-27 compared to the budget and the forecast for '25-26. It looks like the jump on page 95 of that business plan – the expenses of \$263,000 for ministry support services has been changed from the budget to this forecast, which was, my understanding, overspend from last year's budget. With this year it now jumps up to \$643,000 for the last year.

I'm curious, through you, Mr. Chair, what the minister's office budget for travel is, what amount that exactly is. Can you tell us how Indigenous nations may directly benefit from travel? In particular, I see that the minister mentioned that she was on four trips to British Columbia, and that was to do additional consultation. I know with the increase of consultation in that jurisdiction that the travel budget will go up with those requirements. I would like to ask if that travel budget will also include visits to all 48 First Nations and all eight Métis settlements. If not, why not? I would wonder if the minister has visited all of those nations within her portfolio.

Then I'm curious, too. There was a trip that the minister took once this new position was undertaken, particularly to India. What I understand was that it was, quote: focused on strengthening economic ties, energy collaboration, and investment opportunities. End quote. I'm just curious what the minister, through you, Mr. Chair – how this benefited Indigenous nations here in Alberta and

how that expense, made through the office budget and that jumped to \$263,000 from last year's budget, is the result of this additional travel through the ministry's office.

To wrap it up, I know I asked a bunch of crossministry questions, but I do – if we want to tie it back to just answering the question today, the ministry support services, and I can receive answers to the crossministry questions in writing.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Minister, you have five minutes in order to respond to those questions. Thank you.

Mrs. Sawhney: Thank you, Mr. Chair and through you to the member. I do appreciate all the questions on various other ministries, which includes the health ministries, Mental Health and Addiction, the ministry of education, and pieces as well. I think these are really important questions, and I'm very impressed with the member's diligence in terms of reviewing all of these business plans and really honing in on those numbers. But they are not part of my business plan or my budget allocation or my ministry document, so I won't be able to respond to those.

I do want to say that, obviously, as a facilitator ministry I am involved in this crossministerial work in making sure that Indigenous leaders and communities are connected to the appropriate ministries where possible and where appropriate, but when it actually comes to the programs and services delivered by the ministries and questions around their funding, those questions will have to be posed to the ministries. I will give them a heads-up, but certainly you can ask in writing for further detail around those budget allocations around that. Sorry; through the chair. If there are any other questions around that, I'd be happy to answer that, but the actual details around the budget items will have to go to those ministries and departments.

11:10

I know that there was a question on ministry support services and the uptick as compared to budget in the 2026-27 estimate. The reality is that the majority of that uptick is related to public-sector compensation. There was some collective bargaining that happened. Salaries went up, and that is reflected in these numbers here. Other than that, one adjustment that was made to the ABIF grant and there are some minor adjustments made to AIOC to the capacity grant component, there have been no other changes in the budget, and any increases that you may see are generally related to the public-sector compensation.

I do want to talk about travel a little bit because I think this is an important topic to bring up. This project, the west coast oil pipeline: the memorandum of understanding necessitates that someone from government is undertaking engagement with First Nation communities in B.C., with Indigenous communities in Alberta, and it is my desire and hope that I will be able to make it out to every First Nation in Alberta and all settlements in the next year or two. I know that my predecessor took about four years before he actually was able to go to every community, and I know he was much more active in this regard. I've been quite busy with this project and going to meet with some of these communities in British Columbia.

Nonetheless, it doesn't mean that I haven't engaged. I've visited many communities around the Slave Lake area. I was at Kapawe'no First Nation not too long ago, had an excellent meeting. We talked extensively about economic development and other projects. I was at the Kikino Métis settlement last summer celebrating at their rodeo, again, really taking that time to understand their social and economic and health-related priorities. So it is a motivation and an

initiative that I'm looking into a little bit further in terms of: how am I going to get to all of these communities? How can I structure my schedule and work with communities as well to make sure that these visits can happen?

There is no substitute for face-to-face interaction. You can have, you know, meetings online, you can have phone calls, but the experience that you receive when you actually go into community and you talk to the elders and you talk to some of the women who are survivors, you hear about their stories and their challenges and the unique attributes and characteristics of each community: that is a learning experience that cannot be replicated in any other manner. This is a priority for me. I understand that communities are also wanting to see me on the ground. Certainly, Councillor Tracey from Sturgeon Lake First Nation has asked me many times: when am I coming out to visit? We've tried making it out, and I know the chair is aware of that. There are cancellations on both parts, but it's still a priority of mine to make sure that I make it out there.

Travel is important. It's all covered in the existing budget, and most of my travel next year is going to be in province, with the exception of a few visits to B.C.

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

I move back over to the government side. Member Armstrong-Homeniuk, your five minutes are ready to go.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Okay. Thank you, Chair. Through you to the minister, first of all, Minister, I want to recognize and thank you for all the work you and your ministry do: your involvement in the community, your many great relationships you've built, which I know you do a lot and you do a really good job of it, and the exceptional job you are doing as the Minister of Indigenous Relations. And your staff are noted. It has been brought to my attention how wonderful you are to work with.

I want to ask, Chair, through you to the minister. The urban Indigenous population in Alberta is young and growing, with approximately 70 per cent of Indigenous people living off-reserve or off-settlement, representing a substantial portion of the province's Indigenous population. As noted on page 94 of the 2026-29 business plan under initiatives supporting key objectives, the ministry provides support to the Alberta Native Friendship Centres Association. This partnership enables the organization to deliver culturally safe and community-driven programs and services. The Alberta native friendship centres play a particularly vital role in urban communities, offering youth engagement and mentoring, elders' programs, family support services, employment and training opportunities, health and wellness initiatives, and cultural programming. Through the chair, can the minister describe what additional measures the ministry is taking to support urban Indigenous communities, including program services or partnerships beyond the existing grant to the Alberta Native Friendship Centres Association?

Also, given the growing urban Indigenous population and the unique needs of urban communities, through the chair, can the minister outline how the ministry is working to ensure equitable access to services and supports for urban Indigenous people and what strategies are in place to engage urban Indigenous organizations in planning and delivery of these programs?

Also, Minister, through the chair, Alberta's government is committed to improving relationships with Indigenous peoples and supporting communities across the province through several important initiatives. On page 93 of the business plan the Indigenous reconciliation initiative is identified as a key funding program with funding remaining steady at \$3.9 million to continue supporting Indigenous communities and organizations. The IRI

provides flexible grants for two streams, the cultural stream and the Indigenous-led initiatives, to enhance, protect, and revitalize Indigenous languages, heritage, cultures, and arts as an economic stream and supports capacity and opportunity development projects that improve economic outcomes.

Through the chair, could the minister expand on how the Indigenous reconciliation initiative funding will continue to support Indigenous communities and organizations, including examples of the kinds of cultural and economic projects it is designed to enable? Also, through the chair, can the minister explain how the ministry evaluates the outcomes and impact of projects funded through the Indigenous reconciliation initiative and how lessons learned from previous grant rounds are used to inform future intakes and priorities?

Also, one more question through you, Chair, to the minister. On page 91 of the business plan the community support fund is allocated \$4 million to address violence, increase safety and economic security of Indigenous women, girls, and 2S-plus people. The community support fund provides grants for community-led projects focused on reducing gender-based violence, enhancing safety and well-being, and strengthening supports for Indigenous individuals and families with an emphasis on culturally grounded, trauma-informed approaches. Eligible initiatives include culturally safe community programming, leadership and mentoring opportunities, healing and wellness supports, and capacity building for organizations serving Indigenous women, girls, and 2S-plus people. Chair, again through you to the minister: can you explain how funding decisions are made and what types of projects or organizations are being prioritized to address violence and support safety and economic security for Indigenous women, girls, and 2S-plus people?

Also, can the minister describe how the ministry determines if a funded project is successful, including what performance indicators or outcome measures are used to assess impacts on community safety, economic security, and overall well-being for the individuals and communities served?

Thank you again, Minister, for all the hard work you do. It is noted.

I'm done with my time.

The Chair: Excellent. Thank you very much, Member.

Minister, you have five minutes.

Mrs. Sawhney: Thank you, Mr. Chair and through you to MLA Armstrong-Homeniuk. Thank you very much for your questions and for your feedback. I really do appreciate it. Your questions are excellent. I know the first question was around how the ministry and department is supporting urban Indigenous communities. You know, there are many ways that we are doing that. We know that urban Indigenous communities are very diverse. They're growing, and they're deeply connected to culture. Our government recognizes the importance of these communities in strengthening Indigenous well-being and also advancing reconciliation.

Urban Indigenous organizations are eligible for funding through many of our grant programs, and I think it's really important to talk about some of these funding allocations that have been made because Albertans who may be watching these estimates right now wouldn't know about some of the investments that are made and the important work that these organizations are doing to support Indigenous urban communities.

Let me give you one example. Bent Arrow received \$290,000 to help provide community support for incarcerated Indigenous men who age out of the youth system and are being released. Many years ago – well, it feels like many years ago; it was in 2019 when I was

a minister for community and social services – this was an organization that I dealt with extensively, and I know that they do incredible work.

11:20

The Institute for the Advancement of Aboriginal Women received a total of \$1.13 million to support three separate projects. Each is designed to help Indigenous women in the areas of trades, transportation, job search, and career counselling. Again, although I haven't had the opportunity to go to their offices, I've been keeping a close eye on their work and on the metrics, and they are an outstanding organization.

The Urban Society for Aboriginal Youth received \$110,000 to help urban Indigenous youth explore technology through a cultural and creative lens. Again, very important investments to make sure that we are supporting people where they're at. Particularly when it comes to the youth, it's very important for the government of Alberta to ensure that we are providing supports to vulnerable people whenever possible.

Other examples from our ministry include funding from the Indigenous women's initiative branch such as the Aboriginal Friendship Centre of Calgary, which received funding for its urban Indigenous community mobilization guide to train community members in the use of the Aahpotah resource guide and other tools to increase awareness, support community mobilization, and assist Indigenous women, girls, and 2S-plus people fleeing violence. There are more examples that I could give.

I do want to say that I was at the Aboriginal Friendship Centre of Calgary not too long ago, and I had the opportunity to speak with the elders and to really look at their housing program. It was really very apparent that these kinds of organizations are really supporting urban Indigenous communities, particularly when it comes to housing. I have to give them a shout-out for their work in ensuring that vulnerable people have a place to call home during very, very difficult times.

I know MLA Armstrong-Homeniuk also asked about how the government is committed to improving relationships with Indigenous peoples and supporting communities across the province. Well, there are several – more than several – initiatives, and we're obviously very committed to ensuring meaningful reconciliation with Indigenous peoples and communities and organizations through programs like the Indigenous reconciliation initiative. This program supports the enhancement of cultural initiatives and Indigenous-led economic development.

Again, I can provide many examples of how two streams within this particular program have supported Indigenous communities across the province. In 2025-26 we supported 56 projects, including 36 cultural stream grants and 20 economic stream grants. I'll give you two examples: \$100,000 through the cultural stream to the Urban Society for Aboriginal Youth and – I had mentioned this in my opening comments – to assist with Echoes of the Past, a virtual reality journey through Treaty 7 history. I had also mentioned this; \$100,000 through the economic stream to the Kikino Métis settlement to develop a business plan and concept designs for a future convenience store and gas bar. Again, incredible opportunities for economic development.

We do evaluate the outcomes and impact of projects funded through the IRI by reviewing the performance metrics for each stream of the initiative. For the economic stream grants outcomes are measured . . .

The Chair: Excellent. Thank you very much, Minister.

Member – oh, excellent. Somebody else. Member, go ahead. You have five minutes.

Member Calahoo Stonehouse: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Minister, I want to begin with the ministry's framing of economic reconciliation and how that framing appears throughout the strategic plan. Starting on page 11 of the strategic plan, priority 1, objective 4, the ministry outlines two aspirational objectives, building oil and gas pipelines through partnerships with First Nations, and second, leading the way through economic reconciliation. However, at the Assembly of First Nations in December a number of Alberta chiefs called for withdrawal of the Canadian-Alberta pipeline. Given that context, this objective does not appear to reflect mutual reciprocity. My question is this: how does the ministry reconcile the absence of mutual reciprocity when mutual respect is supposed to be the core pillar of reconciliation? As written, it appears less like partnership and more like economic reconciliation defined by the government.

Staying with the strategic plan on page 12, priority 1, objective 5, the ministry commits to engaging partners, including Indigenous communities, on species-at-risk management. Ironically, there are no dedicated funds for the caribou management MOU signed with the Aseniwuche Winewak Nation in February. The former minister indicated he wanted to wait for a work plan to commit funding to this project.

On page 93 of the business plan the ministry highlights the Ermineskin water tie-in project, noting that the key objective is supporting interministerial and external partners throughout the process. As construction progresses, I want to ask several questions. What is the minister's assessment of the progress target so far? Is the relationship with project partners currently in a good place? In what ways have partners met or exceeded expectations when it comes to reconciliation-based support? Finally, is this project still on schedule for completion in 2027-2028?

I would just like some clarification on training that was mentioned earlier. How much is coming to cover the fees of the training from federal transfers? Also, broadband was mentioned, and I'm curious as to why broadband hasn't been made a priority for all First Nations and Indigenous communities.

I want to turn to the ministry's commitments around health and safety outcomes to community well-being, primary health care. The Indigenous primary care innovation fund and the bilateral Indigenous patient navigator grant fund have both been very important to improving how First Nations, Métis, and Inuit people move through the health care system. On page 18 of the strategic plan, priority 2, objective 1, the minister notes a \$6.1 million allocation to primary health care initiatives. I have two questions based on this. First, how does the \$6.1 million allocation break down between the Indigenous primary care innovation fund and the bilateral Indigenous patient navigator grant fund? Second, what steps is the ministry taking to ensure long-term funding stability for those programs?

I want to move to the recovery communities. On page 19 of the strategic plan, priority 2, objective 2, the ministry identifies \$52.8 million in operational funding for five recovery community facilities currently being operationalized in Treaty 6 and Treaty 7. How will that \$52.8 million allocation be distributed per centre? How is Indigenous Relations supporting nations to ensure those operational dollars can be spent before the end of '26-27 fiscal year? Does the ministry have updated information on the capacity of these centres giving the funding commitment?

On page 20 of the strategic plan, priority 2, objective 3, the ministry calls for enhanced relationship building with First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities and schools in order to enhance students' success and advance reconciliation. Ironically again, there are no concrete dollar figures attached to this objective and no KPIs articulated. At the same time the IR relation budget plan on page 95

shows an expected reduction of approximately \$600,000. So the question becomes straightforward: how does the ministry plan to meet this call to action with fewer resources, particularly in the northern school divisions, where Indigenous student enrolment is proportionally higher?

Next I want to turn to Indigenous safety and policing. According to the ministry . . . [Member Calahoo Stonehouse's speaking time expired]

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Member.

Minister, you have five minutes to respond.

Mrs. Sawhney: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to the member for that series of questions. I do want to begin with the pipeline project. I know that there are statements that have been made. Statements have been made at certain gatherings, perhaps even in the Legislature, by various individuals around their support or lack of support for the west coast oil pipeline. That's fair. People have their perspectives. We live in a democracy. We believe in freedom of speech. What I've realized since being in this ministry and maybe not even since being in this ministry – I've known this for a while – is that relationships are complex. They're dynamic. They're ever evolving. Something could happen today, and the relationship will be changed today, but tomorrow is a new day.

What I can say with absolute authenticity is that in my engagement with Indigenous communities here in Alberta there has been a tremendous response in term of support for additional egress.

11:30

I think it goes even beyond economics. I think there is a very clear understanding that diversification is a priority for the entire country. We can't solely be reliant on our neighbour to the south as our sole customer for our energy products, and that acknowledgement has been expressed to me by many Indigenous leaders. Despite what may have been said in one forum, in one room, I can tell you that even the day before yesterday I received many text messages and messages after our session in the Legislature, indicating a desire to work together, indicating a desire to work on this pipeline project. As I said, I have infinite patience and time and willingness to listen to various different perspectives and make sure that they are incorporated into whatever pathway is selected as we move forward.

It's really critically important work, and I'm committed to it. This work is not just for Indigenous communities or for Albertans or even just for Canadians. It's almost existential now. I always say it's a do-or-die moment. This is the time that we really focus on trying to get critical infrastructure built across the country.

Just to summarize that point, there is a lot of support for this pipeline here in this province from Indigenous communities. I've had direct one-on-one conversations, and that is the truth, and that is not going to change. And I'm going to continue to engage and have conversations and show up wherever possible. Sometimes I'm not even invited and I've shown up in certain spaces, and luckily it's turned out well for me. I hope that will continue in the future.

I know that MLA Calahoo Stonehouse asked a number of questions on the strategic plan as it relates to health care, as it relates to environment, the AWN caribou agreement. There were some questions around enhanced relationships, the \$6.1 million investment in health care recovery communities, the \$52 million around the recovery communities, and how we're involved in all of that. These are excellent questions. They are questions that deserve an answer, but they are not related to my ministry per se, and as I had mentioned before, these are questions that should be posed to

these ministries. But I do want to emphasize that through the protocol tables and through other mechanisms we work very closely with other ministries to make sure that Indigenous leaders and community members have access to this information. So I would just say once again: good questions, but please do take the opportunity to discuss with the other ministries.

There was a question on the First Nations regional drinking water tie-in program, and I know that there was a specific question on a specific project as well. As you're aware, a \$38.9 million project is under way at Maskwacis, and we were just discussing this again yesterday in the ministry. Ermineskin Cree Nation will connect to a waterline that is being built from Ponoka. Alberta's government is committed to helping connect First Nations to regional drinking water infrastructure. I think I've mentioned that before. Unfortunately, the federal government has failed to meaningfully address the problem of unsafe drinking water in too many First Nations communities. We know that that is a problem, and this is something that I will continue to bring up with my federal counterparts.

The Chair: Excellent. Thank you so very much.

Back to Member Calahoo Stonehouse for five minutes.

Member Calahoo Stonehouse: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister. According to the ministry of public safety business plan on page 143 . . .

The Chair: Sorry. Sorry. My mistake. My mistake. I apologize, Member. I'm skipping over the government caucus. That is fully my bad. I apologize.

Member van Dijken, I believe.

Mr. van Dijken: Thank you, Chair. Thank you for the opportunity to address the minister, and thank you to the minister and the department staff who are here. Thank you for the work that you do.

My first set of questions is going to be focused on the Aboriginal business investment fund. The community, social, and economic development efforts of First Nations, Métis settlements, credibly asserted Métis communities, and other Indigenous organizations are supported through programs, including the Aboriginal business investment fund, ABIF. As noted on page 89 of the '26-29 ministry business plan, ABIF "helps advance Indigenous community-owned economic development projects by providing partial or full capital funding." ABIF has been an effective tool for creating local employment, supporting infrastructure development, and fostering sustainable revenue streams in Indigenous communities. I appreciate the ministry's continued support for this important program.

Budget 2026 reaffirms continued support for Indigenous-led projects through the Aboriginal business investment fund, the Indigenous reconciliation initiative, and the community support fund, demonstrating the government's sustained commitment to advancing Indigenous economic development and strengthening community-driven growth.

My first question, Chair, to the minister: given the important role the Aboriginal business investment fund plays in supporting economic development in Indigenous communities, in the funding noted in Budget 2026, can the minister explain what measures or strategies the ministry is putting in place to ensure that year-to-year funding adjustments do not significantly impact Indigenous communities' ability to access capital and pursue community-identified economic priorities?

The second question. Can the minister outline how the ministry will monitor and evaluate the impacts of ABIF funding on Indigenous community outcomes, including things like job creation,

business growth, and long-term sustainability, and what performance measures will be used to ensure that communities continue to benefit from this investment?

Moving on to the First Nations development fund, the First Nations development fund grant program was developed through a partnership between First Nations and the government of Alberta as part of the First Nations gaming policy and is supported by a share of revenues from government-owned slot machines operating in First Nations casinos. The program supports projects identified by member First Nations based on their own priorities such as housing, programs for children, youth, and elders, cultural initiatives, business start-ups and expansion, and employment and training programs, all determined by community priorities set by each First Nation's chief and council.

On page 92 of the fiscal plan, since 2006 the First Nations development fund has provided more than \$2 billion to First Nations in support of over 5,000 economic, social, and community development projects across Alberta. As noted on page 89 of the business plan, under mandate and structure, the First Nations development fund is a key tool for advancing community-led development outcomes. Before my questions, I'd like to express my appreciation for the ongoing partnership; 5,000 projects, that's a large number, a very large number. The ongoing partnership with First Nations in administering this fund is very well received.

Chair, through you to the minister: can the minister explain how the First Nations development funds are generated from casino revenue and what steps have been taken to ensure stable funding, including any recent changes to the funding model or revenue formulas? Also, knowing that all eligible First Nations participate in the First Nations development fund program, can the minister describe how this funding supports community-identified priorities and what mechanisms are in place to assess and report on the program's impacts on economic, social, and cultural outcomes?

Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Minister, you have five minutes to respond to those questions.

Mrs. Sawhney: Thank you. Through you, Mr. Chair, I would like to express appreciation to MLA van Dijken for these questions. The first question was around the Aboriginal business investment fund. We've talked a lot about this particular grant stream. Essentially, the ABIF program was created to remove barriers for Indigenous-owned businesses, that they face in accessing capital from traditional financial institutions by providing targeted capital grants across Alberta. We know that that is a reality; Indigenous communities face these very real financial barriers to accessing capital, and that is why this program is so important.

11:40

I do want to give some clear examples because we've already outlined some of the parameters around the program, but I want to share some stories about how these funds have been used and how the communities have benefited. Number one, East Prairie Métis settlement will receive funding to expand their secondary firefighting crews and heavy equipment services. A very important investment. This investment will support new equipment acquisition, increase wildfire response capacity, create long-term employment, and generate revenue through provincial contracting opportunities. Twenty-five jobs for Indigenous people will be created during the construction phase, and three permanent jobs for Indigenous people will be created to operate the East Prairie wildland services.

Another project, Kapawe'no First Nation construction limited, will receive funding to acquire heavy construction equipment that will expand nation-led capacity in roadwork, gravel operations, housing development, and infrastructure projects. This investment strengthens revenue generation, supports workforce development, and contributes to long-term economic growth. Ten jobs for Indigenous peoples will be created through this particular investment.

As I said, we've talked a lot about the parameters around this, but I know that there was a question around performance measures. So let's talk about the number of permanent Indigenous jobs created by ABIF grant recipients. Employment data is self-reported by recipients during the application process and at final project reporting. ABIF staff track successful applications and outcomes through an internal tracking system, and the results are compiled, analyzed, and compared year over year to assess impacts and inform program improvements. In 2025-26 ABIF dispersed \$10 million to Indigenous-owned businesses, resulting in 142 self-reported permanent jobs. We know that we have to make every dollar count, and we also know that ABIF has invested more than \$58 million over 108 community-owned businesses and has ultimately supported 1,200 permanent jobs for Indigenous people in Alberta. That's a phenomenal statistic, and I'm really happy that you posed that question.

Let's move on to your second question. I just want to make sure I get to it, I have enough time. The First Nations development fund: there were questions around that, so I'm just going to get very detailed into this because I haven't had a chance to do that in these estimates as of yet. The FNDF is funded through a dedicated share of revenue generated by government-owned slot machines located in First Nations casinos across the province. This established revenue-sharing formula provides a predictable and stable funding stream directly tied to gaming activity. I've been asked about this formula several times, and there is this great flow chart on our website. If anybody has any questions in terms of how this funding is allocated and what the formula looks like, I can definitely point you to that.

As gaming participation continues to grow, revenues are projected to increase. In '26-27 the FNDF is projected to provide \$178 million in grant funding to First Nations across Alberta. Again, that's the forecast. This represents an almost \$8 million increase over our current projection for '25-26. There haven't been any changes to the model or revenue formula; however, Alberta Gaming, Liquor and Cannabis recently approved an extension to the temporary investment commission, which directs an additional 2 per cent from the general revenue fund to casino operators for an additional three years. I wanted to make sure that I got that information in there.

The FNDF supports First Nations led community economic and social development priorities identified by First Nation chiefs and councils, and I just gave you two examples of two really good projects. They are able to direct FNDF funding towards initiatives that reflect their unique goals and needs.

Pardon me; I gave you examples of ABIF. I do have examples of FNDF as well.

The Chair: Excellent. Thank you so very much.

Now back to the regular scheduled program. Member Calahoo Stonehouse, five minutes.

Member Calahoo Stonehouse: Thank you, Chair. On page 22 of the strategic plan, priority 2, objective 5, there is a \$105 million investment in preventative social programs through family and community support services for municipalities and Métis settlements.

How much of that \$105 million will be allocated per settlement, which preventative programs does the ministry consider the highest priority within each settlement, and how does the ministry advocate for funding levels that match these priorities?

I also want to raise the broad concern about vulnerability. On page 22 of the strategic plan, the section addressing vulnerable Albertans does not explicitly prioritize Indigenous outcomes. There is no mention of Indigenous elder abuse, intergenerational residential school survivor supports, clear carve-outs for missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, or protections for two-spirit youth. How is this ministry advocating at the strategy table to ensure Indigenous vulnerability is addressed in a distinctive way that reflects the way our communities experience it?

Turning to economic security for Indigenous women, on page 23 of the strategic plan, in priority 2, objective 6, the ministry commits to increasing economic security safety and violence prevention for Indigenous women, girls, and two-spirit plus people. However, the community service fund listed on page 96 of Budget '26 remains at \$4 million with no increase. Why has there been no increase to community services fund, and how is the ministry ensuring these funds, particularly for an economic security program, is reaching far organizations in the north?

I want to discuss community infrastructure. On page 24 of the strategic plan, priority 2, objective 7, the ministry allocates \$9 million for the active communities initiative. However, in 2024, despite more than \$12 million in funding distributed, no First Nations or Métis or Inuit sites received funding. How many Indigenous facilities received funding in 2025, if any, and how is the ministry ensuring Indigenous communities are competitive and successful in accessing this funding stream going forward?

On page 94 of the business plan, the ministry reiterates its ongoing funding commitment to the Alberta Native Friendship Centres Association, which receives \$1.3 million according to the 2024-25 IR annual report. The association is currently developing a gender-based violence prevention initiative focused on men and boys. Has the ministry considered increasing supports in order to expand the scope and scale of programming?

As we saw last year with Samuel Bird going missing, the family took on the incredible financial burden, the emotional burden of looking for that young boy. The minister talked earlier about Aboriginal Alert and that this is an investment that this ministry makes. However, when I asked the minister last year, "Does the Aboriginal Alert system speak to any policing system?" he said that it does not. I want to ask: does the Aboriginal Alert system yet speak to any policing system, so that when a loved one goes missing, police systems are notified, and that they are communicating?

Further to that I want to know the road map training around missing and murdered Indigenous people. Will the opposition also receive training on this road map that has been created, and will communities also receive the same road map training on missing and murdered Indigenous people? I also am curious to how many First Nations and Métis communities were participants in the road map developing. Were they codevelopers and codesigners, or was this created solely by the government and the ministry itself?

Insofar as the Aboriginal Alert: has it found any missing people? Are you removing the aboriginal alerts when people are found? Are there supports to families when a person posts a loved one on the Aboriginal Alert site? Are there interventions or supports that are reached out to mothers, fathers, loved ones when their child goes missing? Those are my questions. Lastly the money: how much of the funding will be allocated to Aboriginal Alert, to the families, and to supports?

I want to thank the minister and the chair for my time.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Member.

Minister, you have five minutes.

Mrs. Sawhney: I'd like to express my gratitude through you, Chair, to Member Calahoo Stonehouse for those very important questions, and I do have some answers. I'm worried I might not have enough time, so I'm going to speed talk, but I would be happy to provide more information afterwards as well.

11:50

There were questions around FCSS. This used to be my program back in the day, and I know it's an incredible program. I would love to answer in more detail, but it's not really part of my ministry or department budget allocation, so I would again recommend posing these questions to the appropriate ministry and they can give you some more substantive responses. I think there were some other questions related to other ministries as well.

There was a comment around: when we talk about vulnerable Albertans, why are we not drilling down in more detail to talk about Indigenous communities and women and children and 2S-plus people? I think that that's a good question, but I can say that within this ministry we do provide the supports to make sure that vulnerable Indigenous Albertans are getting the help that they need and they are being connected to the appropriate departments that can further support them.

In terms of the Alberta Native Friendship Centre, I did hear about this program to reduce gender-based violence. It's really targeted towards men and boys, and I think that is an excellent initiative. I know that other women's shelters have focused on programs like this and they've received good outcomes. I can say that our funding has been maintained for the friendship centres, and I certainly made a point of it with my federal counterpart in Ottawa because there was some talk about reductions in funding from IS towards the friendship centres, and I really advocated for the important work that they do. I am sure that they will have more to say about that in the future.

In regard to the Aboriginal Alert system, I think those are really good questions as to whether they're connected with the police system. I will have to dig into that a little bit more because I don't know all the details, but I did talk about the Aboriginal Alert system earlier today. I'm proud to say that we have funded this program since 2023, and there is going to be more funding as we move forward because there have been measurable impacts that have come out of this initiative.

I was on their website last night, and I know one of the questions posed was: what are some of the outcomes? Under one of the tabs, there was a tab with photos and profiles of those who have been recently found or recently located. I think that when you're talking about these horrific tragedies that are experienced by many families across the country, to have a space where you can see that people have been reunited with their families or that they have been found provides hope. It provides an avenue to start thinking about how these kinds of supports are really important.

Of course, there was another tab that shows those that are still missing and have not been connected back with their families or loved ones. It's an important resource. I do want to definitely advocate for the Aboriginal Alert. I know that the Premier's council provided a letter of support. As I mentioned, we're happy to keep the support intact. I do want to share the website address for Aboriginal Alert because I think it's important for anybody who might be listening to actually have an opportunity to look at the website. It is www.aboriginalalert.ca. There's lots of information there. If you are in the untenable situation of searching for a loved

one, there is a way that you can fill out a form on this website to seek additional assistance.

I know there was a question posed about any periphery support services that could be provided, and we will look into that and provide some more information on that.

I think I have answered most of the questions that have been posed. Actually, I haven't. The community support fund: let me give you two very quick examples of how we have supported communities in the north. Number one, Paddle Prairie Métis settlement. They received a three-year funding total of \$600,000 to assist with Unity Uprise to support Indigenous women and girls. Futures Lesser Slave Lake received a three-year total of \$512,000 to support the finding financial security and economic independence initiative. So even though the budget has remained flat, it continues to be extremely impactful.

The Chair: Thank you so very much, Minister, for that.

I believe, Member Yao, you're up for our last couple of minutes. Our meeting time is five minutes left, so maybe guide that in order to get a response to your questions.

Mr. Yao: Thank you so much for that, Chair. To the minister: again, thank you for all your hard work. I wish to pivot towards educational opportunities and workforce development.

On page 93 of the '26-29 business plan key objective 3.6 highlights the Alberta Indigenous internship program that supposedly provides opportunities for recent Indigenous postsecondary grads to gain valuable employment experience within the Alberta public service and with Indigenous community partners. It was designed to support development of Indigenous talent, build capacity within the public service, and strengthen the integration of Indigenous perspectives into government programs and services. It's thought that by offering that hands-on experience, mentorship, and professional development, this Alberta Indigenous internship program also contributes to reconciliation efforts by fostering meaningful engagement between government and Indigenous communities and helping ensure that government initiatives are informed by Indigenous knowledge and priorities. This sounds like an amazing initiative. I'm kind of curious: how long has this been around for? And I'm wondering if the minister might be able to provide us with some statistics like the total number of interns employed by the Alberta government under this program in the last year, including information on which ministries and community partners participated. I'm wondering if you have any information on that.

Also, I'm wondering if you can also explain how this Alberta Indigenous internship program supports the ministry's broader goals of announcing programs and initiatives that reflect the perspectives of our Indigenous people and how it contributes to the government's ongoing reconciliation work. It sounds like an amazing program. It looks like it's really just trying to give some people a good opportunity to get some really great internships, and I'm wondering how this program is doing; again, a little bit of a history on it. I'm just wondering what you can share with us.

Mrs. Sawhney: All right. Well, thank you very much, through the chair to the MLA for this question. It is an important program. I will just give you some very detailed information to make sure I'm being substantive in my answer. Through 2025-26 nine interns that comprise cohort 5 have been working in Transportation and Economic Corridors; Arts, Culture and Status of Women; Children and Family Services; and Indigenous Relations. Some have begun their community placements with organizations such as Aboriginal Alert, which we were just talking about, and Confederacy of Treaty Six. In August of 2025 seven interns were hired by four ministries: Primary and Preventative Health Services, Municipal Affairs, Technology and Innovation, and Advanced Education. This group is cohort 6. They are about halfway through their first year of their two-year internship. Furthermore, the Alberta Indigenous internship program directly supports the Alberta government's commitment to reconciliation by strengthening Indigenous representation, perspectives, and lived experiences throughout government. It's very important because if you're going to do this work, lived experience and that authentic perspective is critical to the work that we're doing.

Through the recruitment and development of Indigenous public servants, the program helps ensure ministry programs, policies, and initiatives are informed by Indigenous world views. A key component of the internship program is the community placement that interns complete in the second year of the program. The placements provide opportunities for interns to diversify their work experience, stay connected to community, and strengthen relationships between government and Indigenous organizations and communities.

I will have to say that during my time in Indigenous Relations, I'm very pleased to see that we have Indigenous voices reflected in my ministry staff, in my department staff, and there is no value that you can place upon the learnings, the wisdom, the knowledge, the thought process. I know that I still have a lot to learn, and I rely on my entire team to help guide me through some of this important decision-making, but there is no substitute for lived experience, and I think all of us can say that. In whatever realm of life that we have operated in, we have lived experience that helps inform the work that we do, and I always place tremendous value on that.

I really do appreciate you asking this question. We're very pleased to be able to support this program that brings great talent and knowledge and expertise into government, and we'll continue to support it.

Thank you.

The Chair: Well, thank you. That concludes our meeting here. I must advise the committee that the time allotted for consideration of the ministry's estimates has concluded. Thank you, Minister and also her officials here at the table. Thank you to all the members for your questions throughout the day.

I would like to remind committee members that we are scheduled to meet this evening, March 11, at 7 p.m. to consider the estimates of the Ministry of Transportation and Economic Corridors.

Thank you, everyone. The meeting is adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 12 p.m.]

