



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 31st Legislature
First Session

Standing Committee
on
Alberta's Economic Future

Tourism and Sport
Consideration of Main Estimates

Monday, March 10, 2025
7 p.m.

Transcript No. 31-1-11

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First Session**

Standing Committee on Alberta's Economic Future

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Standing Committee on Alberta's Economic Future

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Ministry of Tourism and Sport
Hon. Joseph R. Schow, Minister
David Goldstein, Deputy Minister

7 p.m.

Monday, March 10, 2025

[Mr. Getson in the chair]

**Ministry of Tourism and Sport
Consideration of Main Estimates**

The Chair: Good evening, everyone. I'd like to call the meeting to order and welcome everyone in attendance. The committee has under consideration the estimates of the Ministry of Tourism and Sport for the fiscal financial year ending May 31, 2026. I'd ask that we go around the table and have members introduce themselves for the record. Minister, if you could introduce the officials who are sitting with you at the table. My name is Shane Getson. I'm the MLA for Lac Ste. Anne-Parkland, the constituency I refer to often as God's country, and chair of this committee. With that, we'll start our introductions to the right.

Mr. Wright: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Justin Wright, MLA for the charming constituency of Cypress-Medicine Hat.

Mr. Wiebe: Ron Wiebe, MLA, Grande Prairie-Wapiti.

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

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

Mr. Stephan: Jason Stephan, MLA Red Deer-South.

Mr. Schow: Joseph Schow, Minister of Tourism and Sport and Government House Leader and MLA for Cardston-Siksika. To my right is my deputy minister, David Goldstein. To my right-right is my assistant deputy minister Paul Lamoureux. To my left is my finance executive director Carmen Vidaurri, and to my left-left is senior financial officer, Jeff Dumont.

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

Dr. Elmeligi: Good evening. Sarah Elmeligi, MLA, Banff-Kananaskis.

Ms Goehring: Good evening. Nicole Goehring, MLA, Edmonton-Castle Downs.

Ms Hayter: Good evening. Julia Hayter, MLA for Calgary-Edgemont.

The Chair: I'd like to note the following substitutions for the record: Ms Hayter for Member Loyola, deputy chair – oh. Actually, we have one member online.

Let's go to the member online as well. I see Member Loyola.

Member Loyola: It's MLA Rod Loyola for Edmonton-Ellerslie.

The Chair: Perfect. Thank you, sir.

I'd like to go back to the substitutions for the record: Ms Hayter for Member Loyola as deputy chair, Ms Sweet for Member Boparai, Mr. Wiebe for Mr. van Dijken, and Ms Goehring in for Member Hoyle.

With that, a few housekeeping items before we turn to the business at hand. The microphones are going to be operated by the folks of *Hansard*, so we don't have to be touching any switches. Committee proceedings are live streamed on the Internet or broadcast on Assembly TV online. The audio- and videostream of the transcripts of the meeting can be accessed via the Legislative

Assembly website. Members participating remotely are encouraged to turn on your camera while speaking and mute your microphone when not speaking. Remote participants who wish to be placed on the Speaker's list are asked to e-mail or message through the committee clerk, the gentleman to my left who didn't want to be introduced. The members in the room should signal the chair. You do have to get my attention; I am not a mind reader. Get my attention, and I'll put you on the list. Please set your cellphones to the least disturbing setting provided possible.

Speaking rotation and time limits. This is the first one we're kicking off here for this year, so if it's not familiar – folks, bear with me; my voice is a little bit sore and raspy here today – just allow me to get through this here. Hon. members, the main estimates for the Ministry of Tourism and Sport should be considered for two hours. Standing Order 59.01 sets out the process for consideration of the main estimates in the legislative policy committees. Suborder 59.01(7) sets out speaking rotations for this meeting. The speaking rotation chart is available on the committee's internal website, and hard copies are provided to the ministry officials at the table.

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 the two 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 time or the rotation, please e-mail or message the committee clerk about the process.

Ministry officials who are present may, at the direction of the minister, address the committee. Ministry officials seated in the gallery, if called upon, have access to a microphone in the gallery and are asked to please introduce themselves into the record prior to commenting.

Pages are available to deliver notes and other materials between the gallery and the table. Attendees in the gallery may not approach the table. Space permitting, opposition caucus staff may sit at the table to assist their members. However, members have priority to sit at the table at all times. It doesn't look like we'll have a problem tonight with that. We've got lots of chairs around the table.

Points of order will be dealt with as they arise, and individual speaking times will be paused. However, the block of the speaking time of the overall two-hour meeting shall continue. The shot clock still goes on and will continue to run down.

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

Finally, the committee should have the opportunity to hear both questions and answers – questions and answers; this is an interesting concept – without interruptions during the estimates debate. Debate flows through the chair at all times, including instances when speaking when time is shared between the member and the minister. You'll find the chair to be very happy to look at you, to talk to you, during the whole time, and take any of those items that may cause a little friction off the table.

I would like to now invite the Minister of Tourism and Sport to begin your opening remarks. You have 10 minutes, sir.

Mr. Schow: Wonderful. Well, thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and I'm pleased to discuss the Ministry of Tourism and Sport's budget for the Budget 2025. I've already introduced the members of my executive team to my right and my left, but I'd also like to take this moment as I'm joined by members of the ministry executive team in the gallery. I wholeheartedly appreciate their support and remarkable work these past couple of years, so I wanted to take a moment to publicly thank them. It is through them that we

are able to accomplish all the work that we are speaking about today.

The Ministry of Tourism and Sport was established in 2023, so in many ways it is still quite new. The past year is the first full year that the ministry has worked through, and in that time we have encouraged Albertans to be active by supporting sport and recreation facilities and access to affordable activities across the province. We have continued to build Alberta's reputation as an attractive destination to host world-class sporting events and continued to grow the visitor economy across the province. With an operating budget of \$132.7 million, we will continue to work with communities and businesses across the province and partners across Alberta and international markets to achieve the ministry's goals.

Last year the tourism strategy was launched to chart a path forward to our goal of growing Alberta's tourism sector to \$25 billion in annual visitor expenditures by 2035, a goal we intend to reach. The All-season Resorts Act was passed in the fall of 2024, which will help us reach this goal by diversifying the province's economy and creating more opportunities for Albertans to enjoy activities such as hiking, biking, and skiing in our own backyard. We are building the team of environmental and land management experts to staff the new all-season resorts branch in my ministry. The All-season Resorts Act is a made-in-Alberta answer to the very successful model in British Columbia, which was established nearly two decades ago. The new sole lifecycle regulator established under this act will streamline approval processes while maintaining environmental review and better support resort proposals, which will increase investor confidence in Alberta and attract private capital into the province's tourism sector.

Alberta's government remains committed to Indigenous consultation through the regulatory process, as we do with all of our natural resource decisions. We are currently engaging with Indigenous communities across Alberta about all-season resort policy and regulation. Through the new regulator of all-season resorts, local communities will be engaged and resort developments will help strengthen rural economies in partnership with local businesses, Indigenous opportunities, and in keeping with the cultural fabric of the community. We look forward to updating Albertans about all-season resorts as the new branch and program are established over the coming months.

It is through Travel Alberta, the province's destination management organization, that we are driving towards many of the goals and outcomes in the tourism strategy. To continue the successes gained since last year, Alberta's government is providing \$75.2 million to Travel Alberta in Budget 2025.

As we all know, Jasper experienced devastating wildfires last summer. Alberta's government is committed to a strong return of tourism businesses, accommodation providers, and visitors to Jasper. That's why through Travel Alberta Alberta's government provided an immediate \$2.5 million to support tourism recovery in Jasper to ensure the town continues to be a strong tourist destination. With more than \$3 million in additional support for Jasper announced last week, Alberta's government has now provided a total assistance package of more than \$181 million to ensure Jasper residents and businesses are supported as the community recovers from last summer's wildfire. We will continue to provide support to help the town have a strong start for this upcoming tourism season. I want to remind everyone that Jasper is open for business; now is the time to visit Jasper. I encourage everyone to enjoy Jasper's world-class hospitality, tourism operators, and experiences, making new memories in Jasper and helping the community to rebuild stronger than ever.

Developing emerging destinations, including in rural Alberta, will help Albertans discover new places in their own backyard, and visitors will have even more authentic Alberta experiences.

7:10

Through Travel Alberta Alberta's government is working closely with operators, community leaders, and residents across Alberta to boost our visitor economy in new areas of the province. Travel Alberta continues their effort to increase flights coming into Alberta, especially since most international visitors who come to Alberta fly here. As a result, over the last year WestJet has announced increased air access to Calgary including a new direct flight from Seoul, South Korea, a direct flight from Tokyo expanded to year-round service, and a new Mexico City route launching in May. We look forward to these increased opportunities to bring the world to our doorstep, where they get to experience the beauty and vastness of our lands and landscapes.

With 1 in 3 international travellers seeking authentic Indigenous experiences, Indigenous tourism is playing an important role in achieving our tourism goals. Our government is directing \$8.85 million between 2021 and 2026 to Indigenous Tourism Alberta, the largest provincial commitment in Indigenous tourism in the country's history. In keeping with our government's commitments to Indigenous communities, I believe that it is important to highlight that the Alberta Indigenous Opportunities Corporation's mandate was expanded to include investment in tourism in October of 2024. This exciting change helps Indigenous communities access funding to invest in major projects across Alberta's world-class tourism destinations. Indigenous tourism revenues in Alberta reached \$258 million in 2023 and are projected to exceed \$293 million by 2026. This growth will strengthen economic opportunities for Indigenous peoples in Alberta, both now and in the future. We look forward to advancing these goals further because tourism means jobs.

We have made great strides on the sports side of our ministry as well, including the mandate to develop a program to invest in sport and recreation infrastructure to help Alberta's communities to remain vibrant, healthy, and actively engaged in the sports that they love. We launched the active communities initiative, which in 2024 committed \$10 million to support 19 projects across the province. This is the first grant program in Alberta that is dedicated exclusively to sport and recreation facilities. Budget 2025 continues this commitment with \$10 million for sport and recreation facilities that are at the heart of many communities. These investments are more than just building facilities; they're about building healthier families and more resilient communities by creating opportunities for more Albertans to be more active more often.

Through the every kid can play program with the stable and ongoing funding of \$8 million we continue to provide opportunities for kids to participate in the sports they love no matter their financial status. The program was first launched in 2023 and since then has provided financial support to more than 12,200 children and youth to subsidize sport and recreation program costs. Sport is for everyone, and Alberta's government is working hard to ensure that no child is forced to watch from the sidelines.

Budget 2025 continues to support events like the Canadian Finals Rodeo in Edmonton, which I had the honour of attending last year and presenting awards to the winners. Our commitment of funding for this event helped to ensure that it continues to be right here in Alberta. It's important to ensure this provincial tradition continues to thrive in our province while preserving jobs and boosting the local economy.

Several major hockey events were funded last year and will continue to be supported in the next few years, including the 2027 IIHF World Junior Championship; two Hlinka Gretzky World

Cups, one of which took place last year and the next in 2026; two Canada versus United States National Women's Rivalry Series games in the upcoming year; and the 2024 World Para Ice Hockey Championship that took place last year; and four years of Hockey Canada summer camps. It was remarkable to witness the positive economic impacts the events had in 2024 in the province, and we look forward to the events in the upcoming years.

In addition, major sporting events continue to bring great benefits to our province, which we supported in the past budget and will continue to support through our major sporting events grant program through Budget 2025. These events can have an economic impact in the millions of dollars per event, build on the province's reputation as a premiere host for major events and an attractive travel destination for visitors from around the world, and expand our sports sector's capacity to deliver world-class sporting events. Sport tourism is on the rise, and Alberta is positioning ourselves as a hub for sports activity.

These are just some of the highlights that our ministry has accomplished over the past year and will continue to accomplish through Budget 2025. Alberta is a beautiful province with so much to showcase for both sports and tourism. That is why this ministry was formed: to focus on opportunities that will strengthen our amateur sports system and increase the visitor economy.

The Chair: As the Speaker may say, I hesitate to interrupt, but we have reached the end of your time, Minister. Thank you for the presentation.

One other housekeeping item I want to bring to everyone's attention, if you're good with it. It makes it really handy for the chair and those following along at home if we keep it to the fiscal. If we talk about the government estimates, ministry business plan, strategic plan, fiscal plan, that's awfully good as well, and if we can keep it within the ministry, that makes it awfully handy. Not to boast, but this committee last year, we only had two points of order of nine entire meetings through the whole time, so I'm hoping we can break our record. MLA Sweet, I'm looking at you. So if we can keep with that, it seems to help decorum quite a bit, you guys, and obviously gets your questions answered a little bit better.

So, with that, for the first 50 minutes it goes to the Official Opposition, and the minister, you guys can go back and forth or block time. That's up to you. If it is shared time, so if block time, it's 20 minutes which can't be exceeded, and then you can go back and forth with the questions no longer than 10 minutes each. If the time is not shared, then it's still that 20-minute segment, but it's 10 and 10. So with that, MLA Goehring, you caught my attention first. I would open it up to you if you want to ask the minister that fun question.

Ms Goehring: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. Minister, are you open to going back and forth?

Mr. Schow: You know, I'm usually inclined to do block time, but today, for you, yes.

Ms Goehring: Thank you. Thank you very much.

Mr. Schow: I do reserve the right to go back to block time, though.

Ms Goehring: Thank you very much, and thank you to everyone that's joining the minister at the table today. I'm looking forward to getting through the budget and getting some answers to some of the questions that have been brought to me from many stakeholders across the province.

So Minister, starting off, we know tourism and sport are absolutely essential pillars of Alberta's economy, culture, and

community well-being. Tourism is also a significant economic contributor, rivalling some resource extraction practices even, yet it continually is underfunded and isn't supported with an effective strategy that leverages this potential and amplifies this economic revenue in ways that support local communities, enhance ecosystems, and address truth and reconciliation meaningfully. However, the lack of transparency in funding allocations, absence of timely investment in rebuilding Jasper, and the need for stronger Indigenous tourism and sport development initiatives raise serious concern.

While your opening remarks and statements talking about funding tourism sound wonderful, the total operating for the ministry has been cut by \$1.9 million. When we adjust our population and inflation, this amounts to about an \$8.4 million dollar cut. Minister, in your opening remarks, you talked about supporting Jasper with \$181 million. Could you specifically say where that money went?

Mr. Schow: Well, I want to thank the member for the question, through you, Mr. Chair, and I think you've already hit on some very important points, the first of which is that tourism and sport, I think, are essential pillars of Alberta's economy. Since this ministry was created – and I give full credit to the Premier for seeing the vision of having a Ministry of Tourism and Sport, allowing me to focus entirely on those two mandates. As someone who is a product of sport, I like to think that it's done so much for me in my own life and my ability to manage time, learn all the kinds of skills that you get on the playing field or on the court, whatever it may be, that sometimes you just can't get in the classroom.

And then of course, on the tourism side, the hon. member mentioned the economic benefits. Tourism does mean jobs.

Ms Goehring: Minister, I hesitate to interrupt. You had 10 minutes to open. Can you please answer the question so that we can go back and forth? The question, again, is where the \$181 million to support Jasper is being spent specifically.

Mr. Schow: Sure. Well, I'm happy to mention that right off the bat we made a point of supporting Jasper's destination marketing organization to continue to advertise Jasper as a world-class destination. I'm a firm believer, and I suspect members around this table would also argue, that Jasper is a crowning jewel of our province. We feel very strongly about that, and so that's why we needed to make sure that we manage the reputation of our province, that Jasper will come back stronger. It was certainly a very difficult time for that community. A lot of that was done in advertising to tell international markets that we need to reach our tourism goal of \$25 billion by 2035 that Jasper is open, it will be open, and now is a great time to visit.

7:20

Myself, I've been to Jasper recently. I was there with the federal Minister of Tourism to explain the importance of the community, to talk about the funding commitments that we have made. You know, it's important, working with Travel Alberta, to understand that if we're going to get people back to Jasper, if we're going to communicate to them that it's open and that they have the world-class tourism visitation opportunities, whether it's the hotels, whether it's the ski hills, whether it's hiking, golfing, we need to be able to advertise that to international markets. So I think it's very important that we invested that money there.

I'm happy to have my deputy minister continue to talk a little bit about the funding that we have given and the work that Travel Alberta has done with Jasper since the fires ended and now that we're working on recovery.

Mr. Goldstein: Thanks, Minister. The \$181 million is a whole-of-government approach to Jasper, which includes several ministries as part of the wildfire response group. The specific aid from our portfolio came in at almost \$3 million of direct support to Tourism Jasper to keep the doors open and allow their staff to continue the work and help them undertake some of the investments they were already committed to in the international markets. That includes the GoMedia project with Destination Canada that is going to come there in the fall, which is going to bring 200 international journalists to Jasper. I don't have to spend all the time today going through it, but there is a series of initiatives – just to say that organizations like that are funded usually through a destination marketing fund. When, of course, the hotels closed for a period of time, those funds weren't coming in, so we sort of were the bridge financing mechanism for that organization.

Ms Goehring: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Member, just through the chair.

Ms Goehring: Thank you.

Mr. Chair, on page 221 of the government's estimates, line 2.3 allocates \$75.25 million to Travel Alberta for tourism growth and diversification, which, to be clear, is a cut. Can the minister break down how these funds will be used and what specific programs or regions will benefit?

Just for those following along at home, Travel Alberta is working to support 10 tourism development zones across the province. Many of these zones are in rural areas who have not yet developed a robust tourism plan. To be able to truly achieve their potential for visitor experiences and economic revenue, they will require support to develop strategic tourism plans, nurture investment opportunities, and implement a successful tourism product. Will the Travel Alberta funding be allocated to them? Which zones will take priority? And how will the funding be distributed to local businesses to support tourism growth? Will Travel Alberta be doing anything to incentivize its investment in tourism-related infrastructure like hotels and restaurants to support local tourism in rural communities in these tourism developmental zones?

Mr. Schow: Thank you, Member, for the question. A lot to unpack there. I'm just kind of making a couple of notes. But you made an excellent point. The tourism development zones in the province are 10 strategically located areas that we think in collaboration with Travel Alberta have a high potential for development and output. As I mentioned, our goal of reaching \$25 billion by 2035 is one that is certainly lofty but I think very achievable. Given the compression that we've seen in places like Jasper and Banff, understanding that those areas are seeing increased visitation without expansion, we are looking to find new places to disperse visitors who are coming here from around Alberta, visiting their own backyard, coming from around the country, and then, of course, from around the world.

The purpose of the tourism development zones was to look at places that we could make targeted investments in new world-class tourism products. Now, I mentioned a little bit about them in my opening remarks with regard to Indigenous tourism, and I can elaborate on that later. But what I can say to your initial question, to the member through the chair, is that we did have a decrease in the budget, but it was only because of the phasing out or ending of what was a rural Alberta development program that we had. That was a short two-year program, a top-up, that effectively was created through the previous minister of agriculture. The two-year timeline on that program has ended.

What I think is important to note, again to the member's question, is that we are continuing to invest in rural Alberta. I talked earlier about this crowning jewel of Jasper and Banff and Lake Louise. But to have crowning jewels, you have to have a crown, and that's what I believe these 10 TDZs, or tourism development zones, are. They give us an opportunity to look at these areas that are strategically located from a travelling perspective, proximal to an airport, as we talked about earlier.

You know, the target investments, I'm sure my deputy minister and CEO of Travel Alberta could talk a little more about it, but I think it's an important note that I've been to a number of these places, personally gone out and visited with the travel operators, and they are so grateful that this government sees the vision of tourism as an economic driver. Then if you talk to some of the local businesses around there that are having induced benefits from increased purchasing of products, whether it's meat or poultry or even things like homemade bedding, right, like all the things that are culturally relevant to those areas.

I'm happy to throw it to David Goldstein, the deputy minister and CEO of Travel Alberta to talk a little more about the specific investments we're making in those TDZs.

Mr. Goldstein: Thank you, Minister, and through the chair to the member. We had a unique challenge in Alberta where pre-COVID 65 per cent of the tourism revenue was in five destinations and was heavily in the summer season. Part of this was an econometric view of what was the capacity in other parts of the province. Putting the two northern TDZs aside for a second, they're all sort of within a one and a half or two-hour drive of one of the international airports. We're investing with entrepreneurs and communities to the tune of almost \$65 million over the last three years to actually build product in those various regions so that when we go into the international marketplace, we actually have itineraries that we can sell to international and U.S. customers.

You asked the question: what are the priorities? Well, we don't have favourite children. There are some areas that are going to be more advanced than others, and we hope it will be an escalator for all those parts of the province, particularly in the north where it's more difficult, but we see tremendous opportunities and have been working with Grande Prairie and Fort Mac and other parts of the province. Happy to elaborate further.

Ms Goehring: Thank you very much.

Two of them are the legacy destinations like the Rocky Mountain parks and Drumheller. I'm curious how they're going to continue to develop the infrastructure required to successfully host the world. You talked about being able to expand and look at new destinations, and I'm assuming that's through the recent piece of legislation, but can you talk specifically about those two destinations?

Mr. Schow: Sorry, Member. Could you repeat the two destinations?

Ms Goehring: Rocky Mountain parks and Drumheller.

Mr. Schow: Sure. I'm happy to speak more broadly about the issue you raised, which is about infrastructure. I think it's a great point. As we develop more places for people to visit, they have to find a way to get there. I mean, that's just a natural occurrence here, so understanding that, I think that strategic development of these tourism development zones, making sure the proper infrastructure is available in those areas, is certainly vital.

When we look at something like our all-season resorts, the process would be that we are looking at master plans that would be proposed to the department. They would review them on a merit basis and then look at the other factors surrounding those. Are there

roads available? The other side is if people are coming to Alberta, we have a reputation to maintain that we have already established and will continue to establish as a premier destination. If people are coming here to see something like Drumheller, as the member mentioned, and they are not travelling on roads that are comfortable because they're full of potholes or there's high traffic, we have to address those issues.

As we develop and look at the long-term tourism strategy, this is where I like to think that me and my colleagues are either tourism or tourism adjacent, understanding we all have a role to play in creating what is a very hospitable and welcoming environment for this province.

I don't have specific numbers for the two areas that you mentioned, but what I can say is that I've taken this into consideration. I've spoken with my colleague, Minister McIver, the Minister of Municipal Affairs, Minister Dreeshen, minister of transportation, and others as we work towards this goal of reaching our tourism spending goal in 2035, understanding there would be some demands on infrastructure.

I think it's important to know that, you know, we also have constraints on other areas. We look at something like Parks Canada and the ability that we have to work in the parks given that it's national jurisdiction, right? Understanding that in those areas expansion is very difficult, so we have to look outside the parks where we can develop. That is the long-term plan, but we are going to continue to integrate the infrastructure demands as we also build on the tourism products.

Ms Goehring: Thank you very much, Minister, through the chair.

Now to go on a little bit about tourism diversification and regional development. Given Alberta's heavy reliance on mountain tourism, what strategies is the ministry implementing to expand tourism in other regions such as Indigenous tourism, agritourism, culture tourism, and specifically what portion of the tourism budget is specifically allocated to Indigenous-led tourism businesses and rural tourism expansions?

7:30

Mr. Schow: I'll start with the Indigenous tourism question first if that's okay, Mr. Chair. I think the member again has raised a very good point. Indigenous tourism is vital to our tourism mix. But I also think it's not just about tourism; it's about sharing Alberta's story. The Indigenous cultures and communities have been in the province since time immemorial and are part of this fabric and the story that we tell. I've travelled overseas a number of times to talk about Alberta's tourism strategy and our long-term tourism goals, and they are impossible – I repeat: they are impossible – without Indigenous tourism. I've heard from buyers in international markets who have said that two-thirds of their clients want an authentic Indigenous tourism experience.

You look at a product like Métis Crossing, just up by Smoky Lake, which is a boutique hotel and Métis cultural experience, a place I've been to. They have beautiful sky-viewing domes and also a bison reserve. It's a place that I encourage all members of this committee and the millions of people at home watching this committee at this moment to visit because it is a world-class tourism destination. We see the vision of something like Métis Crossing or something like Painted Warriors Ranch, which I'll talk about in a moment.

Investments need to be made. So we are committing over \$8 million between 2021 and 2026, which is the largest investment in Indigenous tourism in the country – I repeat: the largest investment in Indigenous tourism in the country – because we understand what

I think others are just figuring out, that Indigenous tourism is vital to the health and well-being of a vibrant tourism sector.

Ms Goehring: Thank you very much, Minister, through the chair.

The current performance indicators for visitation and tourism sector employment reflect growth from 2021 to 2023, which is on page 165 of the business plan. Are there targets for these sectors in the coming years, and why are the expenditures from tourism and the amount generated by the tourism levy the only performance metrics with targets in coming years?

Mr. Schow: Sorry, Member, just repeat the question. Are you asking about why we are only using spending and levy as the metrics for success?

Ms Goehring: Yes.

Mr. Schow: Okay. Well, I'm happy to set my deputy minister up again to talk a little more about the numbers and do a bit of a deeper dive. But what I can say at a high level is that there are a number of ways to measure visitation in the province. You can look at things like hotel stays. You can look at things like restaurant visitation. You can look at the number of times someone visits a specific attraction. What it really comes down to is: how much are people spending in Alberta? How much is the economy benefiting from visitation, whether that's leisure travel, whether it's business travel, whether you're visiting friends and family, sports tourism, et cetera? I don't think it's necessarily a knock to use spending as a metric for success.

If we look at people coming in, we might have a large number of visitors coming into the province, but if they're not spending very much, we're not actually going to see the economic benefit. I've heard actually from municipalities as we've met with them to talk about the expansion of tourism in Alberta into regions that you could say are underrepresented in the tourism mix, and they have expressed concerns. They have expressed concerns about high visitation numbers without real addition or adding value to the local market.

I'll give you an example. If you're going down to the Crownsnest Pass area, some people will go down there and they'll spend two or three weeks glamping or they'll come down there with an RV. They'll bring their own entertainment with a side-by-side or a motorcycle. They'll bring their own food. Really, they're coming in and using the area, which is fine because it's a beautiful place to visit, but they're not shopping locally. We don't really count that necessarily as additions to the local economy. This is a large part as to why we're looking at attracting more international visitors, because they stay longer and they spend more.

I'm really pleased because last year we again exceeded records of visitor spending in 2023, which was \$12.7 billion; \$3 billion of that was from international visitors, another record for us. We are blown past prepandemic level spending. We are now into what I think is the upward trajectory, and with the introduction of the All-season Resorts Act and many of these resorts hopefully coming online in the coming years, that number is just going to continue to skyrocket. We'll reach our goal of \$25 billion by 2035 or sooner.

Now, I'm happy to turn over to my deputy minister to talk a little bit about some of the other key points that answer the question.

Mr. Goldstein: Thank you, Minister. Mr. Chair, just to circle back on part of the member's question, I think you're referring to page 165, item 1.d, performance indicators?

Ms Goehring: Yes.

Mr. Goldstein: That, and you asked why we did not forecast forward past '23? Was that the question?

Ms Goehring: Yes.

Mr. Goldstein: To my understanding – and I'll be challenged if wrong – I think this is the Treasury Board template that we work on. This is the information the Treasury Board asks us for. Of course, we do metrics looking forward. We have at Travel Alberta a very robust data group that works on this stuff. But I think for the purposes of this report – and I believe you asked the question about KPIs generally.

Ms Goehring: Yeah.

Mr. Goldstein: I would refer you to the annual report of Travel Alberta, that has very explicit KPIs on how the marketing campaigns perform, what resident sentiment is in Alberta for tourism. We have very specific ROI numbers for our aviation and our economic development and investment funds. The economic investment funds I think are set at a 3-to-1 ratio or 4-to-1 ratio. There are two separate ones, which include the number of private-sector dollars that are coinvested. We've blown through the door on that one as we see larger projects and more success. There are very specific KPIs that are put together in the business plan, approved by the board, and then on to the minister to be signed.

Ms Goehring: Thank you very much.

I just want to circle back to rebuilding Jasper and the national park tourism. In your opening remarks was the first time that Jasper was mentioned in any part of the documents that we've been going through for estimates. There's zero direct mention of funding for rebuilding Jasper in the budget. Given its economic importance and recent wildfires and infrastructure damage, what financial or logistic support is being provided going forward, not what you've already invested but what you're intending to do going forward? Is the province co-ordinating with the federal government to secure disaster relief for tourism infrastructure funding for Jasper? What targeted investments are planned for Jasper's tourism sector given its critical role?

When we're trying to entice visitors but there's no investment in the community, how can we show that we're actually supporting the existing community? Jasper is critical to Alberta's economy. In 2023 international visitors spent \$2.9 billion in Alberta, a \$600 million increase from prepandemic, and Jasper accounts for approximately 22 to 25 per cent of tourism expenditures in the Canadian Rockies. If you could, Minister, through the chair, very specifically show in this budget how you're supporting Jasper going forward.

The Chair: The chair will just jump in here for edification, too. With that, I'm sure the member is aware, too, this is Tourism and Sport. There might be some overlaps in other ministries. I'll allow the minister to answer, but in case it isn't there, that's probably it.

Minister, over to you.

Mr. Schow: Sure. Well, supporting Jasper is vital to the future of Alberta tourism. Some of the projects that we're working on with the community of Jasper are ongoing. While we have committed to a number of programs in the past, we continue to work with them and advertise with them.

I will digress for a moment because I think it's important to note and remind everyone that Jasper is in a national park. As a government we jumped immediately to the aid of Jasper. Our Premier has led her cabinet colleagues working with this and the

Minister of Municipal Affairs as we deal with the ongoing challenges of the recovery of Jasper, everything from taking down houses and tearing up foundations to helping to rebuild businesses. We have effectively done this alone, without the help of the federal government.

I have appreciated working with the municipality of Jasper, but I can tell you that for a community that is located in a national park, I have felt that the federal government, whether it's not knowing which minister we're working with, whether it's Minister Boissonnault, Minister Sajjan, Minister Ferrada, the Prime Minister – I mean, the list goes on and on. I don't even know who's looking at it today. But what I can tell you, Mr. Chair, to all members of the committee that have been watching that, the province of Alberta has Jasper's back. We committed immediately \$2.5 million, but we also announced last week another \$3 million to provide a total assistance package, which adds to about \$181 million.

Housing, that's another issue. We're working with the community. They're moving ahead with that, but it has been a very difficult time working with the federal government. It is a disaster in Ottawa right now. To be so bold as to say that we need an election I think is understating the case. The reality is we need real leadership in Ottawa working with our provincial government to help Jasper, which is in a national park, through the recovery process.

7:40

An Hon. Member: Here, here.

The Chair: Folks, maybe through the chair. I'm going to try to keep the decorum. I understand the sensitivities around Jasper. It's where a bunch of my friends grew up. I was out there as well the day after the first visits on-site, so this is very near and dear to all of us. But we want to try to keep the conversations germane to the estimates itself, back to the questions. I will give some latitude for both sides for that because it is a sensitive item, but just so we can maybe steer it out of the corners before it goes there.

The other one too is that at the start when we talked about shared time, it does go back to 10 minutes at max on both sides. I appreciate your interjection, and I'll try to keep an eye on that. I'll give you guys a little bit of latitude on here, but bring it back to the estimates if we could, please.

Ms Goehring: Thank you, Mr. Chair. What I was wanting to intervene on is that the feds did step up. Blaming the feds for not co-operating when the government was negotiating with Jasper on how best to support them and withholding funds unless the federal government did something, which is something that a provincial government has never done in a crisis response to wildfires, floods, or anything, so if the . . .

The Chair: Member, just to keep it in context – again, it's going to be difficult guys. I appreciate it's near and dear to everyone's hearts. Tourism and Sport has a certain scope. If we can concentrate on that scope and, to the minister as well, broader discussions may not be helpful to getting through the estimate or to decorum. We can just consider that the last shot fired and go back to the estimates, if we could please, and be specific to it. Minister, if you could reciprocate by responding in kind.

Mr. Schow: Sure. Well, you know what I'll do, I will let my deputy minister, David Goldstein, talk a little bit about the targeted investments that are being made in Jasper. I think that would also assist to answer the question that the hon. member had asked.

Like you said, Mr. Chair, this is a very emotional time. I have been to Jasper. I have driven around the community. To see burned

out cars, to see burned toys strewn around, I mean, these are people's livelihoods. This community needs help, and we have stepped up in every way possible despite barriers.

I will let Mr. Goldstein add to that.

Mr. Goldstein: Thanks, Mr. Chair.

I missed part of the last answer, so I apologize. It was not just marketing support that we provided. The member asked a very good question about the other supports. This is a staged approach. There were about six or seven businesses that we needed to get back up and running in order to run a winter season. As you know, winter is a slight – I don't want to kill too much time on the clock. Winter is obviously a slower season and a reduced number of available hotel rooms, and we were really focused on getting the ski operation up and running and back again and supporting that. I won't go through all of them because of time, but there were a series of investments that Travel Alberta made.

I don't know who's been there lately, but some of you will remember that Maligne Canyon used to have an ice climbing attraction, which, of course, is no longer available. We actually worked with that entrepreneur and the town council to create another ice climbing structure in the middle of town so there was something for folks to do when they came there. I think that when the final numbers come out, which will probably be at the end of next month, they actually had a decent winter. Like, we obviously want the visitor economy to be stronger, but from hotel occupancy and spend, they made it through sort of the toughest part of the year, and then the next phase of investments will come in probably spring and summer.

I hope that answers the question.

Ms Goehring: Thank you.

Moving on to workforce development and labour shortages, the business plan highlights a tourism and hospitality immigration stream. Can the minister provide a timeline for implementation and an estimate of how many workers will be supported through this stream?

Mr. Schow: Thank you to the hon. member for the question, through the chair. I can confirm that the program is up and running. It is fully subscribed already.

You have addressed what I think is a central issue in tourism in the province. There is a possibility of becoming victims of our own success and having the tourism sector grow so fast we don't have the labour force to sustain it. That is why we have put government collaboration in the tourism strategy, to make sure that we are collaborating among my colleagues.

I mentioned this earlier. If you're not the Minister of Tourism, I think you're tourism-adjacent. That of course goes for the Minister of Advanced Education, Rajan Sawhney, my colleague, working with her with the postsecondary institutions to help create more interest and more programs that directly drive students into the tourism sector.

I've often said that people who don't know a lot about it look at tourism and think that it's a job. There are countless careers in tourism, well-paying, mortgage-paying, grocery-buying, sports fee-paying jobs and careers in tourism. I think part of my job as the minister is to help change the paradigm about working in tourism. It's not a temporary stop. I can't tell you how many conventions I've gone to and spoken at, and I'll ask: how many people here started right at the bottom, you know, where you're busing tables or doing something else in the tourism sector? A lot of them put their hands up and they'll tell you right off the hop: I started busing tables for a six-month opportunity, and that was 20 years ago. I hear

that time and time again because it's such an incredible environment to work in.

It's certainly understanding the labour shortages we have in the sector. We also have issues with staff accommodation. This is something that we will address, I believe, in the master plans when we look at the All-season Resorts Act. If you look at a place like Banff or you look at a place like Lake Louise, given that it's in a national park, we have more visitation, but we do not have expanded opportunities for people to stay who work in those areas. You can imagine the kind of problem that creates for employers who are trying to find places to have their staff stay close to or proximal to the attraction. It's very difficult. So for that reason we continue to try to make the case to our federal counterparts in Parks Canada that we need more staff accommodation.

A perfect example of this would be Lake Louise. This is a community with a world-class ski hill, world class. I can tell you that I've been all over the world selling Alberta's tourism sector, and there are a couple of words that don't need a translator. One is Lake Louise and the other one is Sunshine. Banff is another one – right? – like Jasper. People know these areas and they want to go. It's on a bucket list for them. But if the attractions are over our max capacity and there's no more staff to stay close by, what are we supposed to do? So understanding that you need to address the labour issues, streamline labour into the tourism sector, and also look, as the member talked about, at the immigration stream, working with my colleague Minister Yaseen, who's doing a terrific job on this file, it's a whole mix. We're going to get there, but at the moment we do understand the constraints, and we're working with my colleagues to try to resolve those issues.

Ms Goehring: Thank you very much, Minister.

I'm happy to hear that you're collaborating with multiple ministries because it is important to make sure that we have a strong sector within, you know, bringing young people into this field to work in. It's really important to make sure that that's happening.

When we're talking about having communication with other ministries and making sure that, you know, with our population growth there's a taxing that happens on our health care, education, and social support systems, can you tell me a little bit more about how you're working with other ministries to ensure that tourism and hospitality workers, when they come to Alberta, have access to a doctor, that their kids are going to have a school, and that there will be houses for them to live in?

Mr. Schow: Well, through the chair, thank you to the member for that question. I can say right off the hop that on a formal and informal basis, I am continually communicating with my colleagues in cabinet about the importance of their ministry with respect to tourism. We talked about, you know, the infrastructure for roads. We talked about the need for more schools, the need for hospitals. But I would also say going down or through the chain, that there is also more communication and collaboration with departments. My deputy minister sits at a deputy ministers' table where this is constantly a topic of conversation. My ADM does the same thing. We understand the value of the labour force in this province. We understand that as we increase visitation and increase demand on those products and people need a place to stay, we also have to have a place for them to go to school, for their kids to go to school.

Speaking from the sports perspective, we have to have a place for their kids and them as individuals to recreate, to build community. I can talk about this as I'm sure it will come up later, the active communities initiative, a \$10 million investment. This is within the Ministry of Tourism and Sport, but if you look at what we're doing outside of that, collaborating is the essence of the tourism strategy,

engaging my colleagues, and the Premier, again, her vision of having a minister that can go from one colleague to the next making the case for tourism because this is a huge economic driver. This is a huge economic driver.

Look at other economies around the world that are expanding their tourism offerings. Look at a place like Saudi Arabia. You know, they have seen the value of tourism. An economy that is almost entirely based on petroleum and natural resources; now they're expanding into tourism. People around the world are seeing the importance of the tourism sector.

7:50

But to that point as well we are amazing players in a very competitive international market, and if we don't manage this properly, we will not maintain the reputation we have as a world-class destination. I think our tourism strategy has done an excellent job managing this so far, and I think the future is bright.

Ms Goehring: Thank you, Minister. On page 9 of the strategy plan, objective 2 states that the current and long-term labour market challenges will be addressed by supporting the workforce with skilled trades and professions among young Albertans and adults seeking career transmission, yet there's no mention of tourism. The strategic plan makes no mention of skilled trade or employment specific to the tourism sector. So which jobs will be created and where?

In meeting with stakeholders, they're concerned that tourism growth won't bring high-paying jobs like coal mining would. I'm curious what the minister's thoughts on that are. And, through the chair, does the minister see the potential for high-paying, long-term jobs coming out of tourism?

Mr. Schow: Thank you for that question, through the chair. Yes, absolutely. I think that the member – I don't want to speak for the member, but I hope that all members around this table would agree that there is a tremendous upside in working in tourism. There are valuable careers, high-paying careers in tourism. I go back to this idea that if you're not tourism, you're tourism-adjacent. I'm not talking about necessarily owning a restaurant, but you're looking at maintenance crews and the trades. We don't have it specifically as line items in the budget, but understanding that as we invest in the trades, as we invest in other education streams in the province, you can go many different directions with an education, including into tourism. Just imagine what it would be like if you're, you know, a red seal plumber and you wake up every day in Canmore. I mean, who doesn't want to have that kind of a beautiful vista to see? Or in the Crownsnest Pass. Or you live in Drumheller, a beautiful area of the province that we see tremendous upside for as well.

I guess the point I'm getting at is – I feel like I have, in a roundabout way, answered the question already. But just to reinforce the point that there are well-paying jobs and careers in tourism, our job here in the ministry is to make that case to our colleagues and help drive more interest in work in the tourism sector, with the degrees and diplomas that people are coming out of postsecondary with.

I'm happy, you know, to have my deputy minister talk a little bit about some of the specifics when it comes to careers and how our department and Travel Alberta are collaborating with some institutions. Particularly, I'm sure that he has lots to say about SAIT.

Mr. Goldstein: Thanks, Mr. Chair. SAIT was awarded the top hospitality program in the world. Not Canada; the world. The minister has already mentioned that we have this round-table of

deputy ministers and ADMs. We meet on a quarterly basis. I buy bagels, which means everybody comes.

Mr. Chair, I want to go back to the member's questions. There are a couple of examples of this. In talking about collaboration, it gets down to sitting down with transport and their corridor strategy to see how it aligns with the TDZs. Are we looking at investments in the right places? Are we talking about broadband or cellular access to rural parts of the province that need this? This is the new visitor information centre, right?

But back to the education question. There are a series of pieces that the province has been working on, not just with our portfolio but with the aviation industry, for example. Mount Royal just announced I think two years ago their aviation management program. That's a cutting-edge piece. There was just an announcement of the new Lufthansa machinery and repair centre that's going to be based near YYC. Those are all very high-paying technical jobs. We're working with partners to look at the simulator program, setting up an aviation simulator program for 737s, also based in Alberta, which is another huge way of training and retaining very high-level paying jobs.

So while we continue to work with colleges and universities on one part of the system, there are some significant high-paying jobs in other parts of the system that are coming through. As we build this out, a whole series – I think the minister mentioned engineering jobs, plumbing jobs, electrical jobs, as we build out some of these pieces.

Ms Goehring: Thank you very much.

If we go to page 165 of the ministry business plan, objective 1.d, it suggests the tourism sector employment as a marker of performance. In 2019 the annual employment in this sector was over 240,000, whereas in 2023 it was below. How is the minister able to say that there are high performance markers when the industry's employment has not recovered since the pandemic?

Mr. Schow: Thank you to the member for the question. Just to be clear, you're asking about the dip in employment between 2020 and 2022?

Ms Goehring: Yes, but we still haven't recovered to prepandemic numbers as of 2023.

Mr. Schow: Right. Well, you answered one part of the question, which was that it was COVID-related. I mean, we had significantly reduced – but also the issue with us is we're continuing to build our tourism strategy, right? We're continuing to attract visitation. We're continuing to attract labour and it is an ongoing work. But, you know, we've seen our visitation numbers continue to go up; we see our spending continue to go up. So as you talked about before, we see the demand for increasing labour – and I suspect that my deputy minister might have more to add on this – but what I think is important to note is that you have identified an issue that is continuous, not just in the tourism sector but in all sectors in Alberta.

Like, labour shortages are an issue because we have a thriving economy. Alberta is the beacon of hope and opportunity for the rest of the country. We're what everybody wants to be because we do it well. So there will always be demand for labour. But, I mean, I do see the number. It's not significantly lower than prepandemic level numbers, by about 2,000, but what I can say is that we continue to build the demand and work to train more staff as visitors come.

Ms Goehring: Thank you.

Is it possible to put the last time of this section over to my colleague?

The Chair: Oh, yeah. If you would wish to cede your time, you can.

Ms Goehring: Thank you.

The Chair: Absolutely.

Dr. Elmeligi: Thank you, Mr. Chair and through you to the minister. I'd like to shift gears a little bit here. You know, tourism happens on the same landscape as a lot of other activities in Alberta, obviously, and on public lands, tourism can occur in close proximity to resource extraction practices. In many instances, tourism may not align with resource extraction practices, and I just wanted to take an opportunity to zoom in on the Crowsnest Pass a little bit because it's a great example of this conflict.

The Crowsnest Pass is a tourism development zone in the Alberta tourism strategy, and it is also the site of a proposed coal mine just seven kilometres north called Grassy Mountain. I wonder, through the chair to the minister, how much of the Travel Alberta grant is going to the Crowsnest Pass to develop their tourism development zone? And how is the minister reconciling a coal mine potentially going seven kilometres north of this tourism development zone? Regardless of if the mine has impact to water or wildlife or anything like that, the proposal for the mine talks about a transfer yard at the rail yard in Blairmore, which will inevitably create coal dust blowing over the communities of the pass and the surrounding trails. Is coal a compatible land use with tourism specifically in the Crowsnest Pass, and how much of that Travel Alberta money is going to the Crowsnest Pass to develop their TDZ?

Mr. Schow: Well, thank you, Member, for the question. I'm happy to let my deputy minister at some point in my answer talk a little bit about the specific amount of money that's going there as, you know, he would be the best person to answer that question. But what I can say is that when it comes to compatibility with tourism, our government and the Ministry of Tourism and Sport particularly understands that we don't do things in isolation. That's exactly why we did a review of the renewable projects.

There was a windmill project that was planned near Hill Spring just outside of my town that I call home, Cardston, and as a result of the new mandate with protecting beautiful viewscapes, that project is no longer going ahead. What I can say is that we are very cognizant of potential threats and opportunities in the tourism sector across the whole spectrum. But I think that the Crowsnest Pass in particular has a tremendous upside for the province as a place that could be responsibly developed with more tourism attractions, and the money going there is going directly to making sure that we advertise it as such.

I will allow my deputy minister and CEO of Travel Alberta to talk more about the specific investments in that area.

8:00

Mr. Goldstein: Thanks. Mr. Chair, those are not easy questions, but we'll see how we can get through them. We have to live in balance. You know, there are different sectors of the Alberta economy that abut each other, and I think we have done a very good job as a province, as opposed to some others, of creating space for that type of diversity. Obviously, our focus is trying to get folks to see the beauty above the ground as opposed to exploiting what's below the ground, but we know that they have to live together in compatibility.

The actual investment in the Crowsnest Pass is a tougher answer because it's not an easy place to get started. The minister and I were down there, I think about a year ago, meeting with council. There are some communities that are just not ready to receive tourism, are

not tourism ready. We actually have gone and invested in a master plan for that area. We have given them a series of options. We have invested in a couple of key properties down there. Charmed Resorts is a very good example of a very strong success down there. They know well that the ecology of the area is an important piece of that. We've invested in a couple of Indigenous outfitting operations down there.

While it's a spectacular part of the province, it's a bit of a flywheel trying to get the momentum to get the community behind that sort of development, so it doesn't happen overnight. It's a very difficult process.

Dr. Elmeligi: Thank you, through the chair, to the minister and the deputy minister. I appreciate that it is a difficult situation, and I too have spent quite a bit of time down in the Crowsnest Pass and in the Castle, and I think that there are some very specific things that could be done to promote tourism in that space that actually do fall under the government's purview although not necessarily in the tourism ministry.

For example, one of those opportunities is to pave the road from Blairmore to the Castle provincial parks, which would more directly connect that community to Alberta's most recent, largest provincial park in southern Alberta. Recognizing that falls under transportation and forestry, I do hope that is something that the minister is championing with his colleagues, because in reality tourism can provide longer term economic and environmental sustainability than a coal mine, and in this particular case I don't think a coal mine is compatible. Coal dust swirling over mountain bike trails is not how people want to do cardio in the mountains.

However, moving on, I – oh, we're going to run out of time here. There's also the issue of forestry operations outside of Bragg Creek, that has also generated significant public concern because of impacts to tourism and recreation potential. We're faced with these very specific issues, and I think the All-season Resorts Act is going to create more of these situations where we have tourism and recreation directly in conflict with resource extraction, in the minds of the local people in the local community. What I want to know, through the chair to the minister and the deputy minister: what is the strategy to deal with these conflicts? How do we make the hard choices between tourism and resource extraction when they're both happening in the same place at the same time?

Mr. Schow: Well, through the chair, thank you to the member for the question. I guess my short answer, which will then become a long answer, is that we can walk and chew gum at the same time. I think I made the case earlier on in my remarks that we don't happen in isolation as the Ministry of Tourism and Sport. My colleagues are acutely aware of the demands that we have but also the demands that will be coming as we expand tourism in places like the Crowsnest Pass.

But if you're looking for a model for success, you don't have to look too much further than our neighbours to the west in British Columbia. It was only two and a half short decades ago that a place like Whistler was considered a garbage dump. It is now one of the top places to visit in the world. It's on a number of bucket lists for people, but we think that Alberta has a made-in-Alberta model for an all-season resorts program, for an all-season resorts division within the department. We have done extensive research, both me as the minister visiting with the government of British Columbia, to talk about some of the things they would have liked to do differently had they done it earlier on. We also looked at how they've done it properly in the interior, understanding that there are also resource extraction operations in British Columbia. I think they

have just over 18 true four-season resorts in British Columbia and countless other resorts.

So the model for success already exists. We've seen it to the west. We're just building a made-in-Alberta option. I think that that's really important to note because when we were going through this process, consulting with my colleagues Minister Schulz and Minister Loewen in Environment and Protected Areas and Forestry and Parks, we had a lot of long conversations about how this All-season Resorts Act and the process is going to respect local cultures, respect the local natural beauty and the resources in the area without degrading them.

I think it's also important to note that tourism is regenerative. If you look at some of the other economic drivers in the province that are extractive, they are great for our province and great for economic development, but tourism is benefiting the area. This idea of don't touch it: that is not conservation, Mr. Chair. I've even seen videos online of people who are visiting some of the national parks, and they're cramped up in little spaces on trails. I'm thinking that's also not conservation.

People are going to continue to come to Alberta. What we're doing is working. Our plan is working. We have to find other places to put visitors who are coming here to experience Alberta. This means the All-season Resorts Act and doing it responsibly.

The Chair: With that, the first block of time has finished. We now have 20 minutes of time over to the government caucus. I see MLA Wright. I guess we'll go with that question back to the minister of how you want to utilize the time.

Mr. Wright: Yeah. Thank you, Mr. Chair and, through you, to the minister. I'd like to have a back-and-forth conversation because I'm going to jump on a couple of different topics, and it just might be a little bit easier to go back and forth.

The Chair: It's up to the minister's discretion.

Mr. Schow: You got it.

Mr. Wright: Excellent. Well, thank you, Minister, for taking the questions. Through the chair to you, with 2025's provincial budget expected to have a \$2.5 billion deficit, tourism dollars and spending increases in the province are going to have a huge impact on reducing that potential deficit. I have a few questions pertaining to key objective 1.2 on page 164 of the business plan.

In the fall of 2024 the government passed the All-season Resorts Act, that aims to increase tourism revenue and attract investment while balancing sustainability and preserving community interests. The new act was modelled after British Columbia's successful tourism strategy, which allowed them to develop more than 13 significant all-season resorts on Crown land. Now, it's also worth noting on this that they also did this while balancing being Canada's largest coal producer. You know, these resorts provide year-round attractions, including skiing, hiking, mountain biking, and other outdoor activities, significantly boosting B.C.'s economy. How does the All-season Resorts Act, as outlined in Budget 2025, incorporate environmental sustainability initiatives to balance tourism development with preserving the natural landscapes and ecosystems as we see? And then (b): in Budget 2025 how does the economic impact of developing all-season resorts compare to the current state of Alberta's tourism industry with what key benefits are expected over the next decade?

Mr. Schow: Well, look at the timer. I don't think there's enough time to actually go over all the benefits, but I'll try to touch on as many as I can.

Through the chair, MLA Wright, thank you for that very thoughtful question. The benefits to start off with are economic. There's no question that to reach our spend goal of \$25 billion by 2035, it just can't happen without the All-season Resorts Act. I would also say the long-term benefits are jobs – right? – creating more communities, more vibrant opportunities for people to get together and enjoy Alberta's backyard.

Something I haven't touched on a lot because we think about tourism as visitation from visitors outside of the province, but the All-season Resorts Act is actually going to allow us to visit more of our own backyard. I don't think it's any secret that it can be expensive to go to a resort in Alberta. For many people that is cost prohibitive. So having more competition in the resorts market creates an environment where I think the cost of some things will go down and give people more opportunity to see their own backyard and experience Alberta.

8:10

The other issue is that we are seeing an increased number or at least a concerning number in visitation of Albertans into British Columbia versus British Columbians coming to Alberta. We have a spend deficit of about \$1.5 billion, and what that means is that Alberta residents are spending more in British Columbia than they are spending here. Just to bring this into focus, we were looking at a resort in Alberta. I went out to this resort early in the morning, at around 7 o'clock, driving on the Trans-Canada west, and it's still dark outside at this time of year, in the winter. If you looked off in the distance, you'd see what I call this lava flow of brake lights or red lights off in the distance, just as far as the eye can see. Those cars are not stopping in Alberta. Those cars are going to British Columbia. We need to give them a reason to stay at home and visit their own backyard.

The economic benefits are there. The education benefits are there. The business opportunities are there. The chance for people to enjoy careers living in the mountains are there. I mean, the list goes on and on. I would say that this All-season Resorts Act is transformational for our province's tourism sector, and I can't take a lot of credit for it. I've been the minister for just over a year and a half. But long before I got in this position, there were people working on this because they saw the success of our neighbours to the west. I love to give a lot of credit to people who are working on this. To use a sports analogy, I'm really just the guy who punched it over the goal line, but to drive it down the field a lot of other hands have touched this, and I'm grateful for them. They saw the vision that is Alberta and what we can be with this All-season Resorts Act. I am excited about the future.

Mr. Wright: Thank you, Minister.

Through the chair, if we can jump over to visitation numbers. You know, I look at the general visitation numbers, and I see the performance indicator 1(c) on page 165 of the ministry's business plan tracks the number of visitors to and within Alberta, and even the minister previously just mentioned that there is a net deficit when we look at visitors from British Columbia to Alberta and vice versa.

In the 2023 numbers there were 31.7 million Albertans travelling within the province and 3.8 million Canadians travelling from outside the province, with 2.2 million international visitors from around the world. Now, with the all-seasons act, you tied back in the conversation about getting advice or looking to British Columbia's model to bring this up. I can't help but notice in the Crowsnest area, British Columbia has got the two largest coal mines in Canada. What were some of the learnings that helped British Columbia be able to drive their all-season approach while also

balancing the ecological impact of the nation's two largest coal mines in the Crowsnest? Also, how does that impact on the number of visitors that they see along those areas?

I'd like to highlight the success, however, of the ministry. In total we went from 25.4 million visitors in 2021 to 37.7 million visitors in 2023. Can the minister also point to factors that drove this success and how some of the changes we've made can impact 2025 and forward as part of the ministry's business plan?

Mr. Schow: Thank you for that very thoughtful question. I think I'd start off by saying that British Columbia, a decade and a half ago, took a concerted effort to developing tourism, but it started at the government level. The Premier of the day understood that there are ways to diversify the economy without taking from it, and that was through the resorts, by utilizing responsibly the natural resources that we have above the ground. That started, of course, with resort developments. So for us to match the kind of success that we've seen in British Columbia, it does require increased numbers. It requires places and resorts for people to visit, but it also requires volume.

I can tell you that there are a number of products that are beginning to emerge even more today than in the past that are in high demand, some things like Nordic spas. Nordic spas are in incredibly high demand. They are very popular. We don't have very many in Alberta, but there are a number that are coming up in pretty short order. You also look at five-star accommodation. These are the kinds of things that our international visitors are looking at, so for our success to be realized, it has to be based not just on volume of visitation but also on yield of spend.

I do want to turn over to my deputy minister because he'll have a little more information about the kind of numbers we've been seeing over the past couple of years and how that's changing what we expect to see from a volume and a yield perspective with the all-season resorts and generally from the tourism development zones that we planned out and how this tourism strategy that we released February of last year is coming together and what to expect from a Travel Alberta perspective.

Mr. Goldstein: Thanks, Mr. Chair. Member, I want to thank you for highlighting the success that we've seen, which is not just in the number of visitors; it's also the revenue. I guess the short answer to the question is: an exceptional team at Travel Alberta. But I think there's more to it than that. This province made a decision in the midst of COVID that they were going to emerge stronger and better, and they took the elements of marketing access in place and put them under one roof. Travel Alberta in its expanded mandate, through the expanded legislation became a destination management organization, not just a marketing organization. We're the only one in the country that's done this. We have won international awards for the work that we do. I was recently asked to speak at an international global leaders conference about our plan.

Provinces have different programs. Some of them have marketing programs, some of them have air access programs, some of them have economic development programs. We're the only one where it's all under one roof. There's been a fairly devoted vision to this. You know, the overnight success has been three or four years in the making, which is why we not only have the strongest growth from a visitor perspective on a percentage basis, the strongest revenue, we were the first province in Canada to surpass COVID numbers. We were the first province in Canada that surpassed international revenue numbers, which is really, really critical.

Mr. Wright: Thank you, Minister and Deputy Minister.

Through the chair, I'd like to change up and maybe start talking about major sporting events. As my riding of Cypress-Medicine Hat was a bid city for the 2026 Memorial Cup – unfortunately, Kelowna won that – you know, these types of events are very near and dear to my heart. When I'm not in the Legislature over the winter I am coaching hockey, and I love to see that Alberta remains committed to supporting Hockey Canada, investing in events that boost economy, promote tourism, and celebrate sports that we all love. Hosting the 2027 world junior championships will further showcase Alberta's passion for hockey and its ability to deliver world-class events.

Alberta has long been a leader in fostering hockey experience, and Budget 2025 is no exception. How does Budget 2025 plan to ensure infrastructure and resources are in place to deliver a world-class experience for players and fans? Beyond major tournaments like the Gretzky cup or the World Para Ice Hockey Championship, how will Budget 2025 help support grassroots hockey development and local events across the province?

We'll kind of stop it at that point for this question.

Mr. Schow: Sure. Well, thank you, Member, for that question. Like you, I was equally disappointed that we lost the bid for the Memorial Cup. I actually have been to the Memorial Cup myself years and years ago, and it is an experience unlike anything else in junior hockey. It's really something special. We were able to support an Alberta bid. Unfortunately, we lost it, but I think what we showed in that moment and in others is our commitment to hosting major national and international sporting events.

I can't tell you how many sporting events I've been to. I mean, I could, actually. I have a list here, and I'd be happy to go over it at some point. But what I can say is that there are a number of benefits from hosting these kinds of events. One, the economic return. We look at something like the world juniors that we're hosting in '26-27. We expect the economic benefit to be over \$50 million for that. That's huge for the community. That's huge for the downtown area of Edmonton. The other benefit is that people get to see Alberta, whether they're here in person as a fan, as a player, as a coach, trainer, whatever that may be or whether you're watching on television from somewhere around Canada or around the world, all the b-roll footage of the mountains, the b-roll footage of the town, of the community: that stuff drives tourism.

8:20

The other benefit of these events is the general interest in sport. I think that somebody can go to an event and they can get that spark, that one spark that drives them into a sport. They can see somebody play for the first time. We look at a hometown hero like Connor McDavid, one of the best players if not the best player in the world. At some point he had to say: I want to do that. I don't know when that spark hit, whether he was watching someone on television or watching a family member play the game of hockey, but at some point he had that spark. Giving us the opportunity to host these kinds of events, what I think is a relatively small investment, has broad-stroking benefits that I think are even very difficult to measure, but we do it in economics. You know, we certainly do it from an economic output standpoint, but the benefits are even further reaching.

Mr. Wright: Wonderful. Thank you, Minister.

Chair, I'm going to cede the remainder of my time to my colleague from Red Deer-South.

The Chair: Okay. Go ahead, MLA Stephan.

Mr. Stephan: Thank you, and welcome, Minister of Tourism and Sport. Those are very fun things, and Albertans and families will pay to have fun. It's a very important area for Alberta. On page 220, line 2.2 of the estimates, tourism policy and strategy is "responsible for the legislative, regulatory and broad policy framework strategy to advance tourism." Minister, I know you've touched on this strategy throughout estimates so far, but is there anything that you'd like to add to expand on that in terms of how we get to our goals? What's the critical path in terms of the strategy for your ministry?

Mr. Schow: What I would say is that the critical path to success in our Tourism and Sport strategy really is increased visitation, increased spend on the tourism side, and on the sports side or recreation side getting more Albertans active. At a very high level I look at this from a wellness perspective, and I often say that healthy kids who learn healthy habits at a young age become healthy teens, become healthy adults. That takes stress off of the health care system. It improves mental health in the province. Through the chair, hon. Member, I believe that you had said that you like to go running often. It's one heck of a good way to clear your head, especially in the business that we're in, but it's also a great way to stay in shape and to focus the mind.

If I look at myself and the work that I've done now, in the future I want to say that we got more people playing, a bit more active; we had more people visiting the province, experiencing this beautiful place that we call home. If I can do that and I can say that we were successful in increasing those metrics, I'd just say that my time here was a success. That's at a very high level of what I'm looking at. I want to improve wellness in the province of Alberta, and I think we're well on our way.

Mr. Stephan: Thanks for that, Minister. I would say that Alberta has competitive advantages in respect of tourism that other provinces may not have because of our geographic location and some of the beautiful sites that we have that other provinces aren't as blessed with.

I want to talk a little bit about employment. Performance indicator 1.d on page 165 of the business plan does talk about tourism sector employment numbers, and we do see that there has been a steady rise in employment since COVID. Of course, tourism suffered greatly during COVID, sometimes with government overreach and lockdowns. What are the strategies that you have in place to continue to grow employment in the tourism sector in Alberta?

Mr. Schow: Well, thank you for that question, and being cognizant of time, I'll try to be brief. We touched on this a little bit, but we do have the tourism and hospitality immigration stream within the Alberta advantage immigration program that was launched last spring. That's really helping those coming to work here in these industries to gain a streamlined pathway to permanent residency. We also understand that as we recover from the pandemic, we are seeing employees that were working in Alberta or looking to work in Alberta find alternative industries during the pandemic, and they have stayed there.

One of our key pillars of the tourism strategy is to increase collaboration with our colleagues in other ministries, in this instance the Minister of Advanced Education, to develop more hospitality streams coming from postsecondary education. My deputy minister highlighted earlier the incredible work being done at SAIT. This is the best hospitality program in the world, and there's no surprise that it's in the province of Alberta. We can certainly continue to build on that success, driving interest, driving more employees and labour into the tourism sector. I have a strong

feeling that once they get working there, they're going to want to stay there. It's a pretty vibrant place to work.

Mr. Stephan: Maybe I'll ask a question about the Canadian dollar. We've seen, unfortunately, the Canadian dollar has depreciated vis-à-vis the U.S. dollar. I know that sometimes when there's a change of oil prices, they've sort of determined the correlation that has to government revenues. I'm just wondering if tourism has looked at what the impact will be in terms of international tourism, especially from the U.S., in view of the Canadian dollar, unfortunately, in many respects depreciating vis-à-vis the U.S. dollar.

Mr. Schow: Well, again cognizant of time, I will say that we take into account a number of factors as we make projections in the future of visitor spend and general visitation in Alberta. The dollar is certainly one of those factors as well, but we have seen and continue to see increased visitation. In terms of, you know, the hard numbers I'm happy to throw it to my deputy minister for the next 15 seconds.

Mr. Goldstein: Mr. Chair, I know we're short on time. This will be the most controversial thing that anybody has said today. The dollar doesn't matter that much. The dollar retains Canadians travelling within Canada, but the surveys show . . . [A timer sounded] Am I allowed to finish?

The Chair: Oh, no, you're not.

Mr. Goldstein: Okay.

The Chair: Those following along at home: hopefully we can get back to that one, because I was all atremble in trepidation to hear you as well.

We're moving into the lightning round, folks, to keep it really interesting for those at home, and I'll just go through the rules again. These are 10-minute blocks, which we're into now. They can be five minutes each or combined, but no one may speak longer than five minutes at a time. Time cannot be ceded to any other caucus member. If the time is not combined, then the member or minister may speak only once, so it's also known as the use-it-or-lose-it clause.

With that, MLA Hayter, I'll turn it over to you, and you can ask that question to the minister.

Ms Hayter: Would you like to do block time or go back and forth?

Mr. Schow: Let's keep the good times rolling. Let's go back and forth.

Ms Hayter: Awesome.

Through the chair, the business plan on page 165 mentions supporting safe and welcoming sport, but it lacks specific metrics on gender equity and coaching and leadership positions. One of the questions I do have is: what specific initiatives and funding in this budget are going to increase the number of women in coaching and sports administration roles in Alberta?

Also, on page 166 of the business plan there's a note of \$2.5 million allocated for major sporting events, but research shows that female athletes receive significantly less media coverage and sponsorship, so I'm wondering: what portion of this funding will ensure equitable promotion and support for women's events? Through the chair, you know, women's sports historically receive less media coverage, sponsorship, and facility access, so I'm hopeful that we'll get more specific initiatives in this budget that will address the systemic inequalities.

Sports experts consistently identify that having female coaches and role models significantly increases girls' participation, so, through the chair, I'd like to know how many coaches are women in Alberta and what funding exists in the budget to increase women's leadership positions in sports.

Again through the chair, now on page 165 of the business plan, performance indicator 1.d shows tourism sector employment at 238,500 in 2023. Given that many sports organizations rely on tourism infrastructure, what portion of the workforce development initiatives specifically target increasing women's leadership in sports- and tourism-related positions?

Mr. Schow: Okay. Sure. Given that we are going back and forth, I guarantee that I will not be able to touch or answer on all the things. If I don't, I'm happy to take the questions again, Member. But what I can say is that you have raised a very important issue to me, very near and dear to my heart. As the father of a young daughter who I think has a bright athletic career ahead of her, I would not be doing my job as the minister to create a safe and welcoming place for her.

8:30

It's the exact reason why we introduced the Fairness and Safety in Sport Act last fall, understanding that we are beginning to see examples of transgender athletes competing against biological women. We've also seen instances in this province where individuals have been hurt playing the sport or have lost out on opportunities. A perfect example is Hannah Pilling, a constituent of mine by coincidence, but I'm proud to represent her and call her and her family my employer because they are sterling examples of what you can do if you're committing yourself to recreation and sport at a young age and sticking with it. She has already won accolades as a rookie at her institution.

But I would partially disagree with the member on levels of interest. If you look no further than the PWHL game that we hosted here not long ago, that was a near sold-out crowd at Rogers Place, just a stone's throw from the building that we're currently sitting in, and that was one of the most live environments I've ever been to in a sporting event. Understanding the importance of driving interest in women's sport is the exact reason we bid on the Takeover Tour game that had Ottawa versus Toronto.

Now, it's also why through the every kid can play program we are investing in provincial-scope and municipal- or local-scope organizations as they continue to develop coaches, referees, access to facilities, access to equipment for everyone. My goal, again, as the minister is to make sure that nobody – and I mean nobody – is left on the sidelines having to watch their friends play the sport they love, so we are putting money behind these.

We have sporting events that we've invested in, like the Pan Continental Curling Championship, the 2025 FIS Slopestyle World Cup, the half-pipe championship. These are men's and women's events that saw athletes coming from around the world right to Alberta, and they had one heck of a time and put on one heck of a show. And I can only imagine the young women and girls who saw those events and thought: I could do that; I could do it right in my own backyard. A chance to watch the top female hockey players in the world right here in Edmonton, the top female snowboarders right in Calgary, and then you go to all the other events that we've hosted. I have a whole list here, Mr. Chair. I can tell you that we are behind women's athletics and women's sports in this province, and we're investing directly in it.

Like I said, I don't think I touched on all the answers. I'm happy to continue to go back and forth with the member on some of the other questions she asked.

Ms Hayter: I do have some more questions, but I'm hopeful that, maybe in writing, I could get back from your ministry what specific initiatives and funding in this budget will increase the number of women in coaching and sports administration roles in Alberta. I would really as well like to get back in writing: how many coaches are women in Alberta, and what funding exists in this budget to increase women's leadership positions in sports as well as what portion of the workforce development initiatives specifically target increasing women's leadership in sport tourism related positions?

I'd also like to talk about participation gaps. According to the Canadian Women and Sport research 1 in 3 girls drop out of sports by age 18 compared to just 1 in 10 boys. Looking, through the chair, on page 166 of the business plan, there appear to be no specific budget allocations targeting this significant gender gap. So what specific line items in this budget address this well-documented issue? As well, in this business plan a performance metric on page 166 shows targets at overall youth participation, but it doesn't break down by gender. I'm wondering what the current participation rate is specifically for girls and young women.

As well, the ministry's performance measures on page 166 of the business plan show youth sport participation at 55.5 per cent in 2023 to 2024 while on page 142 of the previous year's business plan it showed it was 60.6 per cent in 2022-23. I'm just hopeful that the ministry has data on whether this 5.1 per cent decline is disproportionately affecting girls and what specific initiatives in this budget address female-specific barriers to participation.

According back to page 166, through the chair, of the business plan adult participation in organized sports is currently only 19.9 per cent. Does the ministry have gender-disaggregated data on this metric, and what specific programs in this budget address the known barriers that prevent adult women from returning to or continuing in sport?

According to page 166 of the business plan the ministry targets a modest increase in youth participation, from 58 per cent to 60 per cent over three years. Given the known sharp decline in girls' participation during adolescence, what specific metrics and programs track and address this critical transition period for young women?

The Chair: And with two minutes and 39 seconds, Minister, back to you.

Mr. Schow: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I most certainly will not be able to get to all the answers in that question. A lot of very important points noted, and we'll see what we can do about getting back to you on some of those ones.

But what I would address first off – the member raised a very important point. I sat down with a former Olympian and Olympian gold medalist, when I became the minister, who outlined the very concerning trend of young women and girls who are leaving sports around the age of 13. One athlete even pinpointed and said that some studies suggest that it's around the month of February. They've pinpointed it almost to a month, which tells me that the number of women and girls dropping out for a myriad of reasons is staggering, and we have to find a way to keep them interested and keep them active. In many of these instances young women and girls are getting distracted from sports into things that are far less helpful and beneficial to them personally.

That's why we've looked at reducing barriers. "Barriers" is the big word that we try to address in the Ministry of Tourism and Sport. The first is access to recreation facilities. That's why we introduced the \$10 million active communities initiative. Last year was the first year of the active communities initiative, where we funded a number of projects around the province, either building or

revitalizing recreation infrastructure. There were a number of purposes to building this. One is reducing barriers, making sure that Albertans of all ages had a place to recreate and to play. The other part of this is understanding that community centres aren't just where people recreate, but it's also where they come together and they build that sense of community. They learn more about each other.

If you drive around the little dots that are southern Alberta towns or, really, Alberta in general – there are lots of beautiful little towns scattered throughout this amazing province – you'll find that the curling rink or the ice rink is the hub of the community. They have games there or practices probably from 6 a.m. until super late if you're playing men's league hockey or women's league hockey. But somewhere else in there they're going to have a room where they're doing birthday parties, they're doing local events, charity events, fundraisers. You name it, they're doing it there. And we have a space as a government to make sure we're funding those.

The other piece is reducing the cost barrier. I touched on the every kid can play program earlier in my remarks, and I'll touch on it again because it's very important to me. This was a program that started coming out of COVID, a \$4 million commitment called return to play, understanding that we needed to get people who are in low-income situations with young kids under the age of 18 back out and being active. That was something that we did. We saw a very important value in that.

The Chair: With that, over to government caucus. MLA de Jonge.

Ms de Jonge: Thank you, Chair. First I'm just going to give the opportunity for Deputy Minister Goldstein to maybe briefly finish his last answer on the Canadian dollar and how it . . .

The Chair: Just for point of clarity, are you requesting block time or back and forth?

Ms de Jonge: Back and forth, please.

The Chair: Okay.

Over to you to set the game up.

Mr. Schow: Yes.

The Chair: There you go. Off to the races.

Mr. Goldstein: Mr. Chair, I welcome that opportunity because I didn't give the other half of the answer.

The currency exchange issue really pertains to the rubber tire traffic of close-haul travel. So since we don't get a lot of that travel – we don't have a big U.S. city beneath us. Our colleagues in B.C., Ontario, and Quebec get a lot of rubber tire traffic. That's where the currency issue comes into play. Several studies over several years, I'm almost embarrassed to say – Americans who live more than a six-hour drive from the Canadian border don't know there is a Canadian dollar, and the exchange rate is a surprise when they get their American Express or credit card bill after they get back. And in this modern age people, especially long-haul travellers, are booking trips in their own domestic currency. They're booking trips at home through their own domestic currency, so it doesn't have the same impact as, you know, we used to think it did back when this was really a cash society.

I hope that answers the question, Mr. Chair.

Ms de Jonge: Thank you for providing that additional context. That's very interesting.

Minister, you know, in the last round you were talking about fairness and safety in sport and how critical that is to ensuring that

Alberta sports are accessible for all Albertans in building lifelong healthy habits, which we know sports do, and across my constituency, from parents to young athletes, I hear time and time again how important this is. I see key objective 2.6 on page 165 of the business plan details the ministry's goals to implement the Fairness and Safety in Sport Act to increase safety for women and girls in sport. That's a delicate balance where the act helps ensure trans women have the opportunity to participate in the sport of their choice in a way that is equitable for all athletes without compromising the safety or the fairness of competition.

8:40

Through the chair, Minister: how does the investment in fairness and safety in sport initiatives ensure consistent enforcement of the act? I'm also wondering if you can provide some examples of how the introduction of this act has or will encourage women and girls to remain in their chosen sport. Then also I'll just throw in a second question there if you can answer that as well: what steps is the government of Alberta taking to address a decline in female participation in sport? I know we talked about this in the last round. I'm specifically interested in how the increased funding towards the fairness and safety in sport initiative aims to encourage more young girls and women to participate in physical activity and sport.

Mr. Schow: Thank you, Member, for that question. I think I want to start by pointing something out. We all love to watch the Olympics. Everyone loves to watch the world-class events, but something I really enjoy to watch that I don't know if everyone pays attention to is the medal ceremony and watching the athletes at the top of the podium, the very top. They all have mixed reactions about winning a gold medal, whether they're crying, they're singing the national anthem, or they're just standing there listening, taking everything in. I cannot even begin to imagine what that would be like.

The emotions going through, I would have to imagine, are a result of years – years – of preparation and training leading to what could be a 10-second race or it could be, you know, a 60-minute hockey game, but all that preparation for years has built up to that one moment where you have the opportunity to shine. Some of them rise to the occasion, some of them don't, and that's the heartbreak of defeat or the thrill of victory. But you see the look on the athletes' faces.

Now imagine someone not being able to accomplish that because of competing in what I think is an unfair environment. We have to address that as a province. We have seen this both with Hannah Pilling at a very real level, someone who is competing for a provincial championship or an opportunity to compete in a championship who was going to not be allowed to do that because of losing to a transgender athlete. We also look at another athlete playing basketball, I believe in Red Deer, who was severely concussed as a result of a play competing against a transgender athlete, happening right here in Alberta.

It is my job as the minister to step in and create an environment that is welcoming and safe for female athletes. The statistics on this are real: 95 per cent of female executives are former athletes. Ninety-five per cent. You also look at the investments we are making, to the previous member's question. We are investing \$45,000 in an annual operating grant to InMotion Network that helps support women in sport leadership. We understand the value of having women in athletics and sport and having women in the business place. We all benefit from that. I would be heartbroken, and I was heartbroken, to hear Hannah Pilling's story, and I knew that I had to act and do something about it.

That's why, in conjunction with feedback we received from stakeholders, we tabled the Fairness and Safety in Sport Act, and we will continue to work with provincial sport organizations, postsecondary institutions, and school boards with the implementation of this. We expect this to be implemented in the fall as we're finishing up the regulations, but we have committed up front \$2 million to ensure that as needs arise, we are adapting to the needs of things like coed divisions.

I've said this time and time again. Everyone deserves a chance to play – everyone – regardless of any circumstance. You deserve a chance to play, and we're going to help make that happen. But we're also going to make sure that for those young women and girls who are reaching that age of 12 and 13 years old, reaching puberty, who are traditionally dropping out of sport for a number of reasons, not the least of which is concern for safety and fairness, we're at least removing that barrier. That's the exact reason we introduced the bill, and that's why we're going to continue to work with our provincial sport organizations and others to make sure we get it right. That is the whole purpose of this.

Ms de Jonge: Thank you, Minister, for your leadership and your initiative taken to protect women and girls in sport. You know, I'll switch gears a bit, but it's very much along the same thread, you know, that sport and physical activity are essential for maintaining public health, promoting communities, and enhancing personal wellness. We know that regular participation in sport and physical activity has a wide range of physical and mental health benefits, especially for children and young people, future CEOs. You know, I can't emphasize enough how important sport and recreational facilities are to meeting the evolving needs of our communities and our growing population.

I think this looks a little different in rural Alberta, where we have our amazing agricultural societies play a big role in engaging with the communities. They provide public spaces for meeting, and they host incredible events, particularly for our iconic provincial rodeo sports, which I particularly enjoy. These are just great opportunities to enhance physical wellness.

I see on page 7 of the capital plan, there it outlines a \$5 million investment allocated towards the Strathmore events centre in my constituency. Can the minister please expand on this project?

Mr. Schow: Well, thank you for that question, and I'd love to expand on it, but I think the bulk of the credit, if not all of it, needs to go to the local MLA, who has done a tremendous job advocating for her constituency, through the chair. I say this understanding that we represent communities around Alberta and they all have needs. Making an important case on why that community needs sporting infrastructure or a place to congregate like the Western Events and Cultural Centre is exciting news. It is great news. We're looking at a building that's going to have 99,000 square feet, including a 55,000 square foot riding arena, 9,430 square feet of performing arts theatre, and 300 rentable horse stalls just to name a few things.

Now, the anticipated capital cost for this project is going to be around \$20 million, as I'm sure the member knows, but our \$5 million contribution will help to leverage the additional contributions of other orders of government and private corporations. This is a perfect example of the community coming together around sport and recreation and building community.

We talked a little bit earlier, and the member mentioned this about, you know, recreation and having more executives, female executives. I'd also say more female politicians and female department staff. I'm surrounded on this table by incredible, accomplished women on both sides of the aisle, and I'm honoured to call you my colleagues. But I think that we are all products of our

environment, and that environment is always enriched by abilities to get together, to communicate, to build community, to build family bonds, and I think that this Western Events and Cultural Centre is a perfect example, and I have to give all the credit to the local MLA, through the chair, Ms de Jonge.

Ms de Jonge: Thank you very much, Minister. This will benefit Albertans for generations to come. Thank you.

The Chair: That just made me all warm and gushy inside. That was excellent, you guys.

MLA Goehring, you're on the list first, if I'm not mistaken.

Ms Goehring: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and as you referred to this being the lightning round, I'm hoping to just put my questions on the record and then have the minister respond.

The Chair: Okay, so you're looking for block time?

Ms Goehring: Yes please.

The Chair: And back to the minister?

Mr. Schow: Yes, of course.

Ms Goehring: Thank you, just because it's short time. On page 165 of the business plan Alberta receives 2.2 million international travellers a year. How many of those are U.S. travellers, and has the ministry done any risk assessment on the impact tariffs could have on Alberta's tourism growth?

On sport and recreation development, community sport and recreation infrastructure. On page 221 of the government estimates support for sport, physical activity, and recreation is decreasing by \$4.8 million. How will this impact the organizations that have been receiving grants, and are you aware of any organizations that will no longer be receiving grants due to this cut? If so, which ones?

Overall, sport, physical activity, and recreation is getting a cut of \$3.76 million, shown on page 221. This comes at a time when the ministry has set goals to grow the number of youth and adults participating in sport and recreation, which is on page 166 of the business plan. What impact will these cuts have on the ministry's goal to grow sports and recreation in the province? How will sports and recreation organizations be impacted by these cuts, and how is the ministry planning amidst these cuts to grow participation in sport? I struggle to see how you can say that you want to grow it, yet you're creating a cut.

8:50

Sport affordability and participation. Alberta has ambitious targets for increasing youth participation in sport: 66 per cent by 2026-27. What specific measures are in place to make sport more affordable to families? I know you mentioned a lot about the kid can play program, so I'm looking for specifics around that. That is mentioned on page 28 of the strat plan, priority 2. It says: increasing affordable access to sport and rec for youth and families for low-income families. If you could identify what the threshold for low-income families is and where in the budget is that program accounted for. I'm curious because we know that Albertans are struggling all across the province with the increased cost of living, et cetera. Are there any new subsidy programs to help lower income families access organized sports?

The next question is: how is the ministry supporting local sports organizations struggling with overall rising costs? In the ministry's 2024 business plan it says that roughly 80 per cent of Alberta adults and youth were participating in recreation with a growth target of 85 per cent for 2025. However, on page 166 of the 2025 business

plan the 2025 target has fallen to 60 per cent for youth and 58 per cent for adults. What has caused these numbers to drop so drastically? The number of Albertans involved in recreation fell by 22 per cent for youth and 31.7 per cent decrease for adults. How is a funding cut to recreation organizations justified when the number of Albertans accessing these critical programs that support their health and well-being have fallen so considerably in the last year?

Page 166 of the ministry business plan, 2(a), the 2025 target percentage of Alberta youth participating in sport has fallen by 6 per cent between 2024 and 2025. How is the ministry increasing participation outside of funding hockey arenas, small to mid-sized projects? How are we addressing affordability in this budget?

The 2024 RMA conducted a report on rural volunteer participation decreasing all across the province. It's directly impacting participation. If you don't have the volunteers, the infrastructure becomes redundant. I'm curious if there's any plan within this ministry to increase access to volunteers and help support volunteer recruitment. On page 221 of government estimates 3.3 and 3.4 there's a decrease in the budget lines. We want to increase the involvement and performance measure, yet cutting funding to those two lines. Again, Minister, it doesn't make sense.

Three point two is sport, physical activity, and rec development. Again, back to the volunteer recruitment. It's a slight improvement in funding. But what is the strategy? Is it enough funding increase?

Thank you very much.

The Chair: And over to you, Minister.

Mr. Schow: Okay. Certainly a lot to unpack there, but I do appreciate the opportunity to answer some of those questions. I also want to thank the member who has led, obviously, the discussion on the opposition side today. A lot of very thoughtful questions. This is where, you know, we clearly understand, and I think we are on the same wavelength when it comes to wanting to do better by Albertans and increase wellness in the province. So I genuinely want to thank her for her work on this in preparation for this committee.

To talk initially about the decrease in funding: this wasn't a decrease in funding going to provincial sporting organizations. It was a decrease in the budget because we had initially planned for the allotments for the Hockey Canada investment. That was an \$11 million investment that we put for the games that I mentioned before about the para ice hockey, the two Hlinka Gretzky tournaments, the two rivalry series games between Canada and the U.S., and then the hockey camps and then, of course, the last pinnacle, I guess you would say, or the premiere event, which would be the 2027 IIHF World Junior Championship. It wasn't necessarily a funding decrease as it was that money was allocated for those two years, and it's no longer a line item in our budget going forward because we made those disbursements.

With regard to sporting infrastructure – I'm trying to read my handwriting like I'm back in grade 10 history frantically trying to keep notes. Member, you'll have to forgive me if I don't touch on all the answers. With regard to subsidy programs, there are no new programs. We are maintaining funding for the every kid can play grant as well as the active community initiative programs. Those two I think have seen tremendous subscription, and I have visited first-hand with the families who have benefited from this. We just did our podium announcement at the MNP centre in Calgary, which was a host for us, and a

number of families came, and they talked specifically about the benefits of that program.

In addition to the active community initiative and every kid can play grant we also have one-off investments like the MNP centre in Calgary. It is a massive recreation facility with a pool and basketball courts. I'll digress for a moment and say that I had one of the best dunks in my career in that facility. It was pretty awesome. All that aside, we put \$20 million into that facility understanding that it is a recreation and community-building hub for everything from playing sports to doing CPR courses and everything in between.

We also talked about how we are supporting teams struggling with costs. The cost to play sports continues to go up. This does go back to the every kid can play grant, but I think it also talks about us funding provincial sport organizations. You know, my department staff would probably have a better ability to explain all the metrics that go into determining the amount of funding each provincial sport organization gets, but suffice to say that we are funding over 70 provincial sport organizations, helping them with their operational costs and making sure they're meeting the mandate of overseeing sports and recreation in their respective sports of focus.

I think it's important that we continue along those lines. I continue to meet with PSOs, provincial sport organizations. We don't get involved in the day-to-day operations, but it's important for us to understand the strengths and opportunities and weaknesses that they're dealing with so we can better adapt.

Money isn't always the answer when it comes to dealing with struggles that provincial sport organizations have. It can often be, you know, issues of whether they have the facilities or whether there are governance issues. Regardless of the problems that they're facing, we're involved. We're here to be a support system for them. For me I think it's important that we continue on that path.

With regard to tariffs, this is a precarious environment that we're facing. As the Finance minister said in his budget remarks: it's not without precedent, but it is a storm that we're going to have to weather as Canadians. As a province we've built in, I think, measures in the budget that address potential fallout from tariffs, but there are things that we just don't know as a ministry, and we will continue to work with our stakeholders across the board to help them adapt and deal with what can be a tumultuous term with the current U.S. President.

But what I want to do is give a lot of credit to our Premier, who has spent a significant amount of time across the United States line, meeting with legislators and the President himself to make the case for Alberta. Heaven knows, the federal government is failing us. The federal government is failing all Canadians, and if they truly cared about Canada and the well-being of the people who live in this incredible country, they would call an election so we can have solid leadership in Ottawa instead of deal with a dog-and-pony show that is their internal party squabbles.

The Chair: Over to the government caucus. MLA Cyr.

Mr. Cyr: Yes. Please. Thank you, Minister, and thank you to the staff for this wonderful evening. You've done a very good job. I don't have a lot of time, 44 seconds to be exact. I'd like to thank the minister for the recent announcement for \$750,000 under the active community initiative grant. Thank you so much. My community really thanks you for that. I'm also thanking you for the 2026 Alberta Winter Games that you brought to my communities up in my area as well. That just shows how much support that this

ministry is looking to bring to northeast Alberta. I think that's an important commitment that I'm seeing from your department, Minister. Thank you so much for your commitment to my constituency, and hopefully I look forward to seeing you up for the 2026 Winter Games.

Mr. Schow: All the credit goes to you, Member. Thank you.

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

estimates has concluded. I'd personally like to thank everybody for playing along, keeping the decorum, the questions and the answers as succinct as possible. Appreciate that.

I'd like to remind committee members that we're scheduled to meet tomorrow, March 11, 2025, at 9 a.m. – check your watches there – to consider the estimates of the Ministry of Immigration and Multiculturalism.

With that, thank you, everyone. Meeting adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 9 p.m.]

