



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

Electoral Boundaries Commission
Public Hearings

Fort McMurray

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1 p.m.

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Electoral Boundaries Commission Public Hearings – Fort McMurray

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Ryan Olsen

1 p.m.

Wednesday, January 18, 2017

[Justice Bielby in the chair]

The Chair: It's 1 o'clock, so I think we'll get started. I have a bit of an introduction, which I'll start with. I know we have a seemingly small audience, but we found that when we were doing this in Edmonton, because people had booked at different times, they didn't always arrive right at the start. They came in through different periods, so you may not be the only ones. In any event, thanks for coming out.

I'm Justice Myra Bielby. I'm regularly a judge of the Court of Appeal of Alberta, but at the moment I'm chairing the Electoral Boundaries Commission. With me are the other members of the commission: Jean Munn from Calgary, Laurie Livingstone from Calgary, Gwen Day from Carstairs, and Bruce McLeod from Acme.

Since our postcards went out in the mail announcing the creation of the commission and inviting people to participate like you're doing here today, a lot of people have asked me: "Well, what's this all about? What does the Electoral Boundaries Commission do? Why are you having this now rather than some other time?" So I thought I'd summarize at the start by saying that we've had this commission created to research and make recommendations to the provincial Legislature as to where and how our constituency boundaries should be changed to ensure effective, proper representation by our MLAs in future provincial elections.

While there's legislation called the Electoral Boundaries Commission Act, which is a law passed by the Alberta Legislature in 1990, which says that every eight to 10 years a group has to do this, there's a particular reason for doing it now in addition to the fact that the eight years are up, and that's because Alberta has experienced a huge increase in population since the time of the last electoral boundary review, in 2010. Fort McMurray is a perfect example of that, where your population has grown so much through that period. Overall, Alberta's population has increased by more than 20 per cent since 2010 even taking into account the recent economic climate.

Because a basic principle of democracy is representation by population and we now have more population than we did eight years ago but because all of the newcomers haven't moved equally into each of our 87 constituencies, we're taking a look to see if there has to be a redistribution to make sure that there is relative equality in each of the constituencies.

Alberta has 87 provincial constituencies. We don't have the ability to increase or decrease that number. We're basically looking at Alberta like a pizza, and we're dividing it up into 87 pieces of different sizes and shapes. We can't do 88; we can't do 84. We're tasked with sticking to the same number but just looking at and making recommendations as to whether each constituency should be left alone or whether some changes should be made. As we know, each constituency is represented by one MLA. We have 87 MLAs in Alberta, and the voters in each constituency elect their MLA to represent them in the Legislature. As I say, our population has increased by 20 per cent in the last eight years, by over 800,000 people.

Our challenge is that the population hasn't moved equally throughout the province. It's favoured Calgary, Edmonton, Fort McMurray, Grande Prairie, Red Deer, some of the larger centres. Disproportional numbers of people moved there and not so much into the other ridings. While each of the 87 ridings has grown in the last eight years, which I think is a testament, in and of itself, to how much Alberta has grown, there's been particular growth in certain areas.

Eight years ago the average size for our 87 constituencies was 40,880. Today it's 48,884. Because of this diverse population, the smallest of our constituencies now has 25,192 people, but the largest has 79,034 people, so there is quite a swing around that number. Every constituency was close to 40,800 eight years ago, but because of the influx of people, we've now got some constituencies well above, almost twice the size of the provincial average.

Now, these numbers that I'm throwing about are based on estimates that the Alberta Treasury Board has given to us, but we're lucky in that Statistics Canada is about to release the 2016 federal census figures. We should have them February 8. On that day we'll adjust these figures to the actual figures, but I don't expect that there'll be a whole bunch of variation in any particular point. Right now our estimated population is 4.25 million. As I said, that divided by 87 is 48,884.

Our job is to make recommendations to the Legislature to ensure that each constituency has effective representation by their MLA. In doing so, we start by saying: okay; we should make clear and understandable boundaries, things that give people kind of an intuitive understanding of where the boundaries of their constituency should be. That's an overall goal.

The things that we consider are not just population numbers. If it was just population, we wouldn't have had to come to Fort McMurray. We could have just sat down with a pencil and ruler and divided it up into 87 equal pieces, and we'd be done. We have to consider some other things. The legislation directs us to consider some other things.

In addition to relative population densities, we're looking at common community interests and organizations, including those of First Nations and Métis communities. We are looking at community and neighbourhood boundaries, so we're going to try to not put a constituency boundary through a neighbourhood if we can avoid it. That'll be one of the things we're keeping in mind. If current constituency boundaries happen to run through a neighbourhood, that would be something we'd be interested in hearing about because we could keep that in mind when we're doing our work. We are looking at municipal boundaries of all municipalities in the province, and we're going to try to avoid dividing towns and villages up, trying to respect the boundaries of smaller communities as well as the bigger cities.

Geographical features. Sometimes there's a highway or a river that is kind of a natural dividing point. Where possible, we'll use those as one or more of the constituency boundaries.

But this isn't a closed list, so that's why we've opened this up to public input. We're having these 21 hearings in 15 centres in Alberta over a three-week period to get people's views as to what we should consider in general or in regard to their specific constituency, and also we've invited written submissions. We've had a good response to this point. In 2009-2010 they had 500 written submissions in the course of a year, and we've had 300 in the last two weeks, so there's been a good uptake. In fairness, I think that because of technology there are many more ways people can participate. There's a place right on our website where you can make a written submission or by e-mail or different types of social media or the post.

We'll consider each of these written submissions as well as the oral submissions that people are making in preparing an interim report. That interim report will address each one of the 87 constituencies, make a recommendation for each one of them. That doesn't mean we're going to recommend change for each one of them, but we will address each one. That has to be filed with the Legislature by May 31. Once it's filed, it'll be posted on our website and made public in other ways, I'm sure, and then we'll invite a

second round of public comment. Sometimes people are more able to comment helpfully when a specific recommendation is in front of them rather than generally, so the public will be given a chance to comment on our proposed recommendations. Then there'll be a second chance to make oral submissions at the end of July or in early August.

We'll use those final submissions to deliberate one more time, and then we have to file a final report with the provincial Legislature by October 31. The Legislature may well then go on to pass legislation enacting those changes that are represented by our recommendations. That's what they've done in the past, and that's our goal this time as well.

In summary, equality of population is not our only consideration in looking at constituency size. While our courts, including the Supreme Court of Canada, have interpreted our act to mean that each of us has the right not to have the political strength or value of our vote unduly diluted, our legislation permits variances, where necessary, of up to 25 per cent above or below the average number and, for a maximum of four constituencies, up to 50 per cent below the average. Now, that doesn't mean that commissions in the past have just accepted that 25 was an acceptable number if it could be avoided. In fact, our current constituencies are based on the 2010 report, which had about 85 of the constituencies that were within a 10 per cent variance of the provincial average. So the 25 per cent would be quite an exception.

1:10

Now, of the two constituencies that are the particular exceptions – there could be four, but in the past there have only been two – Dunvegan-Central Peace-Notley has a population of about 48 per cent lower than average, and Lesser Slave Lake has a population of about 38 per cent below average because they're relatively remote. I guess the thought was that if they were increased to reflect the provincial average, they would be so disproportionately large in comparison to other constituencies that it might be unfair to the people who are living in them. In any event, we're considering those constituency boundaries, too. There's no guarantee they'll stay as they are even for those two constituencies.

The law tells us that we have to start by looking at the actual average, the 48,800. Then we look at the number in each constituency. Now, if you look at the maps around the room, the red number is our estimated figure for the constituencies right now. Right now Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo has an estimated 59,576 people. You're 22 per cent above the provincial average. Last time you had 37,815, 8 per cent below the provincial average, so you have really been growing. But Fort McMurray-Conklin doesn't seem to have been growing as much. Last time it had 39,657 people. It was only 3 per cent below the provincial average. But the population has dropped there to 29,533, which is 40 per cent below the provincial average.

Now, these figures don't reflect the full effect of the fire and the results of the fire. Statistics Canada is doing a mini-census of Fort McMurray alone, so they will give us updated figures, but at the moment we're using the figures that will come out on February 8. Then if they're amended further, we'll consider those. But whether they're amended or not, it looks – I observe at the moment – just like one of your constituencies is much above the provincial average and that one of them is much below the provincial average, which is interesting.

We start by looking at 48,800. We look at the numbers of the two constituencies. We look at our list of considerable factors to consider. Is there any reason to move the boundary? We look at all the people's submissions from Fort McMurray and elsewhere. Is

there any reason to move the boundary? If we think that it has to be moved to, say, bring the population size more in balance, then we have to think: well, where should it be moved? Where's the natural boundary being suggested?

That's our job, and we're hoping that you will speak to us about what your constituency should look like after our work, where you would like to see the boundary be. We'll certainly take that into account when we're going forward.

Mr. Olsen has registered to speak at 1:20. Are you ready?

Mr. Olsen: Sure.

The Chair: That would be great. If you wouldn't mind coming up and sitting at the microphone. Know that *Alberta Hansard* is here. This is being transcribed. It's going to be posted on our website orally, and a written transcript will be available to the public there in a few days. So what you say will be made available to the public, just like with every other speaker.

Mr. Olsen: Sounds good.

The Chair: Which constituency do you live in, sir?

Mr. Olsen: I actually don't know. I just moved.

The Chair: What neighbourhood do you live in?

Mr. Olsen: In Thickwood. I live south of the main street there. I live in Brian Jean's riding.

The Chair: Okay. Thickwood is divided between the two ridings.

Mr. Olsen: Yeah. I live on Brian Jean's side of it.

The Chair: I think that's Fort McMurray-Conklin. Okay. Go ahead.

Mr. Olsen: All right. Thank you for this opportunity to talk. My recommendation is not really actually about Fort McMurray. It's more general. I'd like to talk about the indigenous people of Alberta, who I think are underrepresented with our current electoral boundaries. They form a distinct body of Canadians with a particular heritage, culture, and value system, yet they have no dedicated representation at this time. Their communities are scattered throughout the province of Alberta, so their voices are included in and lost among those of the general population. Because of this circumstance, our politicians do not find it necessary to orient themselves around native American needs and interests, which are overlooked both in elections and in Parliament. We should not allow this to continue.

Native Americans do not enjoy the same quality of life as their fellow Canadians. Studies show that our indigenous people have shorter lifespans, less access to clean water, less government assistance, less education, and higher rates of infant mortality, unemployment, incarceration, and homicide than the average Canadian. This is our most vulnerable population.

Historically, Canadians' treatment of indigenous people has been shameful and embarrassing. They have been subject to years of control and government efforts to weaken their values, heritage, and culture. Between bans on voting, residential schools, and an ongoing lesser share of government funding we have created a Canada that works against these people. We must set this right.

This commission has the power to give Native Americans the representation they need, the representation they have always been entitled to as Canadian citizens. I'm suggesting that the commission collect the indigenous reserves into two constituencies. According

to the most recent figures I've found, which are from Indian and Northern Affairs Canada in 2009, the population of on-reserve indigenous peoples should be sufficient to create two electoral districts that fall within the variance allowances. Ideally, these boundaries should group reserves by treaty area – right? – treaty area 6 being, maybe, one and 7 and 8 being the other because 6 is a larger treaty area.

Both the Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the Electoral Boundaries Commission's mandate support this course of action. Both guarantee Canadians fair and effective representation. Not only that, the Charter of Rights and Freedoms allows us to make laws and programs for specific populations in order to reduce conditions of inequality and disadvantage. If we want a Canada that listens to and represents all Canadians, we need to stand up for equality by giving these people representation. It is not enough to acknowledge our mistreatment of them and say that we're sorry; it is time to bring their unique voices and concerns into government to help steer and guide Canada to becoming a more inclusive and just society.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

I'm sure my panellists will have some questions, and I have some questions. I'm going to exercise the prerogative of the chair and go first. The act specifically instructs us to take into account "common community interests and community organizations, including those of Indian reserves." So you're speaking directly to a listed category.

In regard to your comment that there are enough people living on reserves – treaty Indians, as I think they're called under the federal legislation – to make up two complete constituencies: what are the figures you have for the total population in Alberta?

Mr. Olsen: I don't have them with me. I've got them on my paper, maybe.

The Chair: Okay. Where did you look to get that information?

Mr. Olsen: It was from – I don't remember. I think it was one of the Alberta health care groups that were doing – they were the ones where I found the listed data.

The Chair: So your proposal would not address urban First Nations people but only people on reserves.

Mr. Olsen: Yes.

The Chair: And not Métis people, either in a Métis settlement or an urban Métis person.

Mr. Olsen: Right.

The Chair: Okay. So this would be what's sometimes called a noncontiguous riding. Maybe it would be a riding without area because it would be defined simply by people because of their registration with the department of Indian affairs.

Mr. Olsen: Treaty 6 is the larger of the treaty groups, and it is central Alberta. Treaties 7 and 8 are smaller, but they're northern and southern, so that makes a really large riding area.

The Chair: Not that it's necessary, but have you talked to any Indian bands about this idea?

Mr. Olsen: No. I have talked to a couple of my Métis friends about it, but I have not actually got in contact with bands.

1:20

The Chair: Thanks so much.
Any questions?

Ms Livingstone: I just have one, which is just more of a clarification. You are proposing Treaty 6 as one riding and treaties 7 and 8 as the other? I wasn't sure where the division was. I missed what you said.

Mr. Olsen: I just think a treaty section – right? – all the reserves under each treaty are under more similar grouping than splitting it north and south generally, but I'm not too worried one way or the other. Treaty 6 is just the larger of them.

Ms Livingstone: Okay. Yeah. I wasn't sure if you were making a specific proposal, so that's what I wanted to clarify. You're just saying that, all combined, it would be approximately two ridings' worth of population.

Mr. Olsen: You could make a riding out of Treaty 6 and out of treaties 7 and 8. Both of those work as ridings. It's just that I don't know if that's the best option because it does split north and south into one grouping.

Ms Livingstone: Right. Okay. Thank you.

Mrs. Day: I do have one question. Maybe I didn't hear you quite right, but you said something about bans on voting. Can you explain that a bit more?

Mr. Olsen: The native population was restricted from voting unless they gave up their treaty rights. This was, I think . . .

The Chair: Prior to the 1960s.

Mr. Olsen: . . . in the 1960s, yes.

The Chair: Judges couldn't vote until about 1995. I'll just throw that out there.

Mr. Olsen: Yeah.

Mrs. Day: The voting that goes on in the band: is there some sort of voting for band elected officials?

Mr. Olsen: There is voting for band elected officials on a band level for each of the various groups, but they weren't allowed to vote in Alberta politics.

Mrs. Day: Do you know if this is applied throughout Canada?

The Chair: That was prior to 1960 across Canada.

Mrs. Day: That was across Canada in 1960. Okay. Good to know.

The Chair: But they can vote now provincially . . .

Mr. Olsen: They can now.

The Chair: . . . and they can vote now in their own band elections and federally as well should they choose to.

Do you have any insights as to what would encourage First Nations members to participate by voting, to increase voter turnout?

Mr. Olsen: I think that generally just having a visible representation of your ideas and beliefs and people in government will get you more involved. If you continue to vote and you never see any of your ideas represented at a government level or anybody

who looks like you – right? – you’re less likely to vote because you feel it doesn’t matter.

Ms Munn: And as a geographically dispersed block they might not necessarily have enough voice within a geographical constituency to get the attention of the MLA or the people who want to be MLAs.

Mr. Olsen: Correct.

The Chair: I’m just a little unclear. I understood that, conceptually, you were saying that this group doesn’t need to be attached to a particular piece of land because they’re diverse across the province, so you define them by band membership, which would be controlled by the treaty area in which their band is located. So we wouldn’t say: okay; this part of Alberta is part of this constituency that Treaty 6 members only are constituents of. Rather, you’d say – it would be like cloud computing; it’s an idea – that you don’t need land particularly, that as long as you’re a Treaty 6 registered Indian, if I can use the legal label, you can vote for people running for that position, for MLA. Or are you suggesting that they have to be tied to a piece of land?

Mr. Olsen: Correct. The reserves are specific pieces of land. They have borders. They are physically there. Each of these reserves would be part of that population, so it would just be this physical land and anyone in it.

Ms Munn: But, for example, Treaty 8: there are a number of different reserves. I know Treaty 8 because I’m from the south, right? Just to get this straight: aren’t you suggesting that the people form one constituency, have their own constituency regardless of where the land reserve happens to be?

Mr. Olsen: No. The people living on each of those reserves – Treaty 8 has five bands or something in it. Each of those reserve communities, anyone living within them would vote within that grouping. If they move off-reserve or move to a different reserve, then they would be moving into a different boundary.

Ms Munn: But you’re talking about creating one constituency for those five reserves, or five bands, rather?

Mr. Olsen: Yes. Well, it would be more than five bands because none of the bands are that big, have enough for that. Treaty 8 and Treaty 7 or however it was divided would have to be grouped together.

The Chair: And once a person moved to the city, they’d lose their right to vote for a native MLA under this system.

Mr. Olsen: Yes. They would move into a different constituency and would vote in their current location.

The Chair: I find it hard to imagine that five bands would be close to 48,000 in membership. I mean, I just don’t know.

Mr. Olsen: No. Treaty 6 is a large one, and it’s got something like 20 or 30 bands in it. So it would just have to be grouped till we get the numbers of people required.

The Chair: Right.

Any other questions?

Okay. Would you indulge us and answer a couple of questions that I’m asking you as a Fort McMurray resident because we’re interested in collecting information about specific constituencies as well as general concepts. We’re here, and we’re trying to find out

as much as we can about Fort McMurray. Have you lived in Fort McMurray all your life?

Mr. Olsen: No. I moved here about seven years ago.

The Chair: Okay. And you’re somewhat familiar with the city, I take it?

Mr. Olsen: Yes.

The Chair: Okay. If you look at our maps, you can see the boundary between Fort McMurray-Conklin and Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo. Of course, they include much more territory than just the city of Fort McMurray, but each of those constituencies contains part of the city of Fort McMurray. One of them has many more people than the other. Now, we haven’t made any decision on this – we haven’t even talked about it before we came here this morning and looked at these maps – but we will ultimately have to make a decision, and we have to consider all options. If we found that we had to adjust the boundaries of these constituencies so that the number of people in them was closer to 48,800 people, where do you think we should put the boundary?

Mr. Olsen: Hmm. I don’t know. Maybe if you needed more people down in the Conklin area, you could just take over the other side of Thickwood and move it up there, right? So that would move people from one to another.

The Chair: Okay. Do you know how many people – I mean, roughly, do you have a sense of how many people that would be?

Mr. Olsen: I don’t know. Yeah.

The Chair: Okay. All right.
Okay. Any others?

Mr. McLeod: Is there kind of a natural roadway or boundary there that you could identify with the split that you’re suggesting.

Mr. Olsen: Probably after you hit – right? – there’s Dickinsfield and Abraham in there, that kind of feel like the buildings all stop on the exterior of that road anyway, and then it starts up again up in the . . .

Mr. McLeod: Dickinsfield road?

Mr. Olsen: Yeah. Dickinsfield or Abraham or something in there would be – I think the road is actually called Dickins. The little area there is Dickinsfield.

The Chair: Okay. Any other questions, comments, thoughts?
Okay. Thank you so much.

Mr. McLeod: Thank you very much for your time.

The Chair: Now, because we’re here and we’ve come all this way, I’m hoping that the other two Fort McMurray residents in the room will accept our invitation to enter into a conversation about anything that I’ve said so far, just on your own behalf – we won’t attach any political affiliation to that at all – just to share any observations that you might have, because we really want to make a good decision here and be practical. We’re feeling that we have a bit of an information void.

Mr. Jessome: Sure. I will. I will try to help educate you if you like.

The Chair: Please.

Mr. Jessome: My background: I've been here for 35 years. Actually, my current job: I am a constituency manager for two MLAs in Fort McMurray. Previously I was the constituency manager for Mr. Guy Boutilier, who was the MLA for the entire region, which encompasses both ridings. I have experience from that particular era as well as today from a representation and workload as far as the constituencies and so on and so forth.

1:30

When you talk about the disparity or the differences with the population growth, it has predominantly to do with the fact that during the boom time there were three if not four particular projects south of the river towards the airport that had an estimated population of about 15,000 to 20,000 people, and that was Saline Creek. Keyano College had a portion of land. As well, the municipality had a portion of land. All the way to the airport, when you drove in from the airport, for all the area on the right-hand side when you came in, the idea was that they were going to have those lands available. Our potential population growth at that particular time was going to be 250,000. Based on fly in, fly out, the realities of the oil sands, that population never got to fruition. As a matter of fact, industry and the municipality are currently doing population growth projections. Inevitably, the chances are that the municipality would not get any greater than 100,000 people.

The Chair: And that's permanent residents, not including camps?

Mr. Jessome: That's right.

The other thing that I wanted to make mention of is the fact that because of the fire, there are 2,400 structures that were lost, affecting a population of approximately – what is it? – 25,000 people.

The Chair: That were disrupted.

Mr. Jessome: That were disrupted, displaced.

A lot of those people still haven't come back into Fort McMurray. There's still an underlying question as to whether or not they will ever return. Basically, last year during the summer months, with the recovery and whatnot, it took a while for debris removal. It took a while for getting the permits, understanding what can be done. There were homes that were built 30 years ago, and there are current land-use bylaws in place that would not permit them to rebuild them. There are a lot of discussions on what would be allowed for this, what the recovery would look like. The municipality eventually permitted a blanket land-use bylaw; in other words, with little or no restrictions other than land variances and stuff we had there.

The Chair: So that impediment to regrowth has been removed now.

Mr. Jessome: It has.

The challenge will be in moving forward. The municipality has just over 300 applications from people to rebuild in those areas.

The Chair: In the burnt-out areas.

Mr. Jessome: In the burnt-out areas, which is actually quite phenomenal, considering that they really weren't giving permits until the latter part of September, October. Inevitably, if we go back to the status quo, we have 2,400 buildings, and that includes condos and whatnot, that we need to rebuild. The first year we'll determine how many we can build in one year. Then the question will be asked of the remainder of the people, who perhaps have their family in other parts of Alberta and Canada, whether or not they want to wait

another year, to 2018-2019, in order to rebuild. Or do they stay where they're at? That's the question. That's the underlying.

When you look at Fort McMurray-Conklin, it's important to realize that it affected them only. Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo was slightly affected, and that's in the Stonecreek area, but the majority of Stonecreek will most likely be rebuilt in a timely manner. The Fort McMurray-Conklin constituency has been severely affected and hindered as far as its population. As I said, that's 10,000 people, so if you do an average of three to four, 3.5, per household, divide that by two, you can pretty much gather the voting population base, that sort of thing, right?

The Chair: Okay. I know you're blue skying this, but is that the difference that we see here, the explanation for the difference between the two numbers? It solely rests on the fire? It's not just that more subdivisions got built in Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo than were built in Fort McMurray-Conklin?

Mr. Jessome: No. It's twofold. The population you see now has nothing to do with the fire. What you see on the wall has nothing to do with the fire. It actually has to do with the population projections they had for Fort McMurray-Conklin. When we went from one riding called Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo and we split it into two, Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo and Fort McMurray-Conklin, there were population projections for both sides, and that includes Parsons Creek, which is the west side of town, as well as Saline Creek, which is where the airport is. That's the southern part. Parsons Creek is in Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo. Saline Creek is in Fort McMurray-Conklin. As well, even to the fact where Anzac had projections of population increases and whatnot, that sort of thing, which is a part of Fort McMurray-Conklin, the reason that the population never developed was because of the downturn in the economy and the realignment of the projections for the municipality and industry with regard to population. One of the key questions for the municipality and industry would be: what's their new number with regard to population growth?

The Chair: Aside from that, how many – and I'm just asking you to guess here – of the 29,533 people in Fort McMurray-Conklin haven't come back yet?

Mr. Jessome: Altogether we hear – and Steve is in the construction business – if you talk to the people in the faith base, if you talk to people in the grocery business, if you talk to people in Tim Hortons and McDonald's, you know, power, ATCO, and those people, it's a moving target. Anywhere from 10,000, 15,000, 20,000 people have not come back.

The Chair: But they didn't all come from Fort McMurray-Conklin?

Mr. Jessome: Seventy per cent of them would be from Fort McMurray-Conklin.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Jessome: I mean, that's the Fort McMurray portion of Fort McMurray-Conklin, so a vast majority of them wouldn't be coming from Fort McMurray-Conklin.

The Chair: Right. Of course.

If we accept that that 29,000 figure might be even less when StatsCan updates the census, that suggests we might have to consider a boundary adjustment between the two constituencies because one is well over the provincial average and one is dramatically lower than the provincial average. Do you have any

thoughts as to where a good division would be? You don't want to say?

Mr. Jessome: No. I prefer not to. The MLAs, certainly, will have their own input into that one. I'll leave it for them to make that comment.

Ms Munn: One of the questions that I want to ask: we heard earlier today that the two MLAs in the two Fort McMurray constituencies co-operate with one another. They share office space. They share some staff responsibilities. Obviously, you're a constituency manager for both MLAs.

Mr. Jessome: That's right.

Ms Munn: Okay. I think that with respect to budget that may be laudable. Do the MLAs share responsibility for northern travel or remote travel, remote representation?

Mr. Jessome: Absolutely. I mean, Mr. Jean, who is the Leader of the Official Opposition, and Mr. Yao work co-operatively together. They will each travel to the northern area together or sometimes individually and whatnot. Quite often, from our local standpoint, Mr. Yao will meet with a lot of the northern people from within, so he can be meeting with the people from the First Nations, the Métis. We have opportunities where we'll go to Fort Chip in the future.

Ms Munn: I understand that constituencies with large geographical areas have budget monies that are available for secondary offices. Has there ever been any thought given to a secondary, more remote office for either of the Fort McMurray constituencies?

Mr. Jessome: Not that I'm aware of.

Ms Munn: So it's not something that's needed?

Mr. Jessome: Our office is centrally located within both ridings. There are three staff members there, and we deal with the majority of the constituency issues from within the office. The traffic of the outlying areas is lesser, so whether or not it would be needed, that would be a question for somebody else to answer. I'm not really sure. If you talk to Fort Chip, for example, or Fort McKay and whatnot, whether or not there is room there for an office.

1:40

Quite frankly, the system that we have in place now, with the two ridings working together, each constituent within those ridings actually has access to two MLAs, so it's actually a double benefit, and we work quite closely with it. From directing an issue related for each constituency, I feel that it's more than adequate to be able to accommodate those people in the northern areas. We utilize also the local councillors in that area as well as school boards, so we work closely with them with regard to addressing community issues, and then there are the individual issues, social issues, and whatnot that we deal with. It really wouldn't matter where we're at because most of our contacts are in Edmonton through Human Services or Alberta Education or Justice and whatnot.

Ms Munn: So you think that just because they're living in Fort Chip or Fort McKay, they're not being shortchanged in terms of their ability to be effectively represented.

Mr. Jessome: I certainly don't want to make that comment. I will say that if you have an average of 48,000, the level of service you can provide them is: do the best you can. I'm more than confident to say that both MLAs have done an exceptional job of representing their people and addressing issues. We have many case files that we

deal with on an ongoing basis, and we're very proud of the action that we do take, and we're able to assist them and be able to close the files in a timely manner. Like I said, I was there when there was only one MLA for the entire region, and looking at the workload between the two, they're fairly similar and whatnot, so there are more people now than there were when it was 40,000.

Ms Munn: Right. Okay. Thank you.

Mr. McLeod: When we were in Edmonton yesterday, we heard a lot about community associations or community leagues, and they work very well together in some of the areas. Do you have the same thing here in some of your neighbourhoods?

Mr. Jessome: In which capacity? I'm sorry.

Mr. McLeod: Well, like, a community association – what was the one we heard about?

The Chair: We heard about Edmonton Riverbend, but Edmonton has 157 community leagues, and each new neighbourhood has a community league founded and a community hall built and that sort of thing.

Mr. Jessome: The community itself, like, the different neighbourhoods do not have that much. They may do their own little block parties and stuff. As a matter of fact, something we encourage with the municipality is to sponsor block parties and get people out and stuff there.

What we do have is a very strong core group of social profit networks that work together. We have what's called the Redpole Centre in Fort McMurray, and that's down on MacDonald Island. One of the biggest challenges for social profits is staffing and accommodations, so the municipality, through United Way as well and through grants from industry and whatnot, created an organization called Redpole Centre. Basically, what it does is that for social profits that have one or two staff members, this is basically one big office or one big structure that allows you to have shared resources. So they have one administrative assistant that will take the calls and basically channel them off, whether it be HIV/AIDS, United Way, St. Aidan's, or a lot of different organizations.

We have a number of different groups that deal with seniors. We have a number of different groups that deal with the interagency of all the different – whether it be Centre of Hope or, you know, the homeless shelters and whatnot. The community is very dynamic in that sense, that for the issues that are there, there's always a good group of people that are willing to address it and help alleviate those concerns.

The Chair: Going back to your constituents in the north, do they have access to your offices by phone?

Mr. Jessome: They do. Absolutely.

The Chair: Okay. We hear a lot about how the Internet now will be able to improve communication for people who live far away from their MLA's office. Do you see any issues, or is that true in these constituencies as well?

Mr. Jessome: Obviously, the e-mails and whatnot: Mr. Jean and Mr. Yao do a very good job when communicating, giving out their information through social media and/or through traditional advertising and whatnot. Are you talking about in video conferencing?

The Chair: I'm just talking about if somebody has a problem, but it's a two-hour drive to your office, can they just e-mail you?

Mr. Jessome: Then can, and we receive quite a bit of that. I'm just going under the assumption that you know, but there is the RITE number. It's toll-free no matter where you live, so basically there's a RITE number, 310.0000, and then you dial the constituency office anywhere in Alberta, and you can talk to any MLA, so the accessibility is available through that as well.

Mrs. Day: How about, then, when your MLAs go to, say, Fort Chip and be available to the people there. Is that something that is done monthly, or is it something done on an as-needed basis?

Mr. Jessome: Unfortunately, because of the isolation, it's based on availability, right?

Mrs. Day: As-needed basis?

Mr. Jessome: As-needed basis.

Mrs. Day: How far a drive is that?

Mr. Jessome: Right now the winter road is open to Fort Chip, so it'll take you about four and a half hours to drive on a winter road, basically across the Athabasca, the wide-open Athabasca. It's a nice bridge that they have. It's about an hour to drive to Fort MacKay.

Mrs. Day: If I was in Fort Chip, where would I go shopping to get groceries?

Mr. Jessome: Well, they have one grocery store, and it costs them \$10 for two litres of milk and whatnot, so definitely there are issues there. The isolation is something. I mean, they have the northern living allowance, which doesn't really amount to a lot, but, yeah. It's quite a challenge for the people in the north. There's no doubt about it.

Mrs. Day: So this would be the closest. If they did come for a supply trip, it would be here.

Mr. Jessome: That's right. Yeah. In the summertime and actually in the wintertime they'll come, usually travel in light time or whatnot, and they'll load up. Same thing with fuel, right? The winter road goes from about mid-December till, if you're lucky, middle of March, and then it's washed out, so they only have that three-month window to get all the fuel in there for the entire year. If there's no fuel, you're not getting it. Other than that, at the end of summertime they have air freight, but once again air freight costs you an arm and a leg, so it's quite the challenge. There's no doubt about it. Any opportunities to get stuff in, they do it. But in summertime it's actually kind of like the wild, wild west. You know, you're living in the north.

Quite often on the Snye, which is the body of water downtown, which basically encompasses the Athabasca and the Clearwater, where they meet, you'll see boats from Fort Chip that will boat up. It will take them maybe five or six hours to boat from Fort Chip. So they'll come up by boat, launch their boat, and then they'll go in and do their shopping, maybe spend a couple days with their families and stuff and get on the boat with their supplies and head back.

Up until about three or four, maybe six or seven years ago the federal government used to dredge the entire channel right from Fort McMurray to Fort Chip so that they'd have barges that went up. Barges would take up vehicles and whatever during the summertime. They've since discontinued that, which made them

that much more isolated because not a lot of people have the waterways as much to utilize in the summertime.

The Chair: What's the population of Fort Chip and surrounding area?

Mr. Jessome: I wouldn't even venture to guess. Do you know? Is it 1,200? Yeah. Give or take, between the reserve, the Métis, the nonreserve. There's a nonreserve portion out there as well.

Ms Livingstone: If I can jump in.

Mr. Jessome: Sure.

Ms Livingstone: Waiting for *Hansard* to turn on the microphone so I don't leave them with gaps. You've said that you have quite a bit of experience working as a constituency assistant. We heard in submissions earlier this week two kind of conflicting submissions that we heard a couple of times. One if the suggestion that in areas without dense population, with new technology and all of that it doesn't really matter how big a riding is because people can use e-mail and video conference and other things. That was one suggestion made. We also heard from a former MLA about the high value he placed on face-to-face time with his constituents. I'm wondering if, in your experience, you can give us some insight into both of those things and how you achieve balance, I guess, because you're dealing with both people who have easy face-to-face access as well as people who are more remote.

1:50

Mr. Jessome: Right. The face-to-face historically will be dealt with when they have an individual issue. Both Mr. Jean and Mr. Yao have a very high expectation with regard to when they're available. When they're not in session, then they meet as many people as they can. We will quite often host events. We can have upwards of 500 or 600 people or go to events where we can access the most people with it.

Because Mr. Jean is the Leader of the Official Opposition, he also gets calls from all over the province from people who have concerns with their own MLA's service. It basically boils down to a balance between what an MLA is able to do to assist a constituent as well as that the expectation of a constituent may be too high or impractical and whatnot. It's actually quite a challenge, but we pride ourselves in being able to assist as many people as possible.

Does that answer your question?

Ms Livingstone: Yeah. We just had those, sort of, two conflicting in terms of looking at riding size and how to service your constituents. We did have the suggestion that, you know, you could make Dunvegan-Central Peace-Notley as big as you needed to to fit 50,000 people in it but also the suggestion – it was from a former MLA who was talking about his rural colleagues – saying that there was value in face to face and that extending it would be a bad idea.

Mr. Jessome: Well, I guess the idea is that when you have 48,000 people – you do your math work and say 4.5 million divided by 87. You take 48,000 people or even 96,000 people and divide that by how many hours you have in a given year or term or whatnot.

We have different layers of access, so our office works quite closely with people who have individual issues. Our role is to be able to help solve those issues. The percentage of people that want to see the MLA want to see him because they have individual issues, so we utilize our office staff to be able to address as much of this issue as we can and then, you know, involve the MLA as well. Being something for everybody is almost impossible. All you

can do is basically prioritize your availability based on the time that you have. Quite honestly, what we've been able to with the two MLAs has worked really well.

The Chair: In your experience, province-wide for some of the geographically larger constituencies: do they have more staff than city constituencies?

Mr. Jessome: They do. In Fort McMurray the cost of living is a lot higher, so your budget doesn't go as far as it would normally go in other areas. In Cardston-Taber-Warner or in those southern areas a lot of the other MLAs do have the two offices. However, you know, if there was ever an issue that we felt that we weren't able to access or we weren't able to deal with the issues on hand, then certainly we'd look at it, but from where we're at now, our office is, if you take the entire region, literally smack dab in the middle of it. From a location standpoint it's successful. There's no doubt about it.

The Chair: What is the size of Fort McMurray city proper right now?

Mr. Jessome: You know what? Years ago it used to be 10 miles from the airport to Thickwood. So if you're talking about Fort McMurray . . .

The Chair: No. I'm talking about the population size. How many people? We can add these two numbers and get the population of the two constituencies. Obviously, Fort McMurray is the lion's share of that, but it's not the same as . . .

Mr. Jessome: That's the million-dollar question that everybody has. The municipality will tell you that there's – the previous number was 92,000, which included all of Fort McMurray, Anzac, Fort Chip, and whatnot. Then they added in another 34,000 temporary foreign workers, or workers that worked in the camps and whatnot, which brought it up to . . .

Mr. Auty: The shadow population.

Mr. Jessome: Yeah. The shadow population.

That 87,000 is definitely reduced as well as the 30,000 from a population from within the Fort McMurray area.

The Chair: By 10,000 at least. That's what you said earlier.

Mr. Jessome: At least that if not more.

Mr. Auty: The Red Cross said 74,000 people . . .

Mr. Jessome: Yeah.

The Chair: Okay. Here's another question you won't want to answer, but I'll ask it anyway. You've got two what have been called hybrid constituencies here, part urban and part nonurban. You've got too great a population on either of these figures to just have one 48,000-person constituency – it wouldn't be fair – but you don't have 96,000. So you could have one constituency that was entirely within Fort McMurray and another constituency that was hybrid, part within Fort McMurray and then the rest of the outlying area in the current constituencies, or you could continue with the same kind of idea as you have right now, maybe with the boundary between the two in a different place. Do you have any view on that that you want to express?

Mr. Jessome: I wouldn't suggest that you go to that particular style because I think the balance that we have now, a bit of rural, a bit of urban, works well in the fact of accessibility to all. If you had the

hybrid, you know, first off, the cost of facilitating that would be much higher as well as whether or not – you know, we look at our fellow Members of Parliament, so Mr. Yurdiga, who is Fort McMurray-Cold Lake, and we see what he goes through on an ongoing basis. We certainly wouldn't want to have that particular. I think what works now is what's there.

Mrs. Day: You are currently a hybrid.

Mr. Jessome: We are two hybrids. Yeah, we are currently. Absolutely. One and something.

The Chair: You can blame Grande Prairie for this because last time they came and said: no; we don't want to be hybrid anymore. So the commission came and redesigned it, and then for the final report they came back and said: "You know what? We've had second thoughts. Make us the way we were before." So that's what happened. But that does raise the question for other hybrid communities, so I wanted to ask it directly.

Mr. Jessome: Sure. I can just go to my experience when I was the one and only for Fort McMurray-Wood Buffalo and where we're at now. When I talk about accessibility, call volumes, and whatnot, it's fairly consistent across the board. I daren't say that the constituencies are not being well represented. As a matter of fact, I'm quite confident to say that both MLAs represent their ridings in a very creative – with the combination of both and represent equal representation sort of thing.

The Chair: Sure. Okay.

Ms Livingstone: Just one point of clarification. You've said that the partially urban, partially outlying areas work in both the Fort McMurray ridings right now. Is that because people come into Fort McMurray, that that's sort of where they're headed to for, you know, accessing services and things?

Mr. Jessome: There's no doubt. So Janvier, Conklin: they could go to Anzac for their groceries, but most of them come into Fort McMurray. That's where the hospital is. That's where most of your services are. It's basically the draw area for the outlying areas, anyway, so absolutely.

Ms Livingstone: Okay. Thanks.

The Chair: Anything else you'd like to add?

Mr. Jessome: No. That's it.

The Chair: All right. Thanks for being brave enough to engage in this conversation. You've been a big help, actually.

Would you like to say anything?

Mr. Auty: Hi. I'm Steve Auty. I'm the regional director for the provincial PC Party for northeast Alberta. I've been in Fort McMurray since 1977, almost 40 years, worked for Syncrude for 38, retired, was on the Wood Buffalo housing board for seven years – I was chair of planning and development – which is a corporation. We have about 1,350 families here, mostly service-sector people. I'm the provincial riding president of Wood Buffalo.

Any thoughts or any questions?

The Chair: Well, maybe we'll start with the last one because it's fresh in my mind. What do you think about the two hybrid ridings versus going to a model of one completely urban and one hybrid?

2:00

Mr. Auty: Again, like Vaughn says, I think we're well represented in Fort McMurray. The main stores and the main services are a draw, and I think it works well.

The Chair: Have you had experience with constituents who reside in the far north who have had – of course, you don't know about the people who can't reach you – problems accessing you through media, even getting you by phone or by e-mail or other types of social media? Have you heard about a problem there maybe because of poor Internet service or poor availability generally of certain types of services in the north?

Mr. Auty: No. I just looked it up on Google. It's showing 847 people in Fort Chip. They have a councillor on city council, and they're well represented. Even the health services now they're doing remotely, whatever you call it, with the Internet. I can't remember what that's called.

Mr. Jessome: Video conferencing.

Mr. Auty: Video conferencing. Yeah, that's the one.

The Chair: As part of health services.

Mr. Auty: Yeah.

The Chair: Would you like to hazard a view as to, if we have to move the constituency boundary, where it should be moved to? We have heard that it should perhaps include all of the Thickwood neighbourhood. That would be one thing to do. Do you have a view on that?

Mr. Auty: What we need is a crystal ball. You know, we've had many reports and many analyses over the years. We've had the Radke report, just so many different – and the CRISP report. With all of them the challenge is: what is the population? What is the population going to be?

We had a real problem with the land release, and we made major progress in land release, so now we have Parsons Creek, which is built out. We've got the land and most of the services available for another 25,000 people, which is in my riding, in the Wood Buffalo riding. We also have about 23,000 for Saline Creek. I believe it's about 23,000, isn't it? It's built out and just about ready, and there's another area, the Rotary lands, there, too.

The Chair: Is that all in your riding?

Mr. Auty: No. That's in the Conklin riding.

One thing that I've learned over many years is that when the price of oil goes down, everybody panics and we back off on the things that need to happen. Then when it gets really crazy and busy, we didn't do what needed to be done. We start to do it then, and we end up with traffic jams, and it really affects our standard of living. Hopefully, now we continue and – you know, how many people are coming back? I anticipate that there will be a lot. Where will they live? Are they going to live in the Wood Buffalo riding or the Conklin riding? They've got two choices now. Where do you draw a line? You need a crystal ball.

The Chair: If we had to do something, is the Thickwood neighbourhood naturally something that should be kept together?

Mr. Auty: It looks like – I mean, with the Wood Buffalo riding showing at 59,000 people, perhaps the river would be a good dividing line. Perhaps.

You know, my wife is from Prince Edward Island. There are 150,000 people, and there are 27 ridings there for 150,000 people, and here we are chopping this up.

Yeah. Perhaps the river, but, you know, it depends . . .

The Chair: The Athabasca River.

Mr. Auty: Yes. But it depends hugely on other things like Saline Creek and Parsons Creek, the subdivisions that are waiting for the populations, which I predict will be back.

The Chair: All right. Any other questions?

Mr. McLeod: Yes. Sure. My question is: is there going to be a focus? I think you said earlier that you're a builder or in construction.

Mr. Auty: I was a builder, yeah.

Mr. McLeod: Okay. Is there going to be a focus on replacing the current structures or moving to the brand new places in Parsons Creek that you brought up? I'm asking you if you've got a little bit of a crystal ball here. Do you think they're going to rebuild everything first and then look at these new neighbourhoods? What do you see a year from now or even two years from now? Where's the focus?

Mr. Auty: I forgot to mention that I'm also director of the Urban Development Institute.

Mr. McLeod: Oh. Perfect.

Mr. Auty: People will rebuild their houses, those that are coming back.

Mr. McLeod: Clarify that.

Mr. Auty: They've got a title in Abasand. They will build their house instead of selling it, selling the lot and then moving to Parsons Creek, is my expectation.

From an insurance point of view there was an effort or conversations about even waterways, about people with titles trading land and moving to other areas. They didn't really land on – well, they said that they wouldn't trade the land. Also, my sense is that people will build first, and, again, with some insurance things there are some reasons that they should do that. They're not going to be paid out properly or they'll be financially in a better position if they build their house is my understanding. We have 1,800 houses that need to be built, and I expect that a large number of them will be rebuilt, but I don't know what that'll be. Again, like Vaughn says, we've got, I think, 320 permits that were issued. I'm not sure.

Mr. McLeod: No. Thank you. I appreciate that honesty. When I'm looking at these numbers here, they may not vary a heck of a lot because whether they come back – I mean when they come back. Let's put it that way. I'm probably more optimistic. They come back and they fill those up first. Then I can see the expansion in a few years from now. That's what I'm trying to get in the back of my mind, how it's going to look.

Mr. Auty: My sense is that the houses will be built and those communities will be rebuilt. Then the big question is whether it'll be Parsons Creek with 23,000 and then Saline Creek with another 23,000 people . . .

Mr. McLeod: Which one goes first?

Mr. Auty: Which goes first, yeah. It'll be a big difference.

Mr. McLeod: Thank you.

The Chair: Other questions?

Mr. Jessome: Saline Creek is already serviced. That's the only – however, there's a higher value for the land in Saline Creek. Is that right, Steve?

Mr. Auty: There are services to Parsons as well. Yeah.

Ms Livingstone: Sorry. Just for the purpose of the guys doing the transcript, can you just summarize that comment?

Mr. Auty: Vaughn was saying that the services are more advanced to – my sense is that the services . . .

You said that the services are more advanced to Saline?

Mr. Jessome: That's right.

Mr. Auty: I think Parsons also has substantial services. I'm not sure who's further ahead.

Ms Livingstone: Okay. Thanks.

Mr. Auty: I do know that Parsons has a lot, and they had a challenge with a pipeline, with a water pipe. I think they've fixed most of that, but that's engineering. I'm not sure.

As far as lots in Fort McMurray, that's on the back burner. We've got to get through the wildfire, and we've got to get the price of oil up.

The Chair: Right.

Any other questions?

Do you have any questions for us?

Mr. Auty: No.

The Chair: Okay. All right. Thanks a lot.

Mr. Auty: Thank you.

The Chair: All right. Well, we'll take a brief break and just wait and see if somebody else appears because we don't have any other registered speakers, but we're all set up here, so why not wait and see?

[The hearing adjourned from 2:09 p.m. to 2:31 p.m.]

The Chair: Hi, everybody. I'm aware that most of the people in this room, maybe almost everyone, is part of the team, and given that nobody else has appeared, we have decided to shut down now and give us a little bit of extra time to get organized to get to the airport so that we can move out to our next public hearing, in Peace River.

Thank you, everybody.

[The hearing adjourned at 2:32 p.m.]

