



Legislative Assembly of Alberta

The 31st Legislature
First Session

Standing Committee
on
Resource Stewardship

Ministry of Indigenous Relations
Consideration of Main Estimates

Tuesday, March 12, 2024
3:30 p.m.

Transcript No. 31-1-3

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First Session**

Standing Committee on Resource Stewardship

Rowswell, Garth, Vermilion-Lloydminster-Wainwright (UC), Chair
Schmidt, Marlin, Edmonton-Gold Bar (NDP), Deputy Chair

Al-Guneid, Nagwan, Calgary-Glenmore (NDP)
Armstrong-Homeniuk, Jackie, Fort Saskatchewan-Vegreville (UC)
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Sinclair, Scott, Lesser Slave Lake (UC)
Sweet, Heather, Edmonton-Manning (NDP)

Also in Attendance

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Goehring, Nicole, Edmonton-Castle Downs (NDP)
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Standing Committee on Resource Stewardship

Participants

Ministry of Indigenous Relations

Hon. Rick D. Wilson, Minister

Don Kwas, Assistant Deputy Minister, First Nations and Metis Relations

Donavon Young, Deputy Minister

3:30 p.m.

Tuesday, March 12, 2024

[Mr. Rowswell in the chair]

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

The Chair: 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 Indigenous Relations for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2025.

I'd like to ask that we go around the table and have members introduce themselves for the record. Minister, please introduce the officials who are joining you at the table. My name is Garth Rowswell. I'm the MLA for Vermilion-Lloydminster-Wainwright and the chair of the committee. We will begin, starting to my right.

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

Mr. Dyck: Nolan Dyck, MLA for Grande Prairie.

Mr. Hunter: Grant Hunter, Taber-Warner.

Mr. Sinclair: Scott Sinclair, MLA for Lesser Slave Lake.

Mr. McDougall: Myles McDougall, MLA for Calgary-Fish Creek.

Mr. Wilson: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'm Rick Wilson, Minister of Indigenous Relations. I've got my deputy minister, Donavon Young, with me and Kristina Midbo, executive director for all my women's issues, and Chad with our finances and Don Kwas, the assistant deputy minister of First Nations and Metis relations.

Member Arcand-Paul: Brooks Arcand-Paul, MLA for Edmonton-West Henday.

Mr. Schmidt: Marlin Schmidt, Edmonton-Gold Bar.

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

Mr. Huffman: Warren Huffman, committee clerk.

The Chair: Okay. There's no one on remote, so we won't do that part, and there are no substitutions.

A few housekeeping items to address before we turn to the business at hand. Please note that the microphones are operated by *Hansard* staff. Committee proceedings are live streamed on the Internet and broadcast on Alberta Assembly TV. The audio- and videostream and transcripts of the meeting can be accessed via the Legislative Assembly website. We don't have anyone remotely or online. Please set your cellphones and other devices to silent for the duration of the meeting.

The speaking rotation. Hon. members, the main estimates for the Ministry of Indigenous Relations shall be considered for three hours. Standing Order 59.01 sets out the process for consideration of the main estimates in the legislative policy committees. Suborder 59.01(6) sets out the speaking rotation for this meeting. The speaking rotation chart is available on the committee's internal website, and hard copies have been provided to the ministry officials at the table. For each segment of the meeting blocks of speaking time will be combined only if both the minister and the member speaking agree. If debate is exhausted prior to three hours, the ministry's estimates are deemed to have been considered for the time allotted in the main estimates schedule, and the committee will

adjourn. Should members have any questions regarding speaking times or rotation, please e-mail or message the committee clerk about the process.

With the concurrence of the committee I will call a five-minute break near the midpoint of the meeting; however, the three-hour clock will continue to run. Does anyone oppose having a break? Okay.

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

Pages are available to deliver notes or 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 all times.

Points of order will be dealt with as they arise, and individual speaking times will be paused; however, the block of speaking time and the overall three-hour meeting clock will continue to run.

Any written material provided in response to a question raised during the main estimates should 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 without interruption during estimates debate. Debate flows through the chair at all times, including in instances where speaking time is shared between a member and the minister.

I would now invite the Minister of Indigenous Relations to begin with your opening remarks. You have 10 minutes.

Mr. Wilson: Thank you again, Mr. Chair and committee members for calling this meeting. I'm pleased to speak to you today about Indigenous Relations' budget estimates for fiscal year 2024-25. First, I'd like to acknowledge that we are gathered today on Treaty 6 territory, home to First Nations peoples for countless generations, and I also recognize the Métis people, who have a deep connection with this land.

I'd like to introduce other members of my team who are with me today in the gallery. I've got my assistant deputy minister for consultation, land and policy, Thomas Djufors; my chief of staff, Riley Braun; press secretary, Callum Reid; finance director, Howard Wong; and communications director, Brendan Cox.

It's been an honour and a privilege to serve as Minister of Indigenous Relations over the past five years. Over that time we've created new programs. We've expanded others. We've also taken many positive steps towards reconciliation. Budget 2024 will help keep that momentum going. Budget 2024 is a responsible plan for growing a province. The government takes its duty to taxpayers very seriously. This means spending carefully and sustainably and doing what we can to avoid financial hardship for future generations. For my ministry this means we are preserving all the significant budget increases we achieved with the previous budget, and we are holding the line to continue delivering the new programs we created in 2023-24.

We are also making a few carefully considered new increases to key items in our budget. At the same time we will continue to make progress through our protocol and relationship agreements with Indigenous governments, communities, and organizations and through our Indigenous-led councils on women's economic security and murdered Indigenous women, girls, and two-spirited plus peoples.

We are also committed to ensuring that Indigenous communities continue to have meaningful opportunities to participate in consultations on land use, major development projects through our

consultation capacity grant programs. We are sustaining funding for the Métis settlements, communities, and organizations, including the funding we created in 2023-24 for the credible assertion process.

Budget 2023 included a variety of major increases for our ministry, and Budget 2024 preserves that growth and includes a few key increases. First, we are increasing the Aboriginal business investment fund, or what I call ABIF, for the second consecutive year. This will double the fund over two years from \$5 million in Budget 2022 to \$10 million in Budget 2024, and we have good reason for that. Since 2014 ABIF has helped create more than 800 permanent jobs for Indigenous peoples in Alberta. The fund provides capital grants to community-owned businesses so they can construct new buildings and infrastructure and to buy the equipment they need to succeed. It has been an outstanding program, and the quantity and quality of applications keeps increasing every year.

One quick example of a recent ABIF grant is in the Bigstone Cree Nation, where the community has created a new gravel pit business. They needed to purchase several pieces of heavy equipment to really get their operation under way. First Nations can't often get capital loans from banks because First Nations land can't be used as collateral, so programs like ABIF help break down that barrier, and Bigstone received \$750,000 late last year. Now they are hiring additional full-time employees from the nation and buying heavy equipment so they can meet local gravel demand and maintain the nation's roads at a reduced cost.

They're also planning on starting to bid on regional projects like the expansion of highway 686, and there's a possibility of spinoff businesses from that and emerging as other nation members get involved. With another increase the fund can help get more businesses off the ground and create even more jobs for people in Indigenous communities.

Speaking of grants that are making a positive difference, the programs we launched last year, the community support fund and the Indigenous reconciliation initiative, are going strong and will continue to do so in the years ahead. The community support fund is providing \$4 million to support Indigenous-led initiatives that address violence and increase the safety and economic security of Indigenous women, girls, and two-spirited plus people.

The other program we created last year, the Indigenous reconciliation initiative, has a budget of \$3.9 million annually to support Indigenous-led cultural and economic activities. It has been very well received by communities and has been in high demand. It has already supported some wonderful projects. For example, we provided \$100,000 to the Alexis Nakota Sioux Nation to support an excellent language conference last year. It was a joy for me to attend this event and see how much progress they're making in revitalizing their sacred language. Supporting initiatives that protect and celebrate diverse Indigenous cultural traditions and languages is an important part of reconciliation. The Indigenous reconciliation initiative is supporting more than 45 projects in its first year, and I'm looking forward to what the future holds as we continue with this program.

As for the community support fund, I'm excited to release more details soon about the wonderful projects that our 2023-24 funding will support.

3:40

Another thing I'm looking forward to is watching the evolution of the biggest initiative we created during my time here, the Alberta Indigenous Opportunities Corporation, also known as the AIOC. If you heard me talk about economic reconciliation, then you have certainly heard me tout the amazing work that this Crown corporation is doing to remove barriers to Indigenous investment

and economic inclusion. The AIOC helps communities access the loans they need to buy large ownership stakes in major development projects which in turn create long-term revenue streams that can be channelled towards community projects and priorities. Historically banks and other large financial institutions have not provided a lot of support to Indigenous communities. The AIOC is changing the game and making it easier for Indigenous communities to be major investors, and it has been extremely successful.

Since we created the AIOC in 2019, it has provided more than \$680 million in loan guarantees to 42 Indigenous communities in Alberta. It has even supported the largest investments of its kind in North American history. As part of a deal worth more than a billion dollars the AIOC provided a loan guarantee worth \$250 million to 23 Indigenous communities supporting them as major players in a massive pipeline deal, and things are just getting started. This fiscal year we're increasing the AIOC's capacity to an unprecedented \$3 billion. That's triple its capacity from just one year ago. It has also triple the capacity of Ontario's Aboriginal loan guarantee program, one of the only similar initiatives in Canada.

But for the AIOC to fully realize its potential, we recognize it needs more staff. That's why we've given the AIOC extra funding to hire four additional specialized employees with an increase of \$650,000. The AIOC has built a small and mighty team of experts, but it needs to expand so it can work on multiple deals at once and support more complex projects in a variety of sectors.

When looking at our overall budget, I can tell you our ministry is maintaining or increasing spending in all areas under our control. While our statement of operations you may have seen shows a decrease of about \$10 million compared to last year, this is not due to any choices that we've made; it's a result of the factors that are out of our control, the largest one being a \$8.9 million decrease in federal funding to our capital plan from the investing in Canada infrastructure program, or what we call ICIP. My ministry has worked hard to get all the federal funding available to us and out the door and into communities. As things stand, there is no more federal ICIP funding for my ministry, and all the projects Indigenous Relations has supported are either in progress or complete.

The other primary factor affecting our statement of operations is a downward trend for gaming revenue. Forecasts for the province of gaming revenue came from Alberta Gaming, Liquor and Cannabis, and they are based on consumer trends and behaviors, meaning they can change over relatively short periods of time. The downward trend for gaming revenue impacts the First Nations development fund, which I'll talk about later, the FNDF. That's a significant part of the Indigenous Relations budget. The FNDF is funded entirely by revenue from government-owned slot machines in First Nations casinos. When more people use the slot machines, the fund has more money to spend and vice versa, so get out there and get gambling and we'll pick her back up. This makes it difficult to predict how much money will be in the FNDF, but we still expect to receive more than \$141 million to support community development projects in First Nations across Alberta.

We may not be able to control the estimates, but I can assure you that we'll get every cent out the door and put it into our communities. Overall, we're maintaining or increasing the programs that are under our control. Indigenous Relations is making a positive impact, and we're moving forward as partners in prosperity with Indigenous peoples. Together we're working towards reconciliation, and together we are improving social outcomes and finding innovative ways to support thriving, sustainable Indigenous communities. Budget 2024 shows that we

intend to continue doing that in the years ahead, working with Indigenous people to create a stronger province.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Before we proceed, we'll have Member Tejada introduce herself and her constituency.

Member Tejada: Hello. This is Lizette Tejada, MLA for Calgary-Klein.

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now begin the question-and-answer portion of the meeting. For the first 60 minutes members of the Official Opposition and the minister may speak. Hon. members, you will be able to see the timer for the speaking block both in the committee room and on Microsoft Teams. Something I learned at our last meeting: for these first blocks you're able to cede to a next person. That changes, and I'll explain that when we get to the shorter time frames so you're able to keep it full.

A question to the member. Which member is going to speak first? Would you like to share time or combine time or block time?

Member Arcand-Paul: Share time if the minister is open to that.

The Chair: Okay. Minister?

Mr. Wilson: I think I'll go block time.

The Chair: Block time. Okay.

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

Member Arcand-Paul: [Remarks in Cree] Hello, everyone. My name is little river, and I am from the Alexander First Nation. [As submitted]

It's an honour to be here today. I just introduced myself in my language. I will produce the translation to *Hansard*. I want to thank all of us for gathering here today on the territories of the Cree, Blackfoot, Nakota Sioux, Dene, Saulteaux, Haudenosaunee, and the traditional homelands of the Métis. I am thankful to be the critic for Indigenous Relations and reconciliation and I'm thankful for the staff, who busily ensure that work with Indigenous nations is accomplished. I recognize that I am a lawyer, and I'm thankful for the time for the minister to consider my very direct cross-examination today.

I'm going to begin here talking about the AIOC, which you mentioned is intended to increase spending up to \$9.2 million this year to facilitate lending for community partners to enable access to capital – and I apologize, Mr. Chair; this is through you to the minister – for the AIOC to enable access to capital, improved lending terms to support prosperity and social goals for Indigenous communities.

However, the ministry fell short of this goal in '23-24 given the operating expense of only \$4 million. I'm curious how Indigenous people in Alberta can be certain that AIOC allocations are making a difference in their community if the government says one thing in their business plans but budgets for less. I'm also concerned whether the minister is intending to provide measurable outcomes that the AIOC provides economic prosperity and social improvements in Indigenous communities and why or why not that might be. I will also turn to: what steps has the ministry taken to ensure that Indigenous economic prosperity is being realized with the AIOC

and funding is not being used for creating new swim lanes for UCP spending on their personal agendas?

I'm going to turn to the statement of operations, Mr. Chair, to show that in '22-23 \$2.4 million of revenue has come from premiums, fees, and licences. And on page 49 of the annual report of the ministry:

AIOC charges a set-up fee in connection with the issuance of loan guarantees. The set-up fee covers all the costs of providing the proponent transaction advisory services and a defined term loan guarantee. The set-up fee related to transaction advisory services is recognized . . . on issuance of the loan guarantee while the set-up fee related to the defined term loan guarantee is recognized over the term of the loan guarantee.

I apologize for the word salad. That's from the actual document, the annual report. My question is whether the minister can confirm who these fees are collected from and be very specific as to who pays what. With respect to Project Rocket can the ministry clarify in the annual report that will be forthcoming who bore the burden of the set-up fee for the defined term loan guarantee and for the advisory services of \$250 million? Further, for the Cascade power project, the Lindbergh cogeneration facility, and the Northern Courier pipeline system.

You see, Mr. Chair, it is very interesting that the AIOC's fees are recognized on page 52 of the annual report within other "Premiums, Fees and Licenses." I'm curious whether the minister or the ministry can clarify which other revenue makes up this portion of revenue specifically from the AIOC. This year's estimates have estimated this amount of revenue to be around \$12.7 million for '24-25. It's very curious that the ministry is going to be gaining such a substantial amount for the AIOC's basic function yet expecting Indigenous nations to go into substantial debt to engage in the industries that the province has benefited from such bounties since this province was created, in the early 20th century.

I'm wondering if the ministry or the minister can explain how the AIOC is turning a profit, and is this profit being redistributed to Indigenous communities, or is the province retaining those monies? Will the AIOC be accessible to those nations, specifically Chiniki, Piikani, Ermineskin, and Paul First Nations, which were all affected by the renewable moratorium, and how have their applications for funding, if any, been impacted by this moratorium, and what measures has the ministry taken to off-set any disturbances caused by this government's stance against renewable energy? Will the minister assure by yes or no answer today to Indigenous nations that they will be approved to bring projects in agriculture, transportation, telecommunication projects, and any other infrastructure project under the AIOC given the \$3 billion increase that is projected for the AIOC?

3:50

Mr. Chair, the AIOC also provides opportunities to Indigenous nations to play a big role in the economy here in Alberta. It also provides big corporations the ability to benefit from Indigenous nations, to obtain loans to be able to do this. Banks, proponents, heck, even the government themselves obtain revenue from this program. At the end of the day, it's difficult not to see this program as simply a big-business Money Mart which indebts Indigenous nations to jump on the economic roller coaster that is our oil and gas industry.

Given the Premier's austerity measures and forecasts that our royalty abundance from oil and gas may be cooled, how will Indigenous nations continue to benefit from their purchases in an industry that is so volatile and potentially on the decline? Will the minister clarify those repayment terms each of the Indigenous

nations and partnerships have? And, if I could ask, in the annual report please include term limits and amounts.

Mr. Chair, this government has been so fixated on the AIOC that the Aboriginal business investment fund has been woefully underfunded given the impressive figures that the AIOC has been greenlit to dole out. Does the minister not consider the ABIF to be adequate for nations to also develop their own businesses and opportunities without going into debt to do so even though the 2023 annual report states that the projects supported by ABIF “will greatly benefit the social and economic outcomes of many Indigenous communities across Alberta”? Arguably, so will the projects through the AIOC. Why does the government of Alberta want First Nations to go into debt rather than help them out through a program that is successfully supporting entrepreneurs and industries run by First Nations in this province?

I want to turn now to the ABIF. I want some clarity on the minister’s comments about how the \$22 million and the actual budget documents are provided in this estimate. Does the minister have any updates on that funding allocated to the ABIF in Budget ’23-24 and specifically whether the fully budgeted amount of \$7.5 million was used in ’23-24 and why or why not that is?

In the 2024-27 ministry business plan there has been an earmarked \$10 million to be allocated through the ABIF. I’m seeking clarity here because the minister did mention that there was \$22 million provided, but the documents that the government has provided don’t clarify that; they actually provide a different number. How is that ministry going to ensure that it is used to its full potential to help Indigenous communities in their economic pursuits?

Mr. Chair, will the minister also provide direct details on all the projects which received dollars from ABIF? In business plan 2024-27, outcome 1, key objective 1.4 it intends to support community, social, and economic development through funded programs, through the employment partnerships program, and the Aboriginal business investment fund. However, given that the AIOC was targeted to spend \$8.5 million annually in Budget ’23-24 and has not reached that amount in ’22-23 or ’23-24, what assurance, if any, do Indigenous nations have that the ABIF will receive the anticipated money, whether that’s \$10 million or \$22 million, annually for projects? Will that minister commit to ensuring that Indigenous peoples and nations will have access to the ABIF for a minimum of \$7.5 million annually for employment training and business development opportunities, as is referenced in the documents?

Turning now to the FNDF. I heard the minister mention that there was going to be some conversation about that. I might have missed that, but I would love to ask more comments on that. I’m wondering if the minister will issue a full listing of all First Nations development fund projects that were issued, in particular the 296 projects referred to on page 31 of the ministry’s annual report ’22-23, because, Mr. Chair, on page 23 of this government’s ’24-27 strategic plan, priority 2, investing in Albertans, the headline Forming Lasting and Meaningful Partnerships with Indigenous Communities, the government is allocating \$9 million to First Nations to help fulfill First Nations’ economic, social, and community priorities.

In Budget ’23 and on page 23 of the ’23-26 government of Alberta strategic plan it was anticipated that \$146 million of the \$147,250,000 estimate for FNDF was going to be allocated to First Nations for that number, almost the entire figure. What happened between 2023 and this year’s budget, where the ’24-25 estimate for FNDF is \$141,800,000 and this government is only allocating \$9 million to First Nations per the ’24-27 GOA strategic plan? Where

is the balance of \$132,800,000 going if not being allocated to First Nations from the FNDF?

I recognize my time. I’m going to try and get through these last questions. Can the minister confirm that Alberta received \$9 million from federal and other government transfers in ’23? The minister mentioned that there’s not going to be enough money in this budget from ICIF. I’m just wondering why that is.

I would like to turn now to the minister to continue speaking to specifically that FNDF and the AIOC and ABIF.

The Chair: Thank you, Member.

Minister, you have 10 minutes to respond.

Mr. Wilson: Thank you for your questions. I see you’ve gone through the reports carefully, and I appreciate that. We’re proud of what we’ve done in our ministry. We’ve been working really hard to work with all of the communities to make sure that we’re bringing everybody along with us as partners, what we call partners in prosperity.

I’ll get into the AIOC. Over the next 20 years, just with the projects we’ve put out so far, those communities are going to receive \$1.3 billion. That’s \$1.3 billion. This is at no money down and no risk on their behalf.

We’ve got a very good board set up at the AIOC. These are professional bankers from across Canada. Everybody wants to sit on our board. We get applications constantly from very high-end bankers because they all see the value in this, and everybody wants to be part of something that’s new and exciting and helping Indigenous people move forward.

We’ve been really careful. We vet the projects very carefully to make sure that there’s not going to be a failure there. Worst case scenario: it’s government backed, so the First Nations wouldn’t be on the hook for it. We may have to sell assets or whatever to make up the difference, but there is literally no risk to the First Nations or Métis communities that are involved in this.

I was going to tell you a little bit about one of them. You see what kind of value they’re getting from this. I don’t know if you’re familiar up north with the Little Lake Métis community up there. Just a really small, little community. When I started with them, they literally didn’t have anything. They didn’t own land. They didn’t have anything, just a tiny little community up there. I got to know them really well. They were one of the first ones I got involved in a project up there. They now have bought land right in their community, and they’ve got a buffalo herd, and they’ve been building houses, doing social programs. Like, it’s just so rewarding. I can choke myself up already. Sorry. It’s just so rewarding to see this little community that has just started thriving. Their chairman is now working with other communities. He did so well at that first project that he set up his own company, and he’s helping all the other communities to get together.

When you’re talking, like, billion-dollar deals, these are not easy deals to set up. You know yourself. To get several Indigenous communities working together and then throw in some Métis communities with them: I don’t think that’s ever happened before. Now we’ve got these communities working together. They’re hand in hand. They’re all succeeding, making money. When you can see what’s really happening in these communities, building houses, and, like I say, buying land and then setting up buffalo paddocks, like, it’s so rewarding to go up there and just see the people, how they’re so excited to be part of something so amazing.

You talked a little bit about the ABIF. I’m not sure where you got your numbers. The \$22 million was over three years. It started out at 7 and a half million dollars, and then it moved up to \$10 million. From now on it’s \$10 million annually, the ABIF program.

Those are straight-up grants. We've done all kinds of projects with that. I'm thinking just off the top of my head. If anybody has ever been up to Fort Chip, there's a little store up there that we helped set up and build. It used to be the home of the \$22-a-litre milk up there, and since we got this little store going, all the kids can have fresh milk. We've got fresh vegetables. The First Nation runs it, so now they've got a little bit of income coming. They can put some people to work.

Down at the Piikani Nation we did a service centre along the highway there. I think they got 22 people working there last time I was there. Same thing. Like, to be able to see these young people start learning some business acumen and working in their service centre is really rewarding. We've done everything from – some of the Métis communities wanted to get into the logging business, so we helped support them with some logging equipment, a rodeo ground for some of the Métis settlements.

Down in Maskwacis the one I'm really proud of: the Louis Bull band. When I first started with them, they had two employees. The chief was always bugging me about fixing his road up. I said, "Well, why don't you buy a grader and then you can fix your own road up?" He said, "Well, I can't do that." So we helped him. We backstopped him to buy a grader. Then he wanted to build a greenhouse because when COVID was on, they were worried about food security for the kids in the school. I said, "Well, we can help you with that, too." So they built a greenhouse.

4:00

Then he invited me out to see what they're doing out there. So I go out and I pull up, and there's not one grader sitting there; he's got two graders. He's got two Cats. He's got two track hoes. He's got trucks. I say: what the heck are you doing? He says: well, we went all in. They started their own road construction. They're not only fixing their own roads. They're in the road construction business. They're fixing roads for everybody now.

Then I go to look at their greenhouse situation they set up. I got to throw the switch to turn the greenhouse on. That was pretty cool. It's, like, the most high-tech hydroponic greenhouse you've been in. Then their old powwow building: it looks like a spaceship sitting there. I said: what the heck is that? He said: well, we went to Germany, and we found this carbon capture unit. What they're doing is that they burn the garbage from the school, like cardboard boxes, whatever, and then they use the heat off that to heat the greenhouse. And guess what? They capture the carbon off it, and the CO₂ makes plants grow. Crazy, I know. They're capturing the carbon. They're putting it into the greenhouse. The plants are flourishing in there. They're using the food for the schools. They're growing tomatoes and cucumbers and everything else in there. You can see the difference that it makes with these programs. That's why we worked hard to get it through Treasury Board this year to get it up to \$10 million. That program is chugging along. It's doing all kinds of things.

We talked about – what was your other one? On the FNDF. I'm not sure if you know how that works, but that is a program that's all First Nation development. It's money from the casinos. That money comes into our department, and we don't decide where it goes to. You don't have to be a host community to access this money. Any First Nation community can access that money. They put it to us that maybe they want to do a community hall, and then we've got our people that look through all the different applications to see which ones are most likely to succeed or what have you, are going to do the most for the communities. There might be a housing project. It might be a school program.

Then that money, every penny of it, is given back out to the communities to be used on their projects. That's been very

successful. A little bit of a drop this year. What was our total drop on that? It was 4 and a half million dollars. That's just an estimate. That's a first-quarter estimate kind of based on where gambling and stuff is up. I know that at Enoch River Cree they tell me they're going to be up 37 per cent next quarter from what's happening right now. That number could fluctuate up or down a little bit. I did an announcement out at Louis Bull. They're doing a casino out there, and we got them an ABIF grant.

Over two years they got \$750,000 towards their casino, and it's very close. I was inside it the other day. It's a lot bigger than I thought it was going to be. The Louis Bull reserve is here, and then the highway is in between there. They had owned a piece of land there. We did an addition to the reserve there, so that is now part of the reserve, that piece of land where they built the casino, and once that comes online – they're going to open up probably the 1st of May. That's going to bump our numbers again. We don't know what the actual number is going to be. It's a scientific guess where our number is going to be at. I'm guessing it's probably going to be up a little bit, but based on where the numbers are right now, that's the number, a safe number, that we picked to kind of go at. That number could go up.

What else was I going to talk to you about? You'd asked me about ABIF, FNDF. I can't remember. What else was there? Maybe I'll just talk about some more AIOC projects. Our first one: we did six First Nations. The Cascade power plant out by Edson: if you just go through Edson and then you head south about two miles, like, this is a major power plant we built there. We started that about three years ago. For the last three years it's employed, like, 1,200 people out there building this, mostly all First Nation people working there. We've got some of everybody. Alexis First Nation had all their equipment out there. They did all the groundwork.

Right when the power grid was about to crash, thank God they were just ready to come on. They flipped the switch and they came online, and they were able to keep us from going into the dark there right at that critical moment. Thank God they were that far along. They're pretty close to being ready to go up to full capacity. When they go up to full capacity, it's just about 1,000 megs. That's going to produce 8 per cent of Alberta's power. That's a lot. Once that fully kicks in and that money starts rolling in to those six First Nations, I mean, they're going to do very well. To me, to see that one come to fruition was really – I was there right from the first day, when we first scratched the dirt, and now I go out there and see what they're doing. It's a natural gas power plant using good, clean Alberta natural gas. They're using the best carbon capture methods out there. Like I say: a lot of First Nation, Indigenous people working there.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We'll go to the second 20-minute block. You now have 10 minutes to ask some more questions.

Member Arcand-Paul: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I got the numbers from this government's own documents. That's the numbers that I received. I apologize if the numbers are off. That's not our drafting. But I'm well acquainted with the programs as well. You know, my nation has benefited quite a bit from these programs, and I know that these programs do help change.

I would like to raise to the minister that you've not answered the questions about FNDF, and I'm going to ask them again, through the chair. Why are all of the funds not being allocated to First Nations? Thank you.

These figures are all very encouraging, but given last year's budget and the estimates and the fact that those monies were not confirmed to be distributed, I'm concerned that we can throw all

these numbers out there, but that's not going to mean that it's going to reach the nations. I am appreciative that, you know, projects fall through, but if the minister could just be clear about that, Mr. Chair, I would appreciate that, either in the annual report or in writing after these estimates and after this budget is debated.

Mr. Chair, there is mention in the government of Alberta's strategic plan '23-26 to use the Aboriginal consultation office to "facilitate Indigenous participation in the province's resource development sector and on resource development projects." This is in direct opposition to the ministry's annual report '22-23, which highlights the ministry's legal obligations and nowhere mentions the facilitation of Indigenous participation in resource development. Albertans and certainly Indigenous peoples in this province know that this province's track record on consultation is woefully inadequate. Can the minister explain the strategy here under objective 6, standing up for Alberta's natural resources, specifically around what appears to be a modification of the Aboriginal consultation office's intended role?

Mr. Chair, further, on page 22 of the Indigenous Relations annual report it states that the Aboriginal consultation office is intended to provide "certainty [for] the natural resource development sector" as opposed to discharging its legal duty to consult as required under the law. I'm asking the minister or the ministry to please explain why the ACO's responsibility has been reshaped to benefit industry and not solely to discharge the legal duty to consult, as is required by the Crown in right of Alberta.

The Indigenous Relations business plan '24-27 on page 79 states that

Indigenous Relations [also] ensures that Alberta's legal duty to consult with First Nations, Metis Settlements and Credibly Asserted Métis Communities is met where resource development may adversely impact the continued exercise of First Nations Treaty rights and traditional uses as well as Metis Settlement and Credibly Asserted Métis Community members' harvesting or traditional use activities.

How, then, can the ACO also facilitate Indigenous participation in resource development when the province already has a corporation to do so under the AIOC? Is this a duplicity of roles and a waste of taxpayers' dollars? Further, will this estimate be clarified in the annual report for the ministry on a line-by-line basis for the work that the ACO is undertaking to engage Indigenous nations in resource development versus actual consultation?

Mr. Chair, I bring this up because I've heard from stakeholders that the level of consultation undertaken by the province in this last fiscal year was quite concerning, particularly that what was considered level 1 have now been reclassified as level 3. Further, consultation has been interpreted by Indigenous leadership as a simple rubber stamping exercise for industry, and Indigenous nations are not being adequately consulted. The duty to consult must be discharged adequately and not assessed on performative analyses. Given this context my question is: who sets the performance measurements? As it stands now, Alberta is running the risk of not completing adequate consultation given the measurements of timelines to "[build] investor confidence in Alberta's natural resource development sector" – that's on page 38 of the annual report – and not the adequacy of the Crown's responsibilities to Indigenous peoples in this country.

While the ministry is providing \$7 million to Indigenous communities to participate in consultation through the Indigenous consultation capacity program according to page 81 of the business plan '24-27 related to land and natural resource management activities, can the minister confirm that the government will actually discharge its duty with meaningful and, might I restate, adequate consultation with Indigenous nations because of this investment in the ICCP?

4:10

The business plan '23-26 and now the business plan '24-27 have reaffirmed a commitment to allocate \$3.9 million to the Indigenous reconciliation initiative to support economic growth and projects that revitalize and enhance culture, traditions, and languages. However, does the minister realize the number of Indigenous-serving organizations and urban Indigenous peoples this province has and that \$3.9 million alone cannot accomplish projects to respond to that many priority areas for that many people? I note 22 projects, but there are a heck of a lot more organizations doing a lot of good work that need these dollars as well. Can you confirm whether there will be more funds for the Indigenous reconciliation initiative to help Indigenous nations to revitalize and enhance culture, traditions, and languages since communities can no longer rely on the FNDF to do similar projects this year?

Also, Mr. Chair, the 2022-23 Indigenous Relations annual report has indicated two consultation guides for First Nations and Métis that were developed. I'm curious what the final costs for the development of these guides were and if the minister would be able to provide those details either in writing or in the annual report and have the information sessions as referenced on page 25 of the annual report '22-23 carried on in '23-24.

In regard to consultation I want to go back to the comments about the Indigenous consultation capacity program and the woeful inadequacy of consultation. This is particularly concerning given that the ministry is delegated with the task of "advocating for a streamlined federal Aboriginal consultation process, that provides clear timelines and legal certainty for project proponents and Indigenous communities." Will the minister clarify what the duty to consult means to this ministry?

Mr. Chair, the duty to consult, when properly discharged by the Crown in right of Alberta, provides assurance to industry and Indigenous nations; therefore, the ACO must focus solely on discharging its obligation on behalf of the Crown in right of Alberta and not on facilitating Indigenous participation in resource development or solely providing legal certainty to project proponents as the duty to consult is owed by the Crown to Indigenous nations.

Further to this, I've heard from stakeholders that the geodata mapping project has been cut significantly, and some Indigenous nations have now been waiting upwards of 10 years for their territories to be recognized by the government of Alberta.

Put in other words, work that was started under a strong, New Democrat government has simply fallen to the wayside under subsequent UCP governments and especially under the minister's tenure. Can you confirm how many staff in your ministry are committed to the work of geodata collection, Minister, through the chair, and will this government be allocating adequate funds to ensure that the nations I mentioned earlier are no longer waiting despite the minister's own assurances that these will be done as recently as two years ago?

Will the government clarify which Métis groups are going through the Métis credible assertion process of the 14 identified that are going through this process on page 41 of the annual report, and will the government provide any further monetary assistance to Métis groups that are seeking to be recognized under the Métis credible assertion process aside from those already mentioned by the minister, Mr. Chair?

Mr. Chair, the long-term governance and funding arrangement agreement with the Métis expired March 31, 2023. I'm curious whether the minister renewed this agreement in '23-24, or does he have plans to engage in those discussions? If so, is there a specific budget item in these estimates that relates to that potential extension

or renewal? Have there been any updates on the renewed funding for dedicated RCMP operations on the settlements? Are there any specific line items for us to be aware of, or are there any plans to engage in anything similar on First Nations? We know that crime in First Nations is a concern, and leadership has been asking for this for a very long time.

Now, Mr. Chair, with the time remaining, I'm going to be asking about Indigenous women's initiatives. In the annual report '22-23 \$1.2 million of the \$2.1 million allocated for Indigenous women's initiatives – that's on page 28 of that report – in the '22-23 budget was doled out in 11 grants. However, it is unclear as to where the balance of \$900,000 went. Can you please confirm where the balance of that budget went if not directly to organizations carrying out the work of this objective? Given that budget '23-24 was \$7.3 million for Indigenous women's initiatives and that this year it is estimated to be elevated to \$7.7 million, can you please indicate what gave rise to this estimate over the last year?

Finally, Mr. Chair, I'd like to ask now about questions related to reconciliation, particularly around the crossgovernment action toward reconciliation, outcome 2, key objective 2.3 of the business plan '23-26. With respect to the lovely reconciliation garden, which I received an invite to the day before the unveiling – sorry, Minister; I wasn't able to make it – can you please provide us with how much money went to that total project cost?

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you. Before you respond, Minister, I'd just – you're mentioning the annual report a lot and kind of historical stuff. I'd just like you in the future to tie it more closely to these estimates and tie them together, okay?

All right. Minister, you can respond.

Mr. Wilson: Thank you so much, and thank you again for your close detail to the budget there. I'll talk about the FNDF first. I already talked a little bit about the Louis Bull casino and how that's moving along. Some of the other projects: Alexander you probably know about, of course. They received \$276,605 for assistance with the miyo mahcihowin job training program. That's for '23-24. Cold Lake First Nations received \$800,000 to renovate the band-owned residences. Alexis Nakota Sioux received \$2,173,000 to construct nongaming portions of the Eagle River Casino and the development of a travel plaza. Beaver First Nation received \$243,389,000 to support the development of commercial agriculture with the purchase of heavy equipment. Loon River First Nation received \$318,149 to renovate 10 units of community housing. Siksika Nation received \$400,000 to support the Siksika Nation fair and annual cultural celebration and community-building event.

So there's been a lot of projects rolling out through that. I'm not sure how many altogether. Hundreds. And as I said, those are driven by the First Nations. We don't come up with the projects. They come up with the projects and ask us to participate and help them out, and that's what we do.

The revenue is allocated based on the funding formula: 15 per cent to the host casino operator, 15 per cent to the host First Nation charity, 30 per cent to the general revenue fund, 30 per cent to the host First Nations, and 10 per cent to the nonhost First Nations. So in 2023 it was \$145 million; 2 per cent goes towards administration. That's how the money breaks down. So all the money that comes in all goes back out except for 2 per cent, which is used to do the administration work on it.

The ACO. This is a big part of what we do, the consultation department. I think last year we did over 10,000 consultations. Without the consultations the province pretty much shuts down because that's what drives everything, from logging to oil field to

mining. And everything takes different times. So if it's just, like, a seismic truck coming in where it is not really disturbing anything, that's kind of a level 1, so they do a basic consultation. The First Nation or Métis community will have their people go out and look if there's something that might be disturbed. If they think it's in a sensitive area, they might take some elders out to see if there are some graves or a berry patch or whatever. All that's taken into consideration. That is between them and whoever the proponent is of doing the work, and we make sure that they meet their duty for doing that.

There's a difference between the duty to consult and engagement. There is a legal duty to consult on those types of things where we're going to be doing disturbing. A lot of people call everything consultation, but a lot of the things where they're talking consultation is actually not really the legal obligation to consultation but engagement. So we have to be clear that there are two different things. The Supreme Court has decided what we have to do for our consultation, and we watch that very closely. We have our team member here. That's his job to maintain that we are doing everything properly.

Each community gets \$110,000. Swan River is the only community that doesn't take that. Every other community accepts that. Then we have a whole – for the Métis groups they have to go through what they call credible assertion. Now, again, that was decided by the Supreme Court as to whether they get that or not. We've got a department that works very closely with them to make sure that they get all of their information together. They have to prove that they've been in the area, so it might be everything from getting birth certificates from people or, you know, church records that a group was in that area for a long time.

4:20

All these things are taken into consideration and they go through a process, and it can take quite a time to get all that information gathered. Then the decision is made whether they get what they call credible assertion. Once they reach credible assertion, that means that, say, if a company comes into the area – and you're talking about the geomapping, which is really streamlining things because now a lot of them overlap. We've got this giant map of Alberta. It could be, say, for my area. Ermineskin has a geomap that goes all the way out to Hinton and Edson, where it used to be their traditional territory for hunting. Before anything happens in that area, because of our mapping, we've decided: okay; that's within their boundaries, so they get the ability to be consulted with.

Every First Nation out there has one of these geomaps, and their traditional territory has been decided as to where they have to be consulted if something is happening in their area. We're very careful to make sure that each community is consulted properly, and we do a very thorough job to make sure that happens. As you can imagine when I'm talking, we do over 10,000 a year. There are a lot of people out in the field working to make sure that all of this consultation is moving along properly.

We take that very seriously. We've never lost a court challenge, so we must be doing it right, not like – B.C. does things a little different, where they don't have treaties, and that's why they sometimes get challenged, but what we do in our department is very thorough to make sure that the consultation is done properly. We've got some great people in there that are working on that.

What else do I want to talk to you about there? That funding is in place now. We've got a three-year agreement with all the First Nations on that \$110,000. That will be reviewed as we go along. There may be a need for increases if there are more projects going forward or that type of thing. That's what we're doing on that one.

Reconciliation. I got permission from past Grand Chief Willie Littlechild. He started calling it reconcili-action, and I asked him if I can use that word. He said: "Yeah. You go ahead and use that, Minister." He's very thorough with me on that. When we're starting a new program, he'll call me up and say: Minister, what's your action? I always make sure that this government isn't just about talk; we are about action.

One of the calls to justice for truth and reconciliation was to do a reconciliation monument of some type. We did, as you know, the reconciliation garden. If some of you haven't been down there yet, it's just south of the Legislature there. We had Stewart Steinhauer from up at Saddle Lake. If you go around the city, you'll see these giant granite carvings of bears and that type of thing. He's the sculptor that does that. He does it in his backyard. I don't know how the heck he does this. These are not small monuments. The one that we've got down in the reconciliation garden there is 22,000 pounds of solid granite. The total cost on the garden was \$660,000. The monument itself was \$450,000, and then we got the markers and stuff, \$10,000. What we created was this monument you come in past. He calls it *Mother Earth Circling*. It's Mother Earth holding a little baby. Then you walk up a sidewalk and there are little kids' footprints in the sidewalk leading up to a healing circle. We tried to use traditional. We had elders from across the province that helped us. Like, this wasn't some moniyaw's idea; this was their idea as to how this garden should be put together.

In the healing circle we've got four centres to it. We've got tobacco, sage. We've got sweetgrass. We've got cedar. And in the centre there's an offering circle where you can place offerings there for the birds to take and what have you. Then we've got a big seating area where we can hold events and stuff down there. It turned out really well. It was really well received across the province.

Also, I don't know if you've been down there, but when you're standing there, off to your west we've got the Treaty 6 medallion there. Again, this is no small medallion. We worked with the city of Edmonton on that, actually. It's probably a 12-foot-high medallion. Then the medallion, you know, Treaty 6, where you got the chief and the commissioner shaking hands there: they actually stand out from the medallion, so it's like 3-D. It's really amazing. I see a lot of people walking through there looking at that.

What my thought was on this whole thing – and we've been working with Stewart right now. He's trying to develop what he calls the sweetgrass trail. He wants to develop a series of these monuments all around Edmonton so that if somebody comes to Edmonton and they want to learn about the Indigenous people, he's got – he calls one *The Hunter*. I forget. There are about six of them he wants to put around the city. So you'll come up to these monuments, and then there'll be a saying on it, a plaque, and it'll describe what the monument is all about and teach you about the Indigenous culture of the area. We're really lucky to have Stewart working on this with us.

I'll tell you one little story with him. When I was getting ready to do this, I really wanted him to do the carving. I was up at Fort McMurray, and I called him. I said: Stewart, I've got one day left . . .

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We'll carry on for the third block of 10 minutes. Go ahead.

Member Arcand-Paul: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I would like to hear the minister's story, but I'll ask for that in a response in the last part of your block. Thank you, Minister, through the chair.

But I do want to turn now to infrastructure programs for Indigenous nations. I recognize that Transportation and Economic Corridors is the budgeted item, but I know that across Executive

Council there is some work that will be done. Particularly, what portion of the \$190.2 million designated for municipal and regional water priority projects went to the First Nations water tie-in program last fiscal? Then this fiscal, given that funding for the program does not have an ongoing allocation and, in fact, the Ministry of Transportation and Economic Corridors has all but axed \$27,685,000 down to \$8 million for this year's estimates, I'm concerned that this government no longer believes that clean drinking water for First Nations is a priority.

I would urge the minister to talk to his colleagues about this because that is a program that does provide clean drinking water that, in fact, my nation has benefited from, and I've spoken to many stakeholders that rely on this to get clean drinking water into their nations and on their homes. The spirit of FNWTIP is to increase access to safe, clean drinking water for First Nations by connecting to municipalities with reliable infrastructure. Has the ministry been taking shortcuts by adding tie-ins to previous tie-ins as a way to save money, and are these new add-on tie-ins as reliable as original water infrastructure?

I'd also now like to turn to insurance for homes during wildfires as First Nations and Métis people who lost homes in the 2023 spring wildfires experienced lengthy delays in receiving insurance settlements for lost homes and structures. Mr. Chair, to the minister. When anyone loses property during a wildfire, it's a stressful situation to replace a car, a trailer, or a garage full of tools, but when an Indigenous family loses a home, it loses generations of cultural knowledge.

I note that on page 82 of business plan '24-27 there is a commitment to work with the Métis settlements to develop a long-term solution to mitigate the impact and costs associated with disaster-related losses, but there has been no corresponding dollar figure attached as of yet. Has the ministry been pushing the Treasury to solve complex insurance claims and ensure that Indigenous families are compensated in culturally appropriate ways, and how much exactly?

In terms of . . .

Mr. Wilson: Slow down a little.

Member Arcand-Paul: Take your notes there. I've got 10 minutes, Minister, through the chair. Sorry. I've only got 10 minutes. I've got to get through it.

In regard to the environment and climate in the strategic plan '23-26 this government indicates that – actually, before I start this question, if the minister would like to respond to these questions, would he like to respond to these questions as I'm going along?

Mr. Wilson: No. Carry on.

Member Arcand-Paul: Are you sure?

Mr. Wilson: Yeah.

Member Arcand-Paul: Okay. In the strategic plan '23-26 this government indicates that

Alberta is committed to continuing to work with Indigenous communities on environmental issues to develop and maintain long-term, trust-based relationships and recognizing the unique perspective and priorities of the First Nation, Métis and Inuit peoples as partners in climate action.

In the same breath the Premier and her cabinet made sweeping changes to the existence of renewable energy projects in this province.

How can Alberta accomplish objective 7 when it is heavy-handed with Indigenous nations like the four that were affected by the

renewables ban that I mentioned earlier today, which saw up to \$295 million of investment wasted away and 245 jobs lost because of this heavy-handed approach. Mr. Chair, does the minister have a plan to rectify the relationship with Chiniki solar, Archer Piikani solar, Ermineskin Cree Nation solar, and PBC Paul Band solar for their business losses to continue their work in addressing climate change?

4:30

Mr. Chair, objective 7 of the strategic plan also suggests that this government will proactively engage and partner with Indigenous communities on many different strategies, including the water for life strategy, which includes “secure drinking water supply; healthy aquatic ecosystems; and reliable, quality water supplies for a sustainable economy.” Why, then, will the minister not listen to the Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation or the Mikisew Cree First Nation, who have reliably raised concerns about their aquifers in northern Alberta?

I’m turning now to culture. I note that the minister also has a crossportfolio responsibility here. Given that the minister is tasked with leading crossgovernment actions toward reconciliation in culture, can he please clarify what projects under the community initiatives program – \$20,375,000 – went to projects focused on reconciliation and/or directly to Indigenous peoples or nations? Further, given that the capital grant from the federal government through investing in Canada infrastructure – community, culture and recreation totalled \$32,668,000 in Budget ’22-23, how much was allocated to Indigenous peoples or nations for cultural projects? Is there anticipated investment in this year’s budget? And if he could, please list each project for ’22-23.

Mr. Chair, I know you don’t want me to go back to the annual report. I’m not going to because I’m taking your advice, even though we are allowed to rely on the annual report. That is a document that is prepared by the ministry. It is evidence that I could rely on. But I just wanted to put that on the record, that we are allowed to rely on that.

In that regard I want to turn again to the Indigenous women’s initiatives which, unfortunately, the ministry – I know I was throwing a lot at you, but this is something that I’m curious about. Almost a million dollars is not accounted for between ’22-23. In particular, the figure that was allocated, \$2.1 million for Indigenous women’s initiatives: only \$1.2 million was doled out in grants. Was that to the actual councils that you have, the First Nations women council and the Métis women’s council? I’m really curious to really follow that question up.

Mr. Chair, I’d also now like to ask questions related to reconciliation again. I feel like we got the garden; we got a lot of really good information and almost a full story from the minister about the development of the beautiful monument. But I’d now like to ask questions related to reconciliation, particularly the government’s “cross-government actions towards reconciliation” in outcome 2, key objective 2.2 of business plan ’23-26, page 70, which states that the government “collaborate with other provincial government ministries to provide expert advice and support to develop policies, programs, initiatives, and services that reflect Indigenous perspectives and advance reconciliation,” in particular the “priority areas, such as economic community development, culture, language, health and families,” as well as in its leadership role with Jordan’s principle.

I’m curious how much the launch of the website, as referenced in annual report ’22-23 on page 35 – and I doubt that would be my only mention, Mr. Chair. Can the minister elaborate further on what expert advice this government has committed to on reconciliation? Also, in terms of Children and Family Services, in light of the recent

Supreme Court of Canada’s decision in reference re An Act respecting First Nations, Inuit, and Métis children, youth and families, I’m curious – and this is personal curiosity just given my experience as a lawyer – how much did the government spend, whether in dollars or in staff hours on the reference case just mentioned?

I’m also curious about economic community development that is not tied to the AIOC, ABIF or FNDF and how much is going to that. Since this government is so committed to economic reconciliation, I would like to know where these programs are and how much money is being allocated not through those specific funds. If this government is prioritizing Indigenous economic development through its reconcili-action, as the minister has referenced, I’d also like to know how this government has further expanded its leadership in Jordan’s principle, particularly if there’s been no budget for said leadership in this budget or last year’s budget. What about expert advice to support those Indigenous languages and culture? Or are First Nations and Métis governments only reliant on the ABIF or FNDF? Again, as I mentioned, I still have major concerns with the FNDF and what exactly – if that’s something that needs to be updated, Minister, I’d ask you through the chair that perhaps we have that update so nations have that assurance that they will get every single dollar through the FNDF, if that is the case. I am thankful for this time to be asking these questions.

I’d also like to really, really, really quickly turn now to the protocol and relationship agreements that the government has established. Have they established a new relationship agreement, protocol agreement with Treaty 8? And why, specifically, their concern about doing a treaty-based analysis and working toward a treaty rights approach to government-to-government relations? Why has the government failed to do that with Treaty 8 First Nations?

I’d like to end that and turn to the minister to finish his story, but also to answer these questions.

The Chair: Thank you.

Minister, go ahead. You have the remaining time.

Mr. Wilson: I have a lot of paper in front of me so bear with me.

So, I can talk about FNDF because he just talked about that again. Donavon’s probably been here longer than anybody, and he’s probably the guy that set it up in the first place. Other than the 2 per cent that is used for administration purposes, every penny that goes back to the community is guaranteed. We can get you the number on that if you don’t believe me, but that’s 100 per cent. That all goes back. Like I say, this year we are hoping that even with the new casino coming online that we should be up above what we are guesstimating the amount will be.

That goes back to communities, and it is mostly for community-type projects: community halls, social programs, housing. It is a big issue, as you know, on housing. That’s probably one of the biggest issues we have going on in First Nations right now, and we’re working with the federal government to get us some help on there. Our government has just stepped up in a lot of places. We just said: the federal government is not stepping up, so we’re just going to do it. Our Community and Social Services minister, he’s been doing projects all over. We were just talking with Scott about a project up in Lesser Slave Lake. He’s pretty keen on getting some stuff going up there. So there’s a lot of issues, a lot of stuff going on around the FNDF and how we can work better with that.

We’ll go back to the water tie-in project. We’re doing one right now for Ermineskin. It’s a \$39 million dollar project. That’s a waterline coming all the way from Lacombe up to Ermineskin, that

hopefully should be completed this year. The design work is all done and as soon as the frost is out of the ground they'll be working on that one.

Also on that, the Premier has tasked me to do an asset inventory of all First Nations and Métis communities. This is going to be a huge undertaking, but she wants to know where the shortfalls are, if we've got communities that are short of water, if we've got communities that need natural gas. We did a huge natural gas tie-in last year. Where was that one at?

Mr. Kwas: Bigstone.

Mr. Wilson: Bigstone. Yeah. That was many multimillions of dollars to do a gas line tie-in, and we've got another couple of communities that are looking to do something similar, so we're going to be working with them over the next year.

We want to see where the shortfalls are because it seems like the federal government is just dropping the ball wherever we go. The First Nations and Métis communities are coming to me to see if I can assist them to get their waterlines, and their sewer systems, everything up to speed. It's really going to be critical over the next year because, as you know, up north and across the whole province we've got a drought going on and a lot of the reservoirs are low and the lakes are low. Like, a lot of the First Nations get their water right out of the lake, so their input, where they draw from, may have to be lowered. We're going to have to be watching really closely this year on our water levels to make sure that everybody's got adequate water supply.

So that's what we'll be doing this year. We're going to be working on that asset inventory, we'll be reaching out to the First Nations to see where they're at on their water systems, if their water plant needs to be upgraded, or what have you. Like I said, the Premier has tasked me to move forward on that, so we'll be moving forward on it.

Last year, the wildfires were quite an issue for us. I did a – where's my tour sheet there? We had a lot of fires all over the province. I was supposed to be running in an election, but I was up north most of the time working with different communities to make sure that we didn't lose any more houses than what we did. We started out kind of the first part of August, and I had the Premier with me. We had various ministers up there with us: forestry, Mental Health and Addiction. We had a lot of people. In East Prairie we lost – how many houses did we lose there?

4:40

Mr. Kwas: Fourteen.

Mr. Wilson: Fourteen houses there.

Mr. Kwas: I think another 39 damaged.

Mr. Wilson: Thirty-nine damaged. Then a couple of years before that in Paddle Prairie we lost some houses. Cabinet helped us out and went to bat for us, and we did get funding to replace those houses. I'm happy to say that every one of those houses has been replaced and the families were back in before Christmas. We got everybody back in their houses, which was amazing.

It was pretty scary. Like, I was up there. What's the one on the other side of Peace River?

Mr. Kwas: Fox Lake.

Mr. Wilson: Fox Lake. Oh, my God. That was terrifying. I actually got a call in the middle of the night from some friends up there, and they're standing out in the river. There's a wall of flames behind them. This is 2 o'clock in the morning. "Minister, help." Like,

unbelievable. So then I called Donavon. "Donavon, help." We took over one of those – what is that big plane called?

Mr. Young: The Hercules.

Mr. Wilson: We took over a Hercules and we were we were flying it into Fort Chip. Same thing. I got a call from Fort Chip: Minister, help. There are people standing out on the runway. It was like an apocalyptic movie. There are dogs in kennels and people pushing and fighting, trying to get on these little planes. We were able to get a big Herc up to Fort Chip, if you can imagine. They landed on that little runway, and we loaded everybody up, dogs and everything, and we flew them out a couple of times.

Then we got a call from the mayor of Fort McMurray. He wanted to fly a fire truck in. So I sent the plane out to get a fire truck and fly it in. And then Donavon said: I think we better turn this back over. But I was having fun with that. We're flying equipment and manpower around all over the place. You know what? Not one life was lost. That's the amazing part. Those people up there are so resilient. Like, I can't even imagine what it was like, seeing a wall of flame behind you and trying to get out of these communities and knowing that you're losing everything. Like, your entire life is being lost. Then we're taking people out, especially the elders. As you know, up there some of them have never been out of that community. Like, they live on traditionally like moose meat, and then we take them up to Grande Prairie and Fort McMurray and the elders are getting sick because they're not used to Costco food, you know? It was pretty traumatic, trying to get people back to their houses as quick as we could. It was a wild and wooly summer up there, but like I said, not one life was – well. Not directly. No one got killed in the fires. It was pretty amazing.

We've been working really hard with forestry now to beef up the fireguards around the communities to make sure that this doesn't happen again. We've got sprinklers on roofs, some of the materials that they use for houses, trying to make it more fireproof, and working with the communities to make them as safe as we can for this coming year. Hopefully we don't have that same situation again, but we're prepared for it. We put a lot of extra money into it.

We're training Indigenous firefighters. Their communities, they've been fighting fire forever. They know what it's about up there to get the job done and using their methods. Like a lot of them were telling me last year they want to go out at night and fight these fires, but they weren't allowed to. That's the best time to fight them, when it's cooler and they can get out there and fight the fires.

I think we trained 40 new Indigenous firefighters this year, and they're ready to go. We've put a lot of extra money into our firefighting budget just in case we do run into a situation like that again. I think we've already got 40 wildfires going up north.

Mr. Kwas: Almost 50.

Mr. Wilson: Almost 50?

Mr. Kwas: From last year, though.

Mr. Wilson: Those are hangovers from last year. I mean, we're not out of the woods yet, literally.

But we are working hard with the communities, and the communities have been really responsive on making sure that our fireguards are big enough and back far enough and cleaning up around the houses, keeping the grass cut so that if a fire does come through we can control it better. Working with Transportation, we've got a couple of communities that we're working on, new roads and new highways up north. Instead of what happened in Fort McMurray, where you've got one road in and one road out –

another one we were so lucky on. We're trying to develop extra roads in and out of communities to make sure that if fire does come through that they're protected and we can get them out. A lot of stuff going on around firefighting, like I say, the Métis settlements especially. If they do, it's crazy stuff. So we've been working on putting together a program for the Métis settlements as to how we're going to help them be insured or self-insured or just have enough money set aside that if we do have a wreck, that we've got money there to cover it.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We will now go over to the government caucus, but before we do, I'll just make everyone aware that we'll be taking our five-minute break after this 20-minute block.

Member, would you like to go block or shared?

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Block, please.

The Chair: Block. You're okay with block? Okay.

All right. You have 10 minutes to ask your questions. Go ahead.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Thank you, Chair. Through you to the minister, first of all, Minister, I'd like to commend you on your passion and your compassion for the Indigenous peoples, and we're so lucky to have you as the minister. I know those tears are real tears because I know you, so thank you. Thank you so much for your passion. I also want to thank you for being here today to discuss Indigenous Relations in the 2024-25 budget and to answer some of the committee's questions. I want to commend you for the excellent work you've been doing over the past number of years. I know that the Indigenous people and all Albertans really appreciate all the work you do, and we all do, to build a better future.

Indigenous Relations along with the rest of Alberta's government has committed very heavily over the past few years to walking the path forward towards reconciliation with Indigenous peoples. I see that Indigenous Relations' overall budget has decreased by \$10 million. Can you explain the decrease and how you plan to continue creating a prosperous future for Indigenous peoples in Alberta? Also, after reviewing your 2024-2027 business plan, there appear to be a number of changes. This is to be expected to some degree with the supports and commitments in place constantly evolving and updating. Can you explain some of these changes throughout the plan and, specifically, why there are new performance measures included this year?

I see under line item 2 of the estimates that operating expense for First Nation and Métis relations will see a modest increase year over year. This funding is to be used towards establishing effective relationships, legislation, policies, and initiatives for Indigenous governments and organizations and administering the Métis settlement legislation. I think all of us around this table can agree that establishing and maintaining relationships with Indigenous governments and organizations is and should be top priority for any government, and I want to thank you, Minister, for your great efforts in this regard.

What are some of the accomplishments over the past year that your ministry has achieved – I know you've given a few, but I'd like to hear a few more – in terms of creating and building these fruitful relationships and partnerships with Indigenous communities and organizations? I know you have many, many stories, and they're all very good. How will this increased funding help your ministry's efforts going forward, and what specific initiatives will it be used towards?

And now the questions I have for you are about Indigenous women, girls, and 2S-plus people. This government has made a strong commitment to address the crisis of missing and murdered

Indigenous women and girls. The high rates of violence against Indigenous women, girls, and two-spirited-plus peoples continue to be of great concern for this government. This issue is extremely sensitive, complex, and is impacted by a multitude of factors. Therefore, I'm wondering what real action your ministry is taking to address the crisis.

Also, the missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls and 2S-plus people crisis has been front of mind for this government, and you have worked hand in hand with a number of organizations and partners to address this issue. In their pursuit of key objective 2.3, which seeks to establish and strengthen relationships with organizations that serve Indigenous women and 2S-plus people who face significant challenges in their day-to-day lives due to their gender and sexual identities, how is your ministry strengthening these relationships?

Mr. Chair, if it's all right with you, I'd like to cede the rest of my time to my colleague MLA Sinclair.

The Chair: Go ahead.

Mr. Sinclair: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you to my colleague MLA Armstrong-Homeniuk, and thank you, everybody, for being here today. Thank you, Minister Wilson, and all of your staff. I know I try to tell you every time I see you, and everywhere I go I try to remind anybody else, that it's an honour to serve with you. I always say that I try not to look at Minister Wilson because I have a hard time keeping it together. Supposed to be a big, tough hockey guy, but these issues hit very close to home for me.

4:50

I do have some questions on Indigenous women and girls and two-spirited people as well. I would just like to, you know, briefly make mention of some of the topics that got brought up already. One of them: I have the utmost respect, and I just wanted it on the record, for my fellow Indigenous colleague who's here in the room today, Member Arcand-Paul, as well as – she's not in the room today because I believe she's running for leadership – MLA Calahoo Stonehouse. In a really unique and bipartisan fashion we now do land acknowledgements inside of the Chamber once a week. I made a very passionate plea to caucus, my own colleagues, about the importance of this and how it means different things to different people, including my own and Indigenous leaders. But the importance of it, at the end of the day, of making people like me feel welcome in rooms and worlds where that was not always the case: I would just like to say thank you to both of you. And just so everybody understands, these impacts are real, and the work you're doing is commendable, and I'm happy to stand behind you and support you wholeheartedly.

I have some other comments, but I'll reserve them for where it's more appropriate, I think, to the line of questioning.

I'd just like to say that when we're keeping this extremely serious issue in mind, which is both complex and sensitive, I'd like to turn our attention to the Premier's Council on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls as detailed on page 80 of the business plan. "This public advisory agency provides independent advice . . . and monitors actions taken by government to prevent violence and increase safety and economic security of Indigenous women, girls, and two spirit plus people." My first question would be: could you expand on why this council is so important in our government's continued effort to promote the health and safety of Indigenous peoples?

A second one would be on key objective 2.3 from the ministry business plan for '24-27, which is to "Implement and support government actions guided by the Alberta MMIWG Roadmap to

prevent violence and increase safety and economic security of Indigenous women, girls and two spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex and asexual plus people.” I see that over \$7.7 million have been allocated for Indigenous women’s initiatives in ’24-25, an increase from the almost \$7.4 million that was budgeted last year. This funding will provide secretariat support to the First Nations and Métis Women’s Economic Security Council and also support Alberta’s response to the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls.

This is a twoparter. Minister, can you please speak to your ministry’s efforts to address key objective 2.3, the steps this government has taken to prevent violence against Indigenous peoples going forward and particularly Indigenous women and girls, and how this \$7.7 million of funding will help support these efforts? And what specific initiatives will it go towards?

Lastly, staying on the issue of protecting Indigenous women and girls from violence, I have a more technical question regarding metrics. I’d like to refer to page 83 of the ’24-27 business plan. Performance measure 2(a) is the “number of initiatives funded that address violence and increase safety and economic security of Indigenous women, girls and two spirit plus people.” The metric is described in further detail as identifying the number of projects funded by the community support fund, or CSF, which has the primary objective of addressing violence and increasing the safety and economic security of Indigenous women, girls, two-spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, and asexual-plus people. There is a target of 20 projects to be funded in ’24-25, to be increased to 22 in ’25-26 and to 24 in ’26-27.

My question here is: how many such projects were funded in previous years, and if there are any specific actions the ministry is planning to ensure that this target is met? As far as measuring the success of the ministry’s initiatives to protect Indigenous women and girls is concerned, I am curious why this particular metric was chosen. It seems to me that while the number of funded initiatives may be a good baseline metric, it doesn’t necessarily consider how successful these initiatives are, how many people have been helped, and how other outcomes based information. Is the ministry tracking the success of these programs in addition to the number? What can you share in this regard?

Again, I appreciate all the work you guys are doing. It is both heavy and stressful and difficult, and I have much more to share, but I’ll use it in my other block. Please continue the work that you guys are doing; I deeply appreciate it, and look forward to helping in any way I can. Thank you very much, Minister. Appreciate everybody’s time here, and I appreciate my colleagues.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Member.

You have 10 minutes to respond, Minister.

Mr. Wilson: Thank you so much and thank you for the questions. I’ll try not to look at you. We are quite a pair.

Jackie, first I’ll get into your questions on our budget. We are maintaining or increasing spending in all areas under our direct control. I think I talked about it earlier, on why there might be some decreases in the FNDF. But with a second straight increase to the Aboriginal business investment fund, our initiatives are going strong, and we continue to work as partners with Indigenous people. We have doubled the ABIF over two budgets to \$10 million this year, so it can keep supporting Indigenous community-owned businesses and creating jobs and improving social outcomes for Indigenous people across the province. The new programs we

created last year, the Indigenous reconciliation initiative and the community support fund, will continue to support meaningful, effective, Indigenous-led initiatives with more than \$7 million in annual funding between the two programs.

This kind of goes back to your question, too, Brooks, on what we’re doing around reconciliations.

We’re also giving the Indigenous Opportunities Corporation – this is our big one – the ability to hire more employees so it can realize the full potential of its expanded loan guarantee capacity, which is increasing to \$3 billion this year, triple what it was last year. What we’re looking at doing – we started off as, like, oil and gas, renewables, forestry, and mining, and then as we got moving along with it, we’re getting more of the First Nations and Métis people saying, “Well, what about transportation and agriculture,” agriculture is a big one, “and tourism?” That’s probably one of the biggest ones that I get questions about, and telecommunications. As you know, once you get up north of Edmonton, people don’t realize that Mr. Google doesn’t work up there so good. We really saw that during COVID. Like, it’s easy if you’re in one of the bigger cities for the kids to go online and do their school work, but you get up north, you’ve got to drive to the nearest Tim Hortons so the kids can get online to do their school work. So we’re working really hard on those projects.

On Budget ’24 we sustained funding across the ministry to continue the important work we’re doing with various things. We’re talking about the protocol and relationship agreements with the Indigenous consultation capacity programs and, of course, the work that Kristina does with First Nations and the Métis Women’s Economic Security Council, and a range of support for Métis settlements, organizations, and communities. We have signed protocol agreements with the Métis settlements, with the Premier, and we’ll be meeting with them again this spring. We’ve got some really good agreements going with them there. We’re helping them out with the RCMP. We’re helping them with their office management, consultation.

We’ve done a lot of work with the Métis settlements; a great group of people to work with. It’s really rewarding working with them to see how they’re starting to grow. They did their first AIOC project, and all of a sudden now they’re believers. So we’ve got a whole new group that’s interested in doing projects with us there, too.

There was a decrease of \$10 million. I talked about that before because of the capital plan funding from the federal government this year; they dropped that funding. Hopefully they put it back in again. So that was \$8.9 million. The decreases are partially off-set by the following increases. We did a \$2.5 million increase to the ABF to boost the program, that was the 7 and a half million dollars that we were talking about earlier, to \$10 million annually; an \$800,000 increase for public-sector compensation; and a \$650,000 increase to the Alberta Indigenous Opportunities Corporation to hire more employees, mainly because we’re vetting so many projects right now.

5:00

They tell me that actually every day there is at least one new major corporation. My office is kind of fun. It’s like *Dragon’s Den*. We got all these major corporations coming in and pitching their programs. We kind of do the prevetting and send them on.

There are so many projects that people are coming to Alberta with because this isn’t happening anywhere else. Like, I was out in Ottawa. They brought all of us Indigenous ministers out there, and I brought Chief Powder with me and Dave Lamouche, the Métis settlements president, and Donavon, of course. When we got talking with the other ministers, Alberta does more on reconciliation and missing and

murdered Indigenous women – I was invited out especially for a conference with Kristina about that – than all the other provinces and territories combined. If you combine what everybody else is putting into it, Alberta does more than everybody else combined. I'm pretty proud about what we're doing here. We're doing an amazing job.

All the other First Nations and media people across Canada are looking at us and saying: hey, how do we get in on this? Some of the provinces are starting to copy us now. Who's the latest one? Saskatchewan and B.C. are both starting a smaller version of what we're doing on the AIOC. They see the value in it. I was actually out talking to the B.C. minister, and I was telling him about all our different programs, and he's looking at his staff, "Why aren't we doing that? Why aren't we doing that?" and they're taking notes. I guess being copied is a good form of flattery. It's pretty fun to be part of that.

We talked about our business plan. We are collecting data on how we are moving along. Our performance measures help gauge how the department is achieving its strategic goals. The new performance measures are the number of permanent jobs by the Aboriginal business investment fund and the number of Indigenous initiatives funded by that to address violence and increase safety and economic security for Indigenous women, girls, and two-spirited-plus people. We work with Indigenous communities to identify that data, and we review each program on an annual basis. I talked about some of the jobs we created, over 800 just with the ABIF program. You can see that we are doing a lot of good stuff there.

I think the other question was on how this increased funding helps our ministry. I'm proud to say that Alberta's government has signed several new agreements with Indigenous communities in recent years. We did do the Blackfoot Confederacy. We've got an agreement with them, and we have tables set up as to how we can work. When we set up these tables, it allows us to get the people that do the work behind the scenes to get together with the technicians from the First Nations and Métis communities. Then maybe we've got a health table. So we put our people together with the Health department, and they can work on their initiatives that they want to move forward there. There might be a transportation table, so we can work together there.

We've got that table set up with the Blackfoot Confederacy. We've done one now with the Treaty 6. We literally had, I think, all but maybe one minister there with the Treaty 6, and we had all the chiefs. Maybe one chief might have been missing. I've never seen so many ministers and chiefs in a room. It was like herding cats to get everybody there, but we did. We did get everybody in the room, and it was, I'd say, one of the best meetings that we've had with the First Nations to move forward on their agenda.

My good friend Leonard Saddleback said the prayer. He started it off. I understand enough Cree to know what he was saying. He said: "Chiefs, you wanted to be at the table. Take advantage of this. Look around you. You've got ministers sitting beside you all around this room. You've got the Premier here. Take advantage of this moment." It was so powerful. It set the tone for the whole meeting. I was really impressed with his prayer that he gave us there. He's a dear friend of mine. Now I forget what I was even talking about.

Anyways, we have signed those agreements. Treaty 8: we don't have a protocol agreement with them – I think that was asked earlier – but they've got different groups, tribal councils, and they seem to like to work better that way because it focuses more. Because there are so many. I think there are 23 First Nations in Treaty 8. They like to work together with the groups that they've already got these trusted agreements with. That's the way we are working with Treaty

8. We have several different memorandums of understanding, MOUs, of how we work with the Treaty 8 folks up there.

When we talk about Indigenous women and girls and two-spirited people, this is a big one. This is Kristina's. She's kind of walking me through this path, and thanks for all the hard work you do there, Kristina. We are committed to ensuring that Indigenous women and girls and two-spirited people are treated with dignity and respect and live in safety and free from violence. We recognize the root cause of violence against Indigenous women and two-spirited people is complex, so what we have done is we have put together a road map, we call it. It's a path forward as to how we are going to address that complexity, and the road map takes a comprehensive approach to address and prevent violence and increase safety. Have I got a copy of that road map here?

One of the first things when we did our own breakdown of the national calls to action for missing and murdered Indigenous women – Kristina was our lead on that. One of the first things that came out of that was that they wanted a Premier's council, so we did that right away. We set up the Premier's council. We've got Indigenous women; we've got two-spirited people; we've got Métis ladies; we've got a Dene lady; Inuit. We kind of did a cross-section across the province, and the Premier has already met with them a couple of times. She loves meeting with them: a great group of people. They've got some good ideas.

We were just at a conference out in Ottawa with Kristina. They actually changed the date so that I could go and speak to them there because we've done so much work on it. The rest of Canada and the federal minister wanted to hear from us on how we are moving forward. That was a lot of fun.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister. I'll just remind you. I know you like operating on a first-name basis, but if you could refrain from using first names, that'd be great going forward.

This concludes the government members' first block of questions. We will now take a five-minute break, and we'll come back at about 12 after. Have your five-minute break, and away we go.

[The committee adjourned from 5:06 p.m. to 5:11 p.m.]

The Chair: Okay. Now we start the second round of questions and responses. The speaking rotation going forward will be the same as the first round, starting with the Official Opposition, followed by the government caucus. However, the speaking times will now be reduced to five minutes. You'll have five minutes to ask your questions, five-minute responses. This time you can't cede to any other member, and if you don't use your full five minutes, then your time is lost, just so we understand that. We'll just go back and forth as we go.

We will start with the opposition member. Go ahead.

Member Arcand-Paul: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I want to just go back to some of the questions that I don't think were properly answered in my first round of questioning, in my first blocks. In particular, I think the minister mentioned that there was some money towards insurance and there were conversations with the Métis, but there's no direct dollar amount that I can see in any of the documents, in either the estimates or the business plan, for that work. There is recognition that there is going to be engagement, but I would love for the Métis to have confirmation of what that money is going to look like.

I'd also like to remind the minister that there are First Nations which, through you, Mr. Chair, have been mentioned already, particularly the ones around where the forest fires were. I appreciate the minister's passion, but I also know that these First Nations require money as well. It's really interesting that these communities

were mentioned, but there are no dollar amounts attached to that possible coverage, especially when it comes to insurance. I'd also like to ask again with regard to consultation. I note that 10,000 were accomplished last year, but the question is not the quantity; it's quality.

The ACO, as I've been told by a stakeholder, is not discharging its responsibility. First Nations have been indicating their concerns with the ACO, and the minister has not indicated anything today about the mandate of the ACO, particularly with respect to engaging with industry versus discharging its legal duty. I am really conscious that, yes, the province has an obligation to consult, but we do not want to see another situation such as the Kanasatake resistance in Oka, Quebec, or the Shaughnessy golf course on Musqueam territory in British Columbia happening to some of these tourism or recreationist activities.

I was at estimates last night with the Minister of Tourism and Sport, and I raised these concerns because that assurance that should be provided to all industries, including Tourism and Sport, should have that assurance from this government, and I know full well that in specific areas of this province that's not being done. That consultation is a big piece and can disrupt the economy. So I ask the minister to clarify how the ACO is operating and those very back-and-forth comments within the documents from last year and this year and – I'm sorry, Mr. Chair – the annual report as well that stipulate that there are certain concerns with respect to how consultation is carried out. Maybe the deputy minister might be able to speak to this. I'm not sure. I just am very, very conscious about this. I hear from my stakeholders that this is a concern, and those stakeholders are Indigenous leadership. They are chiefs and councils.

I also want to know what this government's budget is doing in respect to the difference between that consultation and engagement that the minister has referenced, taking note that there is no money allocated in this budget for engagement. Specifically, there's money for consultation through the ACO – I believe the number is \$7 million – but that engagement piece, where the minister has already referenced, Mr. Chair, about the difference between consultation and engagement.

There is also the concern about the ABIF; namely, that \$4.5 million drop that the minister has referenced, Mr. Chair. I'm curious where that drop-off has – if it's going to be picked up. As you know, many First Nations, many Métis communities rely on that fund. It is a good fund. I will recognize that importance. But we need to have assurance that those monies are there for this programming to be able to put in cultural and economic and social programming on nations like language revitalization. There are many communities out there that would benefit from this but also individuals that could elevate their lives through this program. I would urge the minister to continue seeking ways to better invest in this.

Then I have some more comments about the Premier's council, but I'm going to turn to the minister now. He didn't finish that story about the monument. I just want to clarify that, too. So if he could also pick that up, that would be great.

Thank you.

The Chair: Minister, you have five minutes.

Mr. Wilson: Yes. I'll start with my story so I don't get – I love his carvings. He does this amazing work. So I called him up. I said, "Aren't you going to put in a bid on the sculpture?" He said, "Well, I was waiting for you to call, Minister." I said, "It doesn't work that way." And he says, "No, no; I already built it." I said: "You what? I don't even pick it. Elders are going pick it." He said, "No, no; you

came to me in a vision a year ago, and you told me what you wanted." So he built it based on coming to him in a vision.

I went out to Saddle Lake. I didn't know where he lived. So we're driving through, and I asked a little kid on the road. I said, "Do you know where Stewart Steinhauer lives?" "Just go down to where all the rocks are. You'll find it." So we drove up there and went up to his house. Sure enough, here's this giant monument that he had already built for the garden based on the vision that he'd had, him and his son. His son is very spiritual. Then, of course, we had to stay for lunch. His wife came out. She said: "Oh, we're so blessed. One of the neighbours hit a moose last night, and then they left us a hindquarter on the step." So we had a great meal of moose stew with Stewart and his family.

Then we took it back to our group of elders that's deciding, and thank God they picked that monument. That's the story on the monument, where it came from.

I have so many spiritual things that happened to me. You know what it's like on the rez. It's been a real growing experience for me, and I feel so blessed to have been taken in by so many Indigenous communities and just treated like one of their own almost. It's been a journey for me, to be honest with you. I've grown a lot over the years.

I want to talk about fire damage on First Nation land. That first call has to be to the federal government because that is their responsibility. We worked very closely with the federal government when the fires were going on. We were in constant contact with them. Most of those houses have been replaced as well. Wherever there was a shortfall, like I say, for moving people or whatever, we just did it.

The Premier made it my mandate that Jordan's principle comes into effect. It doesn't matter, like, if a kid is sick or whatever. We're not going to worry about who's funding it. We just look after it, and we deal with the funding afterwards. That is right in my mandate, to always apply Jordan's principle wherever possible. We take that very seriously, and we just get stuff done, and we worry about who is paying for it later.

5:20

Tourism. I've got to talk to you a little bit about tourism. I love tourism projects. I used to have a tourism operation. I'm not going to tell you where, but it was in a really cool place. I worked with the Indigenous folks there. We'd had a meeting with WestJet, and they had done a study: 1 in 3 people coming to Alberta wants to have an Indigenous experience when they come here. I thought: wow, this sounds like an opportunity to me. I went to Premier Kenney at the time, and I said: do you think I could start a whole Indigenous tourism project? I pitched it to him. He said: yeah; go for it. That's how it kind of started.

My idea was to create an Indigenous tourism corridor right through Alberta. Say you get off a plane in Calgary. We could have a group there that has a bus. You get on the bus and head south. You hit the Blackfoot Crossing down there. If you've ever been there, like, it's a beautiful museum that's hardly used. It talks about looking right down over where the treaty was signed and where the buffalo used to jump over, and if you look across the valley you can see Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump. It's right there as well. Then you've got Writing-on-Stone park. There's a lot of stuff happening in southern Alberta with the Blackfoot people down there.

I thought, well, we can work with the Blackfoot and help them. One of my friends down there was actually on the real *Dragons' Den*, or *Shark Tank*, I guess it was, and he got picked, and they did a project with him. You can go and stay in his teepee village down by the river and live like an Indigenous person for the day and see what their lifestyle was like. That's pretty cool.

Then, coming north, you get into Calgary. We've got the Sam Centre. The Calgary Stampede only happens for a week out of the year, so now there's going to be the Sam Centre there. There is a whole bunch of Indigenous-led things going on there. The Glenbow Museum is doing a huge display on Indigenous artifacts. Then as we go north . . .

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We will now go to government caucus for five minutes. Go ahead.

Mr. Dyck: Thank you, Chair. I really appreciate it. Minister, thanks for being here. Thanks for bringing your staff and just being an excellent storyteller. I just really appreciate it. I never thought I would say this, but I'm having a blast at estimates, so thanks for doing that.

I do have some questions here, too. The Aboriginal business investment fund, which you have talked about a little bit, helps partially or completely fund various capital costs for Indigenous community-owned economic development projects. These projects can make significant improvement in social and economic outcomes for Indigenous peoples and communities.

I do believe this is a great example of how our government, this government, is putting Indigenous peoples in control of their own futures, and this is in part by partnering with them in generating the types of economic opportunities that they are looking for. This is incredible. I love that we are leading the way on this. It's an opportunity. As you said before, Alberta is doing more than what the rest of Canada is doing combined. This is incredible.

My specific question is on page 4 of the 2024-2027 capital plan; that is, \$10 million of capital spending will be provided in the 2024-2025 budget for the Aboriginal business investment fund and \$30 million over the next three years. Can you highlight some of the projects that have received funding through the ABIF in past years and the impacts these projects have had on these communities? I know that you've mentioned a few. I would love a few more stories there, as I mentioned prior.

As well, the Aboriginal business investment fund has proven to be a strong vehicle for bringing prosperous economic opportunities to Indigenous communities right across the province with a second straight 50 per cent increase to the Aboriginal business investment fund, effectively doubling the fund over the last two years, and our other programs and initiatives are going strong. How will these funds support Indigenous communities and strengthen Alberta's economy? This is an incredible increase, 50 per cent. This showcases strong work, strong need but also the strong work that this government is doing. My question in this is: how does the Aboriginal business investment fund improve the social and economic outcomes for Indigenous communities? I think it's really important that we highlight these for those tens of thousands of people that are watching just right now online. Yeah.

As well, I do have a couple questions. You've talked quite a bit on reconciliation, reconcili-action. I thank you, Member Sinclair, for just pinpointing that, too. As you know, reconciliation has been a top priority for our government and for this government for quite some time. I think the proof is in the pudding there just with the impact and our commitment, particularly with the AIOC. But we do have a government-wide commitment to walking alongside Indigenous peoples to a brighter, safer, and more equitable future for everyone. This must be front of mind for this government as we walk the path towards this reconciliation together. You know, we're hand in hand with Indigenous peoples, and we're leading the way, as I've said.

My question in this one: with progress being made on all fronts such as Education, Justice, Health, Mental Health and Addiction, and there is much more to name, can you, Minister, point to some initiatives in place to advance reconciliation? I think this is a really important one to pinpoint, showcase, and also bring some clarity onto as well.

I have a couple more questions here as well. Budget 2024 maintains the funding for protocol and relationship agreements between Indigenous communities and Alberta government. Can you please tell us about your relationship with Treaty 6, the Blackfoot Confederacy, and G4 and what you are working on to improve these relationships? Further, can you explain how this impacts protocol agreements?

At that point, I'll turn this back over to you, Minister, and give you that extra 16 seconds to tell another story.

Mr. Wilson: Thank you so much, Member, for that time. I appreciate that. I'm going to kind of tie stuff with some of the questions that Brooks – sorry, Member. You talked about ABIF, but I think you meant that FNDF had dropped, because ABIF has actually increased.

Member Arcand-Paul: You mentioned ABIF.

Mr. Wilson: But ABIF has increased; it hasn't dropped. Okay?

Member Arcand-Paul: Sorry. In your comments you made . . .

Mr. Wilson: ABIF has increased. We're at \$10 million here from 7 and a half million dollars, so we're up 2 and a half million dollars there. FNDF is the one that dropped a little bit, but that's just an estimate based on how much people gamble, so if you don't want to see that drop, hit the casino and throw some money in the slots, and we'll be fine. Plus, like I said, we've also got a new casino coming online which should bump our prices. We'll know next quarter probably better where we're going to sit. We're using a very conservative number right now, so we'll see where we end up there. So that was that one.

Now, on your question you asked about ABIF as well, some of the projects that we've done. A big one was with Bigstone Cree Nation. That's \$750,000 to support the purchase of various pieces of heavy equipment for their gravel pit business. They've got a really good business going up there because they got a big gravel mine, so they are not only doing their roads, but they're contracting out, and it's been very profitable for them. Plus, it's creating a lot of employment for the people up there as well.

I talked about the Louis Bull casino. That was \$515,000 this year, \$250,000 the year before. They're actually hiring right now. They told me they want to hire I think – it says 30 in here, but I think it was 80 people they're hiring right now because they want to be opened up for 1st of May. So if you want to be a casino manager, there's a good job for you. So it's not going to be just for Indigenous people because, I mean, it's going to help with the farm community out there, you know, kind of a second job. People from Wetaskiwin and the Louis Bull First Nation's right there, but we've got four First Nations: all kinds of contiguous boundaries there. It's going to be a great spot to create employment in that area.

Tsuut'ina Nation, the Redwood Meadows Golf Club: for any of you golfers out there they're putting a big addition there; \$750,000. We're helping them with that. The Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation: \$735,000 to support a high-pressure water blasting business and the expansion of a mobile field service team. That's anticipated to create more job offerings and additional revenue for the community. Over \$2 million was provided to support Métis settlements in advancing their economic goals. So we did kind of a

set-aside just for Métis settlements to make sure that they could take advantage of it as well.

5:30

One of these projects was the Paddle Prairie Métis settlement's land-clearing equipment, estimated to create over 140 jobs for the next 10 years for community members and those living nearby. These projects will help improve social and economic outcomes in the communities by increasing local revenue streams that can be reinvested into the community. I find that's really important, especially in those northern communities. You know, there are not a lot of jobs up there, so anything we can do to create some jobs is huge. The fund has been a strong vehicle for providing prosperous economic opportunities to Indigenous communities, a second straight 50 per cent increase to the Aboriginal business investment fund, effectively doubling the fund over the last two years.

What else did I want to talk about? Oh, reconciliation. Yeah. Like I say, that's been a crossministry thing. I came up with this: let's see where we can take reconciliation, reconcili-action across the whole of government. All of the ministers have been really just actively participating, seeing wherever they can do a reconciliation project. Like, we met this morning on a road project up north to help the community to get access onto a major highway. Instead of going 22 miles on a beat-up gravel road, they're going to have direct access onto major pavement.

Justice is doing projects where we'll set up a court right on the First Nations. As you know, transportation is a huge issue, so people are missing court dates. We're going to set up a court right in Maskwacis so that people can walk down to the courthouse if they have to. All the ministries have been working really hard around this, whether it's community services, so much work being done there around housing projects. You saw what happened in the city when we removed the encampments and got the people into some good, safe housing. We were able to identify people and identified a woman that was on our missing and murdered Indigenous list for five years.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

We'll now go to the opposition caucus for five minutes.

Member Arcand-Paul: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I want to go to the Premier's Council on MMIWG2S-plus. With the recent announcements with respect to the policy on trans folks in this province, what is the alignment, if any, with respect to this trans policy and any recommendations that relate to two-spirit, which, might I educate the members in attendance, is an umbrella term for Indigenous members of the 2SLGBTQIA-plus community. I think it's important to know what that council and what the road map will outline with respect to trans folks, because two-spirit Indigenous folks also include trans Indigenous folks. I am concerned that the current path with respect to that policy will interfere with the projects that the Premier's council and the road map will attempt to accomplish.

I'd also like to reiterate my question because, through the chair, the minister is not answering the question with respect to consultation. First Nations and Métis communities deserve adequate consultation, and they're telling us they are not getting it. This is going to be an affront if this ministry is providing \$7 million to Indigenous communities to participate in consultation through the ICCP. There are large concerns that if they're putting money to this program and not listening to what is happening and what is being urged, to make either amendments or accommodations, this whole process is for nought. I don't want to see any First Nation or Métis community not be heard through that process. If 10,000

projects are going and they are all being rubber stamped and nothing is coming out of it, then I am truly concerned that it is a process that is broken.

In 2022 and 2023 the ministry also began responding to the office of the Auditor General's recommendations regarding ABIF, and I'm thankful that the members opposite are also bringing this up. My question is: how are the program intake period and new performance measures developed, and has there been a review of the updated guidelines? How is the government making sure that Alberta's Indigenous communities are aware of programs meant to assist them and ensuring accessibility to these funds?

Mr. Sinclair: Mr. Chair, I'd like to call a point of order.

The Chair: Go ahead.

Mr. Sinclair: A point of order under 23(c). The member opposite is persisting in the needless repetition of the same question that the ministry has already provided an answer to although maybe he hasn't gotten the answer he's looking for, in his opinion. "How much consultation is being done?" I believe that is a subjective one, and it's tough to measure. This is the opinion of possibly some stakeholders, none of which are itemized and properly able to put a number to. We do believe the minister has answered this question already multiple times. Even if the member opposite disagrees with the amount of consultation done, there is no proper way for us to measure this. We believe it has been asked and answered.

Mr. Schmidt: Mr. Chair, this is obviously not a point of order. The member has the right to use his time as he sees fit. We're certainly not going to take lectures from government members on whether or not he's received an answer to his question. I request that you allow the member to continue this line of questioning.

The Chair: I would rule on this. I guess that when the answer time comes, if the minister could focus on that one question and answer it one more time, then we'll leave it at that.

Go ahead.

Member Arcand-Paul: In terms of these INAC transfers, which have been dropped – and the minister has mentioned that this has been because of federal responsibilities, which is fine – and the 2024-25 estimate being \$105,000, I'm just curious what the breakdown was of the annual INAC transfer for this budget and from 2023-24. I'm also asking for this to be communicated to the public, but if not the public then, at the very least, to Indigenous leadership. Will the minister commit to being transparent with Indigenous people in Alberta about the money it receives from the federal government on their behalf? Will Indigenous people in Alberta, who deserve transparency from this government, especially when it receives federal dollars for programs that should and could be carried out by nations themselves – how does the ministry communicate to Indigenous governments and representative organizations, who also receive transfers from INAC, what that money is allocated towards?

Mr. Chair, the provincial government in last year's budget received substantial monies from the federal government. One program that is carried out by this ministry is the employment partnerships program. I've personally benefited from programs similar to the ISET program, funded by the federal government, and arguably would not likely be here today without this important program provided to Indigenous peoples in Canada. My question relates primarily to why the province is even involved in that program when nations such as my own have the capacity to carry out said programs. Does the minister have the express authorizations from the nations which are served by the organizations which were

allocated dollars in '22-23 and '23-24 to offer these programs, and if so, which?

Given that the monies received from the federal government through investing in Canada infrastructure were received last year in the amount of roughly \$11.6 million and that budget '24-25 has estimated zero dollars, can you please confirm why that has changed? I know he mentioned that the federal government dropped the funding entirely, but I would love more details on that and why there is no confirmation of ongoing funding from the feds. What happened when the projects were stalled, as mentioned, given the \$1.8 million decrease in Budget 2022, and do nations lose out because of these delays? Was this delay all caused by the province?

Further, can the minister explain today why the provincial government agreed to receive these monies rather than stepping aside to give the monies to Indigenous nations, who are more than capable to allocate them on their own for their own infrastructure needs?

The Chair: Thank you, Member.

Minister, go ahead.

Mr. Wilson: I'll just answer one, and then I'm going to get into the consultation stuff. My daughter and her wife are two-spirited and several members of my family as well, so I understand the issues around that. I've had several heart-to-hearts. My daughter was bullied quite badly in school, and I actually feared for her life. But she found a great partner, and thank God. I just love her to death. And now they've got a little fellow, so I've got a new grandson as well. So I understand where you're coming from.

5:40

Our government is only coming from a place of love on this, and we're just trying to give the parents some rights. The new policies that Premier Smith announced are intended to reflect that youth and puberty can be incredibly challenging in one's life, a time when everyone struggles to find out who they are. Alberta's government wants to build an environment where young people's families are included in the conversation and where doctors and medical professionals are readily available to support them.

I'm going to turn the consultation part over to Donavon. You can maybe explain it better than I did.

Mr. Young: Sure. Thanks, Minister, and thanks for the question. I'm happy to try to set the record straight, because Alberta has one of the most robust, if not the most robust, consultation regimes in all of Canada. As the minister said, we administer 10,000 to 14,000 consultation activities on an annual basis. I have a team of about 40, 45 staff who undertake consultation, and the government of Alberta has a really important role to play in consultation.

On the one hand, we have proponents in the resource industry who want to undertake responsible resource development on the landscape, but treaty rights, the ability to exercise treaty rights to hunt, trap, fish for food, and harvesting practices – we also include that those rights and those harvesting practices have to be respected by proponents, by industry. The government of Alberta's role is to play that trusted adviser, that mediator in the middle, where we administer a very public-facing consultation policy and guidelines. That is on our website. Our job is to ensure, as I say, that the exercise of treaty rights is faithfully practised here in Alberta, and for Métis it's harvesting practices as well as cultural and harvesting practices.

I mean, I remember Oka vividly, and I can assure you that there will be no Oka here in Alberta. The government respects treaty rights. The government respects harvesting rights of First Nations and Métis, and the policy reflects that. As I said, I've got a team of

40 or 45 people who spend their career on ensuring that that sweet spot, that trust in the middle, is arrived at between industry and First Nations and Métis settlements.

The \$110,000 that we provide for consultation capacity is really just that baseline core capacity that's provided. Industry provides consultation funding on top of it, but the government sort of provides that baseline. We ensure that every single First Nation in Alberta, all Métis settlements have a baseline of consultation capacity at their disposal. They can come to the ACO for assistance and for advice, which we dispense on a very frequent basis. We have consultation advisers and regional leads who work really closely with all of the nations and the settlements to ensure that treaty rights and harvesting practices are respected, that culture is respected and not trampled on by industry, and it certainly is not the case.

I believe, as the deputy of the department, that we discharge that legal duty to consult in a fair and an expedited manner as well. We have timelines, which are, again, included in our public-facing guidelines and policy, that we work to meet each and every day.

I hope that sort of gets to the bottom of consultation. We take it very seriously in the department and in the government.

Mr. Wilson: I think we're just about out of time.

The Chair: I think you're out of time, yeah. Thank you very much.

We'll move over to the government caucus for the next set of questions for five minutes.

Mr. Sinclair: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you, Minister, again for your fulsome answers and your storytelling as well. I'm going to circle back to the AIOC. Even though it's already been chatted about a little bit, I just think there are some specific items and stories that maybe we could be a little bit more specific on.

In terms of just a couple of things that were mentioned earlier in respect to wildfires in northern Alberta, you mentioned the 686 corridor project, which is, I think, important to note because it's connecting all people, all Albertans to industry, the people themselves, and essential workers more efficiently. It's an amazing project. Part of it is in my riding, and I'm happy to champion and support it. I think it'll have a positive and long-lasting impact on the entire region, which is so often underfunded and forgotten.

But what I think is also important to mention is our government's commitment and your leadership, Minister, along with the Premier's to collaborate and support the consultation process with the three First Nations, the tri-council directly related to the 686 project. I believe it is the Peerless Trout First Nation, the Loon River First Nation, and the Bigstone Cree Nation. It is my belief that the strategy of early consultations is definitely the right answer, in my opinion. I also think it's important to note that these corridors are often spoken about as economic corridors, which is very, very important.

But for someone who grew up and lived in Slave Lake in 2011, during the wildfires, I would remind everybody that we don't have enough safety corridors. We mentioned the in-and-out road of Fort McMurray. I very much look forward to seeing what kind of other corridors – for instance, in East Prairie – that we can champion together to, hopefully, allow that Métis settlement an opportunity to, hopefully, safely exit a fire if it ever does come again.

In terms of specific supports I'm very happy to echo your comments about East Prairie specifically getting a one-time \$9 million fund. This is exactly the kind of thing that I love talking about when it comes to real and meaningful action and support for Indigenous people. This was not a photo-op or a fluffy promise. Those people's houses burned. We cut them a cheque and put them

back in their houses by Christmastime. As somebody who is from the area and was part of helping them with the process in High Prairie, where they were evacuated to, I know first-hand the impacts of these communities and the kids that don't have really large support systems sometimes. You know, it's something as simple as: we delivered teddy bears to little kids that day.

These impacts are real that we're doing and when we support them. I encourage people to step up and visit some of our northern communities, that they are so happy to defend, sometimes volunteer in them, when we don't ask to be defended. There's a difference between talking about helping Indigenous people, and I believe our government is backing it up. There are many, many examples I could refer to.

Yesterday I made mention in our other committee meeting about the AIOC Tamarack deal that I was so grateful to be a part of, which I did not see the amount of media time on television that night. But that's a conversation for another day. Probably too positive of a project. I was very happy to mention all the First Nations and Métis communities that were part of that, which you know so much about, Minister, because you are leading the charge and were from the beginning a part of AIOC.

I'd also like to mention sometimes – and with great respect to the member opposite, who, I would imagine, had maybe not the exact same but a similar arduous journey to mine to get into this position that we're in today, which I'm both grateful for. I do respectfully disagree with his opinion on the sustainability of our beloved oil and gas sector with regard to mentioning the renewables and remind this committee that the federal government and, more importantly, Steven Guilbeault directly attacking Indigenous economic prosperity with his constant attack on our industry . . .

The Chair: Thank you, Member.

Minister, you have five minutes to answer.

Mr. Wilson: My turn?

The Chair: Yeah. Go ahead.

Mr. Wilson: Thank you. Thank you for the question. I appreciate all the support always that I get from you. It's fun getting to know you. We talked about some highway projects, and that goes back to our – it's in my mandate to work with Transportation on developing these economic corridors. We want to go east, west, north, south. We need to move our goods out, especially up in the northern country. We don't really have a good east-west connection there, so that's one thing we're really working on, to develop that economic corridor. It's not just highways; it could be for pipelines. It could be rail line – that's what we really need up there – or power lines.

5:50

And full partnership with the Indigenous folks up there to make sure that they are partners with us in prosperity: it's going to make everything run smoother if they're the ones that are deciding on where it's going and how it's being built. We're not going to get into trouble with going across a sacred ground or somebody's berry patch or graveyard or something. So we want to be working very close with Indigenous people and make sure that when we do these corridors, we're going in a spot where we're not impacting and creating some environmental issues up there. So thanks for bringing that up. That's going to be one of our most important initiatives going forward, especially up in the Treaty 8 area because it's tougher, especially on the west side, to get some projects that work good for the AIOC.

But, like I say, we do have some good ones going right now. Of course, the first one was the Cascade. I talked about that earlier, the

Cascade power plant. That's very soon going to be in full operation, going to be providing 8 per cent of Alberta's power. We had six First Nations in that. Alexis, Enoch, Kehewin, O'Chiese, Paul, and the Whitefish were all partners in that plant. That was one of our first projects. There were a couple of First Nations that were the lead on it, and I asked them. I said, "Can you help out some of the others that maybe don't have the business acumen that you do to move forward?" And they said: "Of course, we will. We'll help out our brothers." So instead of just being a couple of First Nations, it turned out to be six. That was a really good experience, to see everybody working together to make that happen.

And then we did Project Rocket. That one was the largest investment of its kind. It's a \$250 million backstop. We had 23 Indigenous communities working together on that one. There's a whole list; I won't go through them. But they acquired 11.5 per cent of seven Enbridge oil sands related pipelines. The pipelines deliver approximately 1.7 million barrels per day, so this is going to be long-term cash flow for these communities. Like I say, it was a game changer, especially for some of the smaller Métis communities up there that didn't have the opportunity to get involved before in some of the bigger projects.

And even the First Nations – one of the biggest problems we found was that you can't take First Nation land and use it as collateral because it's in the federal government's name. So that's really what was a big holdback, being able to get involved in bigger programs, because you just didn't have the ability to get that collateral. Now with the government backstopping it, all of a sudden the doors open up and everybody wants to get involved and be partners. Instead of the First Nations getting ripped off at 12, 18 per cent interest rates, they're able to borrow at Alberta's interest rates, so they're getting all of a sudden – like, nothing works at 18 per cent, but if you can get the interest rates down to where the province can borrow at, 2 or 3 per cent, all of a sudden a lot of projects start looking very viable. That's what we've been able to do, create a vehicle where they can get involved at a really good interest rate.

Another one was the hexagon project. Five communities, another pipeline project that they wanted to do: Buffalo, Kikino, Heart Lake, Saddle Lake, Whitefish. Project Concord: this was a – is that the one at Frog Lake? No. It's a different one. That's a smaller one, another small power project. The big one – where's the Frog Lake one? I love that one. Lindbergh. Oh, that's cogen. A cogen plant: instead of mining the heavy oil out – you've heard of the SAGD, where they pump steam into the ground, and the heavy oil you can pump out conventionally. There's a lot of waste heat coming off these big steam units, so they attached a power plant to it, a cogen power plant, and they're able to generate power off the waste heat. Like, you know, talk about a green project: don't get any greener than that. Frog Lake did that one by themselves.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Okay. We'll go to the opposition caucus for another five minutes of questions.

Member Arcand-Paul: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you, Minister, for the answers. I still have a few questions that are not quite answered, but I'm going to turn to another one so I don't get a point of order from my member across the way.

It is disheartening to hear of the Saddle Lake Cree Nation having to beg and plead with the province to send out the chief medical examiner to investigate exposed graves at the old residential school site given that this ministry has provided \$8 million in 2021. Does this ministry have plans to continue this funding today and to help

out nations like Saddle Lake to bring justice to the bodies that are currently being desecrated by inaction?

Why did the minister not accomplish their targets of the four protocol and relationship agreements, instead only accomplishing three? I think there was mention that it was Treaty 8. I just would like assurance that that was the one that was not completed. And what did Alberta do with regard to not encouraging or working towards that treaty rights approach to government-to-government relations with any nation in Alberta but specifically the Treaty 8 First Nations of Alberta? I know that the minister skirted this, but I would like assurances for Treaty 8 First Nations of Alberta on why there was not a treaty approach to government-to-government relations and why that relationship broke down if there's a million dollars on the table to implementing these First Nations protocol and relationship agreements.

I would also like to ask whether this government or the ministry recognizes that the rights holders, that deserve to have these protocol agreements, are not provincial-territorial organizations or other similar organizations but, instead, Indigenous nations themselves. These organizations, as wonderful as they do the work – they absolutely provide helpful fora with regard to provincial portfolios, particularly, for example, in Health, Education, or Justice. But rights holders are nations and the people themselves, and we all know that. I know that I don't need to remind the minister, but I will anyway for the minister and the ministry to engage with actual rights holders equitably and regularly moving forward with these protocol agreements.

I'm heartened to hear that there's a lot of good work with respect to the budget currently and the monies that are going to the nations. But I am hyperconscious that in terms of reconciliation there's a lot more that can be done other than just with monuments or with gardens. I think there needs to be, as Grand Chief Littlechild has mentioned, reconcili-action, and I'm heartened to hear that the minister is working on this. I know that the minister, Mr. Chair, has devoted his career to this, and I know that he is really committed to it. But I know there are other nations out there, specifically where there are gravesites around residential schools, that also deserve justice, and unfortunately the reconciliation funding that is in the budget doesn't identify the work that needs to be done. So I'm asking the minister if there are any plans to use those current reconciliation dollars to assist with the location of those bodies, to help return those bodies. I know there's repatriation conversations in the actual budget documents themselves, but there are no plans for those gravesites that are currently being disturbed.

I know first-hand because I was a technician that did this type of work for my nation. I've seen those sites, and I know that they need adequate funding to be able to bring to justice and to honour the lives that were lost. And, Minister, I know that you are emotionally tied – sorry; through the chair to the minister. I know that he is tied to this type of work and to ensuring that First Nations have adequate access, but it's really difficult to see in the numbers where that funding is going to be helping out. Maybe the minister can clarify that there is some allocation for these sites and for these nations that are trying to bring their babies home, the ones that are, you know, buried in the gravesites around residential schools, the ones that, unfortunately, were taken from our families and that there are no records for anymore, the ones that are just bones.

There are communities that are asking for DNA testing to be able to confirm that these are their children because we know that these residential schools brought people from all over Turtle Island to their area, and there are no assurances for the families that they are going to get their babies back. So I would like to ask the minister if there's funding for that.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Minister, you have five minutes to respond.

Mr. Wilson: Thanks for the question. We were actually the first province to come forward with a budget when the first graves were found in B.C. I literally, Donavon – we went to all the ministries with our hand out because we didn't have a budget at that time at all, and we raised \$8 million from all the other ministers to put the first program together.

6:00

I can remember Premier Kenney asking me: "Minister, where did you get this money from?" I said, "Well, we went to the other ministers, and they gave it to us." He said, "Other ministers gave you their money?" I said, "Yeah." "Carry on." We were able to raise \$8 million right out of the chute, and we didn't try to tell the First Nations or the Métis communities how they should spend it. Donavon calls it: we supplied the bus and the gas, and they decide how they want to drive it and where they want to take it. I don't pretend to have the answers to this, so I thought it was best to leave it with the communities to decide how they want to spend the money.

Some of them decided to do the testing for graves. Some decided to do some monuments on their First Nation to commemorate. Not every First Nation treats this the same. Some want to respect the graves and not disturb them; they don't even want it disturbed. Some want to maybe exhume the skeletons if they're there. We're not telling them how to do it, but we do have another grant set up, \$4 million. Again, we're not telling them how they should spend the money, what they should use it on, but the grant is there. They can use it however they want: for reconciliation, if they want to do more testing, however they want to spend it. But we're not dictating: you spend it for this; you spend it for that. We've just provided the money and the vehicle; they can drive it and decide how best to use it.

On our protocol agreements, we've done three protocol agreements across the province. Very successful, and, like I say, that gives the technicians the opportunity to work with the technicians at the province level. Again, we let the First Nation group or the Métis group decide what their big aspirations or priorities are, and then we work with them. And it works well because, I mean, they can come to me – I'm getting old; I forget half the stuff I'm supposed to remember, so it's better to get to the guys that know what they're doing – and we can put them at the table together, and that's how we get things done. It's been really successful; we've got some really great projects out the door because both sides are working together on a focused initiative.

Also, under these initiatives it guarantees them that the Premier is going to be there at these meetings. The Premier: she loves doing these types of things, and she'll come out to them, and it gives them an opportunity to speak directly with the Premier. They've got direct access to various ministers, and it's been working really well. Treaty 8 area: they treat it a little differently. Like I say, they prefer to work through their tribal councils. I've got money set aside every year if they want to do a protocol agreement, but they prefer to do it through memoranda of understanding or through the tribal councils.

So, again, if that's the way they want to work, we work with them. I can only work with the willing, so if they want to come forward with initiatives, which they always do, there's money there for that, and we supply the money to get those initiatives moving forward.

Anything else you want to add on that, Don?

Mr. Kwasi: I don't think so. Like you said, Minister, it's following the community's leads, and Treaty 8 has not approached us. We have always said that the door is open for working on a more formal protocol agreement arrangement with them, and they have chosen to work in a different direction, and we respect that and work with them in the way that they would prefer to work with us.

Mr. Wilson: Then as far as the grants and everything go, I started this a few years ago because when I was in municipal politics, everybody always said: well, you never communicate enough. You'll probably find that in your own ridings. You never communicate enough, and it doesn't matter what you put out there; you're going to hear that you don't communicate enough. So we literally put out a weekly newsletter to all the First Nations and Métis communities of everything that's going on so they've got all the grants that they need to know about, all the initiatives that are going on. All we can do is just keep putting it out there and putting it out there. We've been really successful in getting that information out.

Also, I do travel around the province constantly, and that's how we got the first round of grants out. I was pitching our IRI grants and our missing and murdered Indigenous women grants. Finally, they called me up and said: Minister, you've oversold; stop. That's how we do it. It's me on the road and our newsletters and our website. Anybody can go on our website, and you can see all the grants that are available on that.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

We now go to government caucus. Go ahead.

Mr. Hunter: Thank you, Mr. Chair, and, through you, to the minister and his team. I've always respected Minister Wilson and the work you do. You have an ability to get to the heart of a situation, which most politicians don't know how to do. I can say that you have been a great influence on me throughout the years to help me understand the Indigenous Relations issues. Thank you very much for helping me to understand and how to be more empathetic to the plight that we see throughout Alberta with our First Nations.

I wanted to ask – well, first of all, I wanted to thank you. When I was the red tape reduction minister we worked on a really important project, I felt, to make sure that First Nations did not have to have double cards. It was great to see you get that done, and I wanted to thank you for that. This is how government should work. When something that's common sense comes in, it gets done, and you guys did that.

I wanted to just talk about red tape reduction a bit. As mentioned on page 80 of the business plan, the Ministry of Indigenous Relations remains committed to regulatory approaches and program delivery that reduces unnecessary government oversight and emphasizes outcomes in order to improve access to government services, attract investment, support innovation and competitiveness, and grow Alberta businesses. Not only is reducing red tape an overarching priority for this government but also a specific priority for your ministry since the government seeks to be a partner to Indigenous communities, working with them to provide better outcomes for Indigenous peoples in Alberta. Can you, Minister, speak to the importance of providing an environment where Indigenous organizations and communities can work collaboratively with the government rather than having to deal with a cumbersome and rigid regime of red tape, and then, also, what initiatives has the ministry taken to reduce the burden of red tape and unnecessary government oversight on Indigenous Albertans?

I also wanted to ask some questions in terms of the consultation as it seems to be very important to many of the members here in this estimates. I see under line item 8 of the Indigenous Relations budget estimates that the funding for land and legal settlements has been increased significantly up to almost \$4.3 million for 2024-25 compared to \$3.8 million in the '23-24 budget. I also see, however, that only \$833,000 was forecasted to actually be used in 2023-24. This funding supports Alberta's constitutional obligation out of the natural resources transfer agreement in relation to treaty land entitlement claim settlements.

Minister, I first want to ask what specific efforts this funding will go towards and how it will help Alberta meet its constitutional obligations. And given that the forecasted amount spent last year was so much lower than what had been budgeted for, what were some of the reasons for this, and what factors led you to provide an even higher budget estimate for this year? That was the question in terms of the amounts.

Minister, I know that, as we worked in the past together, this is one of the constitutional rights and responsibilities of the government working with Indigenous partners, but it also is necessary to be able to make sure that we get businesses that want to be able to come in. We are open for business. We talk about that on a regular basis as a government, so I wanted you to maybe just tell us and help us understand: how do you thread that needle to be able to make sure that we have less red tape and being able to get to the business of the people? We do have a big province. We have 4.5 million people that are expecting us to be able to help businesses get going but still be able to provide that constitutional responsibility to our Indigenous partners.

Mr. Wilson: Thanks for the questions. That was fun working with you when we did the red tape reduction stuff. I actually was the first one to meet my targets, and I actually got a trophy for doing it. So thank you for that. That was pretty cool.

6:10

Our efforts to cut red tape outdated the regulations and the processes of making life better for all people in Alberta, especially Indigenous communities. We have shown that we can cut the red tape, especially with the Aboriginal consultation office, our government ministries, and Indigenous communities and industries, by providing an efficient, co-ordinated, consistent consultation process. The ACO helps create certainty and a stable environment for the natural resource sector that supports Indigenous participation.

Thomas and his crew: they work diligently to update us and get us on the geomapping and bring us into the computer age. Everything was done by paper before; that's why it was taking so long. Now we can get, as soon as somebody comes in to us, the information out to the First Nations within minutes. They get notice that there is something happening in their backyard, and we can start the process right away. So we were really able to streamline the process around consultation, and it's a lot of your hard work that inspired us. I actually – I think I came to my deputy, and I said that I want to make this a priority. Like, we've got to get the red tape cut, and I want to win the trophy. So everybody took it to heart, and we worked hard, and we dug in, and we got it done.

Our work – you know, you talk about the cards – in collaboration with Treasury Board and Finance we eliminated the Alberta Indian tax exemption card, and eliminating the AITE card has made it easier for First Nations people to receive tax exemptions on reserve tobacco and fuel purchases. That was a huge one, and I thank you for helping us with that; that just was redundant. So we were able to eliminate a lot of red tape around that one right out of the chute.

We streamlined the application process for the Aboriginal business investment fund and the employment partnerships program to provide clarity, address barriers, and improve accessibility. We talked about the EPP program before a little bit. That's been a huge program. We get it through Advanced Education. They get it through – so it's not as easy as just saying: we'll just give it to the First Nations. It's a complex program, but it's been very productive. We use it to train young people, get them that training that they otherwise wouldn't get.

We also streamlined the FNUF application process to keep grants flowing. We implemented a multiyear funding agreement with the Institute for the Advancement of Aboriginal Women, Indigenous consultation capacity program, to provide stable operational funding support with less administration burden, and we introduced the Aboriginal consultation office's digital service to make the consultation process more efficient and transparent. And I've got to give credit to our team in the back there, Thomas and his crew, for putting that together. It's made a huge difference for the Indigenous communities to get that information right away. Some stuff that used to take three weeks, they can get it within minutes now, so we've made it easier.

That goes to your question on how reducing red tape helps industry and the First Nations. Because this way industry is – if they are coming to us with a project, we can get that information out using our geomapping as to which First Nations and Métis communities have to be communicated with. So, like I say, instead of taking weeks to get that information, the First Nations and Métis groups get it literally within minutes, and they can start that whole process. Because some of them are doing a lot of consultations; like, there is a lot of activity in certain areas. So they have a big team, and if they are working on several at the same time, if they know this is coming in, that is coming in, they can kind of prioritize, too: "Well, this is a big project. We better put some real effort into making sure that we get the consultation done properly on that."

I take consultations very seriously, and so does our whole department. If there is an area – I know of one right now where we've got some issues, but we're working with them. I talk to the chief two or three times a day to make sure that we do our consultation seriously. I literally have my phone on 24 hours a day. If there is an issue, every chief and Métis leader in the province has my hotline, and they know they can contact me, and they do, some at strange hours of the night. But I take all the calls, and we take it seriously, and I can get it out to my team fast. Donavon gets some calls at crazy hours, too, but he always steps up to the plate and gets the job done for me. I'm so lucky to have such a great team around me in Indigenous Relations. Everybody is there for the right reason, like – they are; they're a great team, and thanks for all you do.

I'll leave it at that.

The Chair: Shall we go to the opposition caucus for the next set of questions?

Member Arcand-Paul: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'd like to now paint a picture, because I referenced it earlier, about me working for my nation in respect to geodata information. In particular I was a GIS technician, and in that work I was able to go out on the land and identify really important sacred, cultural, traditional sites that we used to access and that we had actual territory claims over. In that work I was able to learn about the histories of our people. I got to learn about the history of our relationship with the governments, with non-Indigenous peoples on this land and our continued relationship with industry and how we move forward in that work. That's what led me to understanding how we need to relate to each other and how we work together. In our current budget I ask this

question, "How much money is going to the geodata mapping project?" because that is a really important opportunity for our nations to communicate to the province which territories have significant value to their nations.

What I would like to know – and what I've heard from stakeholders is that territories are not being recognized because there's not enough staff complement right now. I'm looking at the fiscal plan '24-27 page 162, where we're seeing no change in hiring of staff with respect to this specific position. There are some geodata staff within the ministry, and I know that there are few of them. With no plans to bring on new staff, I'm wondering if the ministry or the deputies have an answer as to how we rectify that current omission, because this information is really important. It identifies berry-picking sites. It identifies where medicines are, like sweetgrass and sage. It also identifies where there might be traditional hunting paths or fishing or trapping lines. And this position isn't just, you know, inputting information into Google Maps; it's actually going out, figuring out what the nations are saying is on the ground and what is culturally relevant. If it wasn't for that job and subsequent positions like that for Indigenous communities, there would be no conversation about this, and I can't underscore the importance of including Indigenous voices.

My other question is regarding the staffing complement of the ministry. In particular, how many First Nations, Métis, and Inuit employees does the ministry have, and how many are in senior levels of government? If we are spending over a million and a half dollars on staffing, it is important that we include Indigenous voices in the employee roster because the value that is brought to the table is so immense when it comes to understanding these territories, understanding the aspects of what is important culturally, where people might be hunting or trapping, and ultimately if there's an opportunity for more staff in regard to the geodata mapping project specifically.

This leads me to my next topic of Indigenous knowledge keepers circle. I recognize that on page 82 of the of the business plan '24-27 there is the pilot program that is a joint effort with Alberta Education. I'm curious. I note that prior to this I just said that we need more Indigenous folks in the ministry. I take note that with this IKKC pilot program more Alberta public service members will build their intercultural competencies, but I see no number attached to that to continue helping with that cross-cultural understanding. If we're not hiring more Indigenous people, then I want to know what money is being put to these intercultural competencies. But I would urge the ministry to continue hiring more First Nation, Métis, and Inuit employees and including them in senior levels of government because the value they bring to their work is much more than just a face in those positions; they bring a whole world view that will help make this ministry do better.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Minister, you have five minutes to respond.

6:20

Mr. Wilson: Thanks for the questions again. Appreciate that. On the geomapping, it looks like we've got three staff that are full-time on just that alone, and I think you've got 40 approximately altogether in the consultation. Yeah. It's a pretty sizable number that we've got there, and basically it's evidence based. The nations provide us with the information, and then we provide the corporations or whoever is doing the work the direction to work with the First Nation to make sure that something isn't being disturbed, and they can't move forward until, I guess, we stamp it that the consultation is complete. Is that right?

Mr. Young: Adequate.

Mr. Wilson: Adequate. The consultation is adequate. We've got several members in senior positions, executive directors and so forth, that work in the department. I know we just hired a new one from the Métis. There's constantly people coming and going, but we do have a good contingent of First Nation and Métis people that work directly in the department; right in my office, in fact.

We also have a program; we call it the Indigenous learning initiative. I think we've trained something like 15,000 people so far throughout government. We're trying to get through all the departments. We always get different departments coming to us. I call it Indigenous relations 101. We kind of go through all of the aspects of – just because so many ministers are now working with Indigenous people, like from transportation, Health, Education. Everybody is working out there. That is one good thing. A lot of people that get stolen from my department are the Indigenous people. They get taken by Education. They get taken by Health. They get taken by transportation. We've infiltrated all the departments right now. I've got people throughout the various departments that we can call on to help us out if we need some answers around Education or Health or what have you. We've got some really good people that have gone out into various ministries right now.

Let's say that a minister that hasn't really worked with Indigenous people before has to go on to a First Nation. What is the protocol? What's with this tobacco? We have to start right at the basics. Everybody wants to learn about it. Everybody is hungry for knowledge on this. That's what we really find rewarding in our department: working with other ministries and members as to what's the proper way to – and it's different. Like, talking to somebody from Treaty 8 down in Blackfoot country: the protocol is completely different as to how you interact with Indigenous groups.

We've got people that have that knowledge. We have elders that work with us, several different elders from across the province, that help me and our group to make sure that we are doing things properly and working within the protocol of the various regions we go to. Like I say, I think about 15,000 so far we're training, and there is always some group coming to us . . .

Mr. Young: Every week.

Mr. Wilson: Every week you've got another group coming in for training. Oh yeah.

This is a good one that we started this year. It's our Alberta Indigenous intern program. It's a government-wide, two-year paid internship program – so you can take this out to people in your communities – supporting recent First Nations, Métis, and Inuit postsecondary graduates. So if you know somebody that's a postsecondary graduate and they want to do an internship program and they got an interest in environment or Education or Health, we're going to set up an internship program working under those various ministries. The idea is that we're going to advance reconciliation, increase the number of Indigenous employees, improve the retention of these employees, help to build relationships with government and communities, promote cultural competency within Alberta public service. As part of this program, the intern is going to spend six months working in an Indigenous community or organization or an organization that serves a high Indigenous population so they can gain a variety of experience both within the government of Alberta and with community partners, and we'll be administering the program out of our existing budget. Donavon is like that – on *Star Trek*, that Scotty guy. I always say, "I need more money," and he says, "I got no more," but he always

finds it. We're going to come up with this program, and we found the money to fund it internally. Kristina's been a big part of this.

I'm pretty excited about this program so, like, promote it out there for us. If you know somebody that wants to do an internship with the government, here's a great opportunity to do that. Thanks.

The Chair: Thanks, Minister.

We'll go to government caucus and you can use as much time as you want and leave time for the minister to answer, but I'll let you judge that.

Mr. Sinclair: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. Thanks again, Minister. I don't want to make it seem like I blindly disagree with the member across the table, but this is one area that both myself and my colleague to the right of me on TV, MLA Hunter, addressed. I one hundred per cent agree that we need to try and find more of our people in these positions, not just in Indigenous Relations. I think you are definitely leading the forefront on this, Minister, and I've already mentioned how much I respect and support that. But I would like to see other not just government ministries but municipal governments, period, the big city of Calgary, city of Edmonton, the province of Alberta on the bureaucratic side

There needs to be, I think, an examination of – I've said this before – a lived and practical experience with Indigenous people and finding some sort of way of closing that gap between maybe a lack of secondary education and, you know, something as simple as hiring them with good, livable wages for liaison positions with the hope that we can train them to the scope of practice of the job, and then they can fulfill them.

I think this is incredibly important especially when we discuss so many ministries that you have to overlap with when it comes to Mental Health and Addiction, Health, Education, all of it. You know more than I do, obviously. But so many of these are directly correlated to Indigenous, either, intergenerational trauma or root causes. So I think it would be a really good idea for many of us in these positions to be able to support any cause, like your internship program, that can encourage that, kind of, or possibly examining skilled trades within some of the nations that I brought up with you earlier today that we're looking at up in my neck of the woods, where they're looking at First Nations owned-and-operated skilled trades ideas and how there are practical applications for it. I wholeheartedly support those initiatives.

I'll leave you a little bit of time since I didn't even get to my question on the last one, which I apologize for. I got caught up looking down at my book, and I wasn't reading the clock. I just wanted to circle one last time back to some of the comments specifically when it comes to some of the amazing work we're doing on the AIOC and some of maybe the misinformation or the dangers – our Prime Minister last year claimed there was no business case for natural gas to the Chancellor of Germany during his visit, which is a very, I would say, in my opinion, arrogant and naive comment, which would certainly be contested by the six First Nations from that Cascade project. It directly affects their ability for economic participation in terms of chilling investment and the uncertainty that leaves. I think it's important to make mention of that because I do believe we're leading the way. I'm proud on many fronts of all the work we are doing for Indigenous people in this province, and I believe we are raising the bar for other provinces as well. Hopefully, the federal government can follow the lead and catch up.

Lastly – I don't know how much time I have for you, Minister – how does your ministry support urban Indigenous peoples, in 90 seconds or less?

Mr. Wilson: Well, thank you so much. Quickly, I always say that the Indigenous people were like the original entrepreneurs. When you talk to the Indigenous people up north, they're not against development. They just want to be part of it. I think that's where we have to work harder, making sure that when it comes to the regulators and the people out on the ground we are hiring those Indigenous people that have that knowledge that they can bring forward and take back to their First Nations so it's not just being lost. I think that's where we're really going to have to work hard over the next while to make sure that we've got Indigenous people that are involved. That's the whole idea of the of the AIOC: to be partners in prosperity. When the Indigenous people thrive, we all thrive. That's where we're kind of coming from on that.

Urban stuff. We've come a long ways on the urban. I just signed off a few grants today with Bent Arrow. We did one there with them. Friendship centres: we're doing a lot of work around there. I

started a program with the YWCA for the kids from families of missing and murdered Indigenous women so that they've got a summer camp to go to just for them so that they feel included. We've been really trying to focus on helping the Indigenous kids that are in the city.

I've run out of time. Thank you, everybody, for your time.

The Chair: I apologize for the interruption – you were on a roll there – but I must advise the committee that the time allotted for consideration of the ministry's estimates has concluded. I would like to remind committee members that we are scheduled to meet tomorrow, Wednesday, March 13, 2024, at 9 a.m. to consider the estimates of the Ministry of Treasury Board and Finance.

Thank you, everyone. This meeting is adjourned.

[The committee adjourned at 6:30 p.m.]

